

War Memories across Canada Conversation Kit:

Mennonite Conscientious Objectors Rosthern & Saskatoon, Saskatchewan



Mennonite Archives of Ontario/1.34.2.2-8_17

As a young teenager, Mennonite conscientious objector, Don Regier, read the book, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, by Harriet Beecher Stowe, which solidified his belief that war could never be justified. When called to fight in the Second World War, Regier could not agree to pick up arms, no matter how great the cause.

He wasn't alone. By the end of 1945, there were nearly 11,000 conscientious objectors registered in Canada; most spent the war years labouring in alternative service camps.

Discussion Questions:

Do you believe war can be justified under certain circumstances? In your opinion, would there be any differences between the Second World War and civil wars we have experienced since then? Do you believe that conscription is ever justified?

What do you think would happen to conscientious objectors in today's society? Do you think they would be publicly shamed and/or legally punished? Can you provide any examples and explain your answer.

Mennonites faced a difficult dilemma during conscription. If they chose to fight, they risked alienation from their families and communities who believed war was wrong. If they became conscientious objectors, they were labelled as cowards by non-Mennonite Canadians. Some Mennonites solved this dilemma by joining the Red Cross to help the wounded rather than fight. How do you think their families reacted and how were they received by their communities when they returned home? What type of a difference in this behavior might you suspect today?

Activities:

Read *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, by Harriet Beecher Stowe. What are the main themes of the novel? How do those themes relate to the Second World War and the beliefs of the Conscientious Objectors?

Visit a National Park originally built with forced labour during the world wars. Does this knowledge impact your experience at the park? What is the legacy of work camps for conscientious objectors?

Create a presentation for your class or school about the alternative service camps. Where were they located across Canada? How long were conscientious objectors expected to work in the camps? What work did they do? How much were they paid? What were the living and working conditions in the camps? Did they take their wives and children with them to the camps?



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Resources:

Websites

Alternative Service in the Second World War:
Conscientious Objectors in Canada: 1939-1945
<http://www.alternativeservice.ca/>

An extensive resource about conscientious objectors and alternative service in Canada. Includes a resource list for teachers.

Alternative Service Work Camps - Global Anabaptist
Mennonite Encyclopedia Online
[http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Alternative_Service_Work_Camps_\(Canada\)](http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Alternative_Service_Work_Camps_(Canada))

Mennonite Archival Image Database
<https://archives.mhsc.ca/>

The image database contains photographs from several Mennonite organizations.

Mennonite Historical Society of Canada
<http://www.mhsc.ca/index.php?content=http://www.mhsc.ca/mennos/hcanada.html>

A good resource for Mennonite culture and religious beliefs.

Split Loyalties: Fraser Valley Mennonite Service in
the Second World War
<http://app.ufv.ca/fvhistory/studentsites/wwII/mennonitewwIIservice/index.html>

Videos

The Pacifist Who Went to War, directed by David Neufeld. National Film Board of Canada, 2002.
https://www.nfb.ca/film/pacifist_who_went_to_war/

Books and articles

Alternative Service for Peace in Canada during
World War II, 1941-1946, by A.J. Klassen.
Mennonite Central Committee, 1998.

Are you prepared to work in a mental hospital?:
Canadian Conscientious Objectors service during
the Second World War, by Conrad Stoesz. Journal of
Mennonite Studies 29 (2011).
<http://jms.uwinnipeg.ca/index.php/jms/article/view/File/1404/1394>

Park prisoners; the untold story of Western
Canada's national parks, 1915-1946, by Bill Waiser.
Fifth House, 1995.

Sam Martin went to prison: the story of
conscientious objection and Canadian military
service, by William Janzen. Kindred Press, 1990.

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