

# CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTION IN REVOLUTIONARY FRANCE

The French Revolution, with the *levée-en-masse*, introduced the idea of universal military service as an instrument of the modern nation-state. For the first time in history thousands of young men were now drafted into the French army to fight a series of wars against neighboring states intent on restoring the *ancien régime*. Casualties rose on an unprecedented scale. Alongside the fervent patriotism of wide sections of the populace there existed, especially in the countryside, extensive incidence of desertion from the Revolutionary armies and other forms of - usually passive - resistance to conscription. Recent studies of these *réfractaires*, however, make little, if any, mention of conscientious objection to military service.<sup>1</sup> This silence is puzzling since, as the footnotes to this article show, there already exists a modest literature, in French as well as in English, on the subject of conscientious objection in France during the Revolutionary period; and, moreover, leading figures among both Girondins and Jacobins were directly involved in the problem. The two groups from which at this date objectors derived, both of them small, were the Quakers and the Mennonites (then known in France as Anabaptists). The present article reviews the attitude of successive Revolutionary governments to religious conscientious objection and the efforts of the two sects to gain exemption from military service for their young conscripts along with a more considerate attitude on the part of local authorities.

French Quakers were confined to Languedoc, centering in and around the village of Congénies. But shortly before the Revolution an American Quaker whaler from Nantucket, William Rotch, had settled with family and assistants in Dunkirk in order to carry on, with the support of the French authorities, a business that had been largely ruined during the War of Independence. Rotch set up a meeting for worship in that town with English as the usual language of ministry. In 1785, the year in which the Rotch group arrived in France, a young Protestant nobleman and ex-officer, Jean de Marcillac Le Cointe,<sup>2</sup> whose reading about Quakerism had led to his conversion to that faith and abandonment of an army career as inconsistent with the views of the Society of Friends on war, made contact with the Congénies group. He soon became their spokesman. The origins of the Congénies Quakers are unclear; an offshoot of the *inspirés* around the mid-1730s, at the beginning they had had no direct contact with Friends elsewhere. Their

worship and beliefs, however, largely coincided with those held by the latter. As a result of Marcillac's efforts, formal affiliation to the Society of Friends in London was completed by 1789.

Before that date Quakers in France had not been much troubled by the military question. In the 1780s approximately 100 Quaker families were then resident in the Congénies area; according to a contemporary English Quaker report,<sup>3</sup> 'they mostly follow mechanic employments, some husbandry.' 'They do not bear arms but hire substitutes when drawn for the militia'. even though this practice contradicted the discipline of both British and American Friends they refrained, at this date at any rate, from censuring their French coreligionists, thus showing more understanding for the difficulties of continental Friends than was usual, since hiring a substitute or even paying a fine in lieu of bearing arms, if persisted in, normally led to the disownment of the delinquent member of the Society. As for the Quakers in Dunkirk, Rotch before settling there had applied for, and been granted by a government anxious to accommodate this kind of immigrant, not merely 'full and free enjoyment of our religion' but also 'entire exemption from military requisitions of every kind.'<sup>4</sup>

The situation changed of course as the revolution gained momentum and the danger of foreign intervention against it mounted, with increasing pressure to mobilize the country's manpower in expectation of war. Marcillac, now an M.D. practising in Paris and specializing in the cure of gout, with his accustomed energy and the assistance of William Rotch and his son Benjamin, set about obtaining guarantees from the new government that their young men would not be forced into the armed forces: since the establishment of a National Guard in mid-1790, a veiled threat of military compulsion at some future date had threatened. They sought the same kind of exemption, at the least, as the *ancien régime* had given their Society. Quakers were fortunate in enjoying in this period widespread respect among France's advanced thinkers. Voltaire, among others, had adhered to the notion of 'the good Quaker' and praised Quaker Pennsylvania as the kind of quasi-Utopian commonwealth to which humankind should aspire.<sup>5</sup> "Quaker and Pennsylvania" had become bywords in France, representing... a more or less vaguely conceived ideal.<sup>6</sup> This view, however remote from reality, was shared by many of the leading Girondin intellectuals and politicians prominent in the National Assembly of 1789-91.

Marcillac, therefore, set about winning, in particular, the support of the Girondins for his project. He was already acquainted with Jacques-Pierre Brissot de Warville, a leading member of the group, while Brissot himself had often been in close contact with the Quakers since his first

visit to London in 1779. He collaborated with them in connection with his activities as an abolitionist. Indeed the *Société des Amis des Noirs*, in which Brissot held a key position, drew its inspiration in part from Quaker efforts to end slavery.<sup>7</sup> During his visit to the United States in 1788 Brissot had gone out of his way to talk to members of the Society of Friends; among others he met that active and ardent Quaker pacifist - 'the good' - Warner Mifflin, and he also conversed with President Washington himself on the subject of Quaker beliefs and their role in the Revolutionary War (about whose 'pacific neutrality' Brissot incidentally was rather critical).<sup>8</sup> Though a deist with strong anticlerical views, Brissot regarded Quakerism very sympathetically.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, in theory at least he almost accepted their pacifism. At any rate he believed that universal peace would arrive if humanity as a whole followed 'these wise men' in resolving 'never to take [up] arms or contribute to the expences of any war'. Though himself 'convinced of the sacred and divine principle which authorises resistance to oppression', he believed as strongly in the Quakers' right to refuse military service. While he knew about their objection to paying fines in lieu of serving with weapons and their willingness to suffer repeated distraint of property rather than comply with this alternative, he did not see this as an obstacle to granting them exemption in France. 'It would be very easy,' he wrote, 'to reconcile the wants of the state, and the duty of the citizen, with the religious principles of the Quakers. You might subject them only to pacific taxes, and require them to pay a larger proportion of them.'<sup>10</sup>

In a postscript to his *New Travels* added in 1790, Brissot argues cogently that, in reality, the spirit now leading French revolutionaries to approve an armed defence of liberty was virtually identical with the spirit that had animated the Society of Friends in refusing to bear arms for whatever cause. He wrote:

If the old government had an interest in inviting Quakers to France, this interest is doubled since the Revolution. The spirit of that Society agrees with the spirit of French liberty in the following particulars:

That Society has made great establishments without effusion of blood; the National Assembly has renounced the idea of conquest, which is almost universally the cause of war. That Society practises universal tolerance; the Assembly ordains it. The Society observes simplicity of worship; the Assembly leads to it. The Society practises good morals, which are the strongest supports of a free government; the political regeneration of France, which the Assembly is about to consummate, conducts necessarily to a regeneration of morals.

If the French are armed from North to South, it is for liberty, it is for the terror of despotism, it is to obey the commands of God; for God has willed that man should be free, since he has endowed him with reason; he has willed that he

should use all efforts to defend himself from that tyranny which defaces the only image of Deity in man, his virtues and his talents.

But notwithstanding this ardour in the French to arm themselves in so holy a cause; they do not less respect the religious opinions of the Quakers, which forbid them to spill the blood of their enemies. This error of their humanity is so charming, that it is almost as good as a truth. We are all striving for the same object, universal fraternity; the Quakers by gentleness, we by resistance. Their means are those of a society, ours those of a powerful nation.<sup>11</sup>

The Quakers' decision, taken in the second half of 1790, to petition the legislature *inter alia* for military exemption for members of the Society in case of conscription seems to have originated with Marcillac. But Brissot was consulted at every step in the procedure. Marcillac already knew of course that Brissot took an extremely favourable view of the Quakers' noncombatancy. Thus, writing to a prominent London Quaker, the publisher James Phillips,<sup>12</sup> Marcillac in his letter, dated 9 January 1791,<sup>13</sup> spoke of conversations he had held with Brissot 'and some other good patriots,' all of them Girondin members of the National Assembly 'well disposed' toward the Quakers. They included Jean-Paul Rabaut Saint-Etienne, who came from a Protestant background, and the *abbé* Henri Grégoire, who had become the constitutional bishop of Blois, and was later to write about Quakers - as well as Mennonites - in his pioneering history of religious sectarianism.<sup>14</sup> These French well-wishers advised Marcillac 'that the success [of his petition] would much depend on the zeal and the address with which the President [of the Assembly] should present it.' Therefore, they urged, the Quakers should defer presentation of the petition for 'a couple of weeks when it was said Mirabeau would be chosen President: and as he [too] is well disposed towards us and a great friend of Rabaut, Grégoire, Warville etc., he will have pleasure in seconding the application with that energy and eloquence which has hitherto enabled him to combat all his rivals with success.' 'It is to be hoped', thus Marcillac concludes his account, 'that in this day of returning liberty to France we shall be treated with even more consideration [than before 1789], if the Lord is pleased to favour us in the undertaking.'

Furnished with authorization from the Congénies Quakers to act as 'Député extraordinaire des Amis de France à l'Assemblée Nationale' and accompanied by the Rotches, father and son, Marcillac appeared on 10 February 1791 before the National Assembly where Mirabeau had now embarked on his fifteen-day stint as President of that body.<sup>15</sup> The night before, some minor alterations had been made in the text of the petition Marcillac had composed. This was done at the request of the

Rotches who, however, on account of their ignorance of the French language had difficulty in getting all the changes made that they would have liked: 'the time was so short', wrote William Rotch, 'that we were obliged to let it pass with much fewer amendments than we wished.'

On the day itself the Assembly chamber was packed. Deputies attended in large numbers and every place was taken in the galleries for the public so that many "spectators" had to be turned away. However, it seems to have been mainly 'the novelty of the object' that attracted so many people rather than interest in the Quaker religion. On entering the Assembly chamber the three Quakers, according to an old custom of the Society of Friends, had kept their hats on.<sup>16</sup> They had also refused to wear national cockades, though pressed to do so; and they persisted in their refusal even after being told that it was 'required by law, to prevent distinction', and that their safety might be endangered through mob violence generated by their failure to conform on this point. None the less, despite such nonconformity which was probably attributed to the harmless peculiarities of their sect, the Quakers were given a good reception by the Assembly; at one point of the proceedings an unidentified deputy had whispered to Benjamin Rotch, 'I rejoice to see something of your principles brought before this Assembly.' Brissot, who had been asked by the Quaker delegation to give a last look at their text just before entering the Assembly chamber, stood all the time at Marcillac's 'elbow', as he read the Petition to the gathered Assemblymen, so as 'to correct him [William Rotch reports] in his emphasis, which [Brissot] frequently did, unperceived, I believe except by us.' After the reading was concluded, the President Mirabeau read his answer, upon which he politely invited the three Quakers to stay for the rest of the sitting.<sup>17</sup>

The main thrust of the Quakers' petition<sup>18</sup> was directed toward gaining military exemption for their members. But it also included a request for exemption from taking civic oaths and for permission to use the simple forms of registering births, marriages, and deaths that were customary in their Society.<sup>19</sup> Appeal was made to freedom of conscience and to the principle of religious toleration which recent French legislation had exhibited, thereby setting an example to the nations. 'We hope that sooner or later they will follow it.' Among the Friends' dearest principles, the petitioners stated, was that of nonviolence, for the sake of which they had endured severe persecution. This principle prevented them from taking up arms and killing their fellow men 'for any reason whatsoever': a principle which, they believed, 'was in accordance with the holy scriptures', for Christ had told his followers not to render evil

for evil but to do good even to enemies. Britain and the United States had both freed Quakers from bearing arms 'without regarding them on that account as useless members of society.' Therefore Frenchmen, show generosity, the petitioners urged. 'You have sworn never to imbrue your hands with blood for the sake of conquest. This resolve brings you, and indeed the whole world, closer to universal peace. Thus you surely cannot view with hostility those who, by their example, hasten its arrival. In Pennsylvania [Quakers] have already shown that huge structures may be erected and maintained without military preparations and without shedding human blood.'<sup>20</sup> The petitioners concluded by reviewing the various material advantages which they believed would accrue to France - 'a country indeed dear to us' - if the Assembly encouraged their Society by granting it what had been requested.<sup>21</sup>

In his response Mirabeau expressed his admiration for the Quakers' principles considered 'as a philanthropic system'; and he asked their delegates to have full confidence in legislators representing a France now in the process of regeneration and anxious for the maintenance of international peace and the rights of man. Nevertheless, with respect to their pacifism he told the delegates he entertained serious reservations. Though 'doubtless in theory a beautiful principle' doing credit to their humanity, in practice he thought it did not look so fine.

Don't you think the defence of yourselves and your neighbours to be a religious duty also? Otherwise you would surely be overwhelmed by tyrants! Since we have gained liberty for you as well as for ourselves, why would you refuse to preserve it?

If your brethren in Pennsylvania had been settled nearer its savage inhabitants, would they have allowed their wives, children, and old people to be slaughtered rather than resist? And aren't stupid tyrants and ferocious conquerors equally savages?...

Whenever I meet a Quaker I intend to say to him: My brother, if you possess the right to be free, you have also an obligation to prevent anyone from making you a slave. Loving your neighbour, you must not allow a tyrant to destroy him: to do so would be the same to kill him yourself. Do you desire peace? Well then, it is surely weakness that calls forth war. A general readiness to resist would procure universal peace.<sup>22</sup>

The Quaker delegates' labours were not concluded when the sitting ended and they had returned to their hotel. They quickly realized that they must seize the opportunity resulting from the good impression that they appeared to have made at the Assembly and do some further lobbying among influential members of that body. Among those they visited only Talleyrand proved entirely unreceptive. 'After endeavouring to

impress him with the foundation of our Petition,' writes William Rotch, 'he made no reply, but let us pass silently away.' On the other hand General de Lafayette, despite his military rank, promised his support for the Quakers in the course of a dinner-party to which he had invited them. Among those visited it was the Girondin Rabaut who showed most understanding for Quaker nonviolence. He regarded this tenet, he told the three Friends, as "pure Christianity". Without committing himself personally to their position he summarized it as follows: 'If an assassin comes to take my life, and I conscientiously refrain from taking his to save it, I may trust to some interposition for my deliverance. If however, no interposition appearing, I still refrain from precipitating a soul unprepared into Eternity, and he is suffered to effect his purpose on me, I may hope to find mercy for myself.' Marcillac and the two Rotches also organized a series of soirées at the hotel where the latter were staying. These gatherings were attended chiefly by Girondins: there Quaker doctrines were expounded and 'religious subjects' discussed until late into the night.<sup>23</sup>

The Assembly had in fact taken no decision whether or not to grant the Quakers petitioners' requests, merely ordering that the Quaker Petition and Mirabeau's reply should be printed at the Assembly's expense while at the same time transmitting the Petition to the *Comité de Constitution* for examination.<sup>24</sup> No further action in the matter is recorded; the Quakers' requests remained unanswered.<sup>25</sup>

Thus the outcome of Quaker efforts had proved ambiguous. No assurance of military exemption of any kind had been gained, although the current legislators had indeed displayed - in general terms - their goodwill toward the Quakers and toward their peaceable principles, too. A note of dissatisfaction, combined with restrained optimism concerning the present situation, emerged in a letter Marcillac sent to Phillips in London at the beginning of May. 'Although,' he wrote, 'I believe the spirit of general toleration has so far prevailed as not to oblige us at present to bear arms, nor to take an oath, nevertheless it is their intention not to consider us as active citizens in Languedoc and Dunkirk, and I protest always against that, whilst I consider it the duty of every citizen to contribute to the maintenance of his country with his pecuniary means and intellectual faculties.'<sup>26</sup>

In 1792 compulsion was employed in connection with the National Guard, which had been established two years earlier, but "passive" citizens were excluded from this draft. The position of the Quakers with regard to military requirements remained as unclear after the presentation of their Petition as it had been before. After the outbreak of war with Austria on 20 April 1792 and the subsequent declaration on 11

July that the Fatherland was in danger, the situation began steadily to worsen. Marcillac wrote despondingly to London Friends about 'divers trials, which in our weak state we have found painful and grievous, the civic oath, the obligation imposed by the National Assembly to mount guard personally and to arm.' French Friends, including himself, had not felt able in good conscience to comply with 'these trying requisitions'. 'I [have] had,' he wrote, 'several times opportunity of testifying in public that our refusal to bear arms was not in disobedience to the laws of the [state], but in obedience to the heavenly principles of our Master and Saviour Jesus Christ.'<sup>27</sup> An even more pessimistic report came next month from the pen of a Congénies Quaker writing to a London Quaker:

This nation is in a desperate condition... The authorities seize upon, indiscriminately, from the body of citizens a large number of men between the ages of 16 and 50. And we, too, shall not be exempt from the ballot. Judge, dear friend, in what a sad state we find ourselves and what a trial we are having to undergo. While one law ordains that all citizens without exception must mount guard within the confines of their district, another requires everyone, the young as well as the old, to wear the cockade; and anyone in our area who doesn't do this may expect to be roughly handled.<sup>28</sup>

In practice the Congénies Quakers seem to have reached a compromise with the local authorities in respect of the now compulsory National Guard. If called upon to do their spell of duty they served - but not with a lethal weapon. By mutual agreement they went armed merely with a wooden truncheon.<sup>29</sup>

Meanwhile Brissot and the other Girondins, who continued to be extremely influential in the Legislative Assembly and for a time in its successor the National Convention, too, had become enthusiastic supporters of war against the enemies of the Revolution, which they regarded as a crusade for liberty. In the course of 1793, however, Brissot and most of his Girondin colleagues fell victim to the Terror, organized by the Jacobins to eliminate not only adherents of the *ancien régime* or centerists of various kinds but their political rivals on the left as well.

By this date indeed the Dunkirk Quakers, after experiencing difficulties as a result of their refusal to illuminate their windows in celebration of French victories, had left the country for good. The Rotches sailed for England shortly before France declared war against the latter on 1 February 1793. In addition, in this tense atmosphere a promising scheme, devised by Marcillac with the support of English Quakers, to establish at Chambord a school for the training of poor

children in trades and crafts, had collapsed - in large part because of Quaker insistence that any pupils, who were also Friends, should be guaranteed *inter alia* exemptions from military service.<sup>30</sup> And in 1795 Marcillac himself left for the United States; when he returned to France in 1798 he had ceased to be a Quaker. Henceforward, the peasant boys of Congénies, and the simple Quaker villagers their parents, were left to face alone, as best they could, the *levée-en-masse* and the military demands of successive revolutionary administrations and finally of the Napoleonic Empire. For most of this period France was at war with Britain while America was far away: thus Quakers abroad could be of little use in helping French Quakers respond to the military question.

The "legend" of the Good Quaker, we have seen, was common to many French intellectuals at that time, and especially to those on the political left. Revolutionary politicians, including of course the Jacobins, knew about the Quaker Petition of February 1791 asking for exemption from military service<sup>31</sup> and were thus already acquainted with this aspect of the Quaker faith. However, it was not the Quakers but the Mennonites who, in 1793, became briefly the objects of the Jacobins' interest. So these Mennonites, when receiving from the latter a measure of toleration for their noncombatancy, may in fact have been benefiting from the vogue which the peaceable Quakers enjoyed among French revolutionaries generally.<sup>32</sup>

The Mennonites settled in France under the *ancien régime* were an offshoot of the anabaptist Swiss Brethren, who had emerged in Zürich around 1525. Calling themselves "defenceless Christians" and, like their Swiss predecessors, proponents of the principle of *Wehrlosigkeit* (nonresistance), these sectaries refused steadfastly to bear arms though, unlike the Quakers, they were prepared either to pay commutation money in exchange for military exemption or, if it came to the worst, to undertake noncombatant duties in militia or army. In fact before 1789, in Alsace where most of them lived their military obligations had been light, as they were too in that period in the two small enclaves formed by the principality of Salm and the county of Montbéliard.<sup>33</sup>

With the outbreak of revolution the situation altered for Mennonites in France, as we have seen it did too for the French Quakers. At first, however, the government assured Mennonites that in case of a military draft - for example for the National Guard - their religiously motivated objection to bearing arms would be respected, as it had been in the past, in exchange for a monetary payment. But once war had broken out, and young Frenchmen began to be conscripted - and killed - then attitudes toward the Mennonites began to change, at any rate at the local level.

There tolerance - or indifference - sometimes gave way to open or veiled hostility. In the district of St-Hippolyte, for example, the authorities described the Mennonites' objection to bearing arms as a 'dangerous' principle. If followed by others (which they appeared to think quite likely), it would leave this frontier area open to attack by the enemy. They accused the Mennonites of 'ill will and hatred of the Revolution.' 'When the Fatherland is in danger, all citizens who are not public functionaries ought to render service in person.'<sup>34</sup> The fact that the Mennonites, who still spoke only German, also rejected civic oaths as unchristian, wore beards then widely regarded as a remnant of barbarism, and followed a different form of worship from that of their fellow citizens, all added to the suspicion with which the average Frenchmen regarded them, at any rate in times of war when such peculiarities emphasized the sectarians' othernesses.<sup>35</sup>

In the summer of 1793 the Committee of Public Safety took under consideration the Mennonites' claim for military exemption. The Committee's deliberations had been prompted by pressure exerted on the National Convention from concerned subordinate bodies like the Council General of Doubs; it was now asked to hand down some authoritative ruling in the matter. In addition, the Mennonites had appointed a delegation, which sought from the highest authority in the land a confirmation of their military exemption now being contested at a lower level. The initiative in sending a delegation to Paris seems to have originated with Mennonite congregations in the freshly annexed territories of Montbéliard and Salm.

Mennonites in the (former) principality of Salm had recently been encouraged by the warmth of feeling displayed toward them by a three-man delegation sent in March 1793 by the Committee of Public Safety to inspect the newly acquired area. 'Good and brave men', was how one of the three inspectors, Goupilleau de Montaigu, described these rural sectaries; indeed he had become convinced there were 'no better people on the face of the earth' than they were. And he compared them favourably to the Quakers, whom he also greatly admired. Back in Paris Goupilleau promoted the Mennonites' cause with the Committee of Public Safety, and his efforts on their behalf appear in some way to have been coordinated with the lobbying of the Mennonite delegation which had arrived in the capital at the beginning of August.<sup>36</sup> The Petition, which the latter brought with them and presented - in a French translation - to the Convention on 8 August, asked that Mennonite conscripts be allowed to pay a sum of money in place of serving in person. It cited in support the fact that Mennonites had already been allowed to do this in the American Republic: a good precedent

considering the prestige enjoyed by the latter in Revolutionary France.

The matter was referred for a decision to the Committee of Public Safety. And on 19 August 1793 this body issued what was indeed not formally a decree, but simply a recommendation, in effect brief guidelines directed to local authorities, concerning the proper procedure to be adopted in dealing with drafted Mennonites. Among those signing, or confirming, this document we find the names of such prominent Jacobins as Robespierre, Carnot, Couthon, Héault de Séchelles, and St. Just. ‘We have observed the simple hearts of these people’, states their *arrêté*, ‘and believing a good government ought to employ all kinds of virtue for the public good we ask you to treat the Anabaptists with a mildness that matches their character, to prevent them from being harrassed in any way, and finally to allow them to serve in such branches of the armed forces as they may agree to, like the pioneers or the teamsters, or even to allow them to pay money in lieu of serving personally.’<sup>37</sup>

Historians have expressed surprise at finding ‘totalitarian democrats’ like Robespierre and proponents of conscription like Carnot approving a document such as this, which clearly ‘created a privilege’ for one particular group of citizens, and thus undermining the principle of equality to which the Jacobins adhered with such tenacity.<sup>38</sup> ‘Conscientious objection,’ writes a military historian, ‘was tolerated... probably because it was marginal, rather than out of a libertarian concern’ on the part of the men who signed.<sup>39</sup> True, but it is clear the latter were impelled to bend in favour of the Mennonites and make an exception in their case to the Jacobins’ cherished egalitarianism not primarily on account of the marginality of the Mennonites but because these people seemed now to incarnate other principles to which the Jacobins were also devoted. They exemplified an idyll of rustic virtue and an Eden of lost simplicity; and contemplation of this delightful prospect won the heart of even a Robespierre or a St. Just.

For the time being, then, the Mennonites’ fears were laid to rest. Their young men would not be required to fight; henceforward they could serve their country in some more-or-less acceptable fashion. (Payment of commutation money was indeed the way of escape that they preferred.) Nevertheless matters did not go altogether smoothly, despite this official act of grace on the part of the central Revolutionary government. The authorities on the spot, civilian as well as military, showed a tendency to ignore the monetary alternative to noncombatant army service offered by the Committee of Public Safety; efforts were sometimes made either to push the Mennonite draftees into the pioneer

corps or enrol them as teamsters alongside the troops, even when this was against their wishes.<sup>40</sup> We learn, too, of denunciations lodged against the Mennonites by private individuals; it was alleged, for example, that they were not truly nonviolent since some were known to have fired shots at thieves stealing fruit from their orchards. Voices were raised demanding that, on account of their attitude to military service, they should be deprived of active citizenship.<sup>41</sup> However, it was not until after the fall of Robespierre in July 1794 and the installation in power of the Directory in August 1795 that the central government withdrew explicitly any possibility for Mennonite conscripts to escape army service by means of a monetary payment: henceforward, it was now decreed, 'they will be assigned to sapper or pioneer battalions - service which can in no way offend their religious opinions.'<sup>42</sup>

The Jacobins' grant of exemption of August 1793 represents the apex of the French Mennonites' struggle to be free of the yoke of conscription. Half a century later its printed text, the pages now yellow with age, still remained a treasured possession of elderly Mennonites of the Salm congregation,<sup>43</sup> even though the younger generation of French Mennonites had by now abandoned the traditional nonresistance and were ready to bear arms alongside other conscripts. But in fact, as Séguy writes, after 1798 'the privilege conceded by the Convention has disappeared... Jacobin egalitarian logic has swept it away, thus undoing with one stroke of the pen the timid act framed by the sentimentality rather than the legal judgment of the men of the Convention (*la sentimentalité peu juridique des conventionnels*).'<sup>44</sup>

Under Directory, Consulate, and Empire the fate of both Quaker and Mennonite pacifism became increasingly precarious as the government's manpower requirements rose. The Mennonites indeed had some claim to special treatment within the ranks of the army; the Quakers, though, had none. While the army usually assigned the Mennonite boys to a formally noncombatant branch, even though that might entail handling military equipment,<sup>45</sup> Quaker conscripts were not so fortunate. Nevertheless, they appear to have been successful in avoiding, somehow or other, the use of their weapons to kill. Friends in France could report to their brethren in London in 1815 after the war was over: 'Not one of our members has to blush for having done violence to any.'<sup>46</sup> Such determination, they felt, did not merit the censure which their conscripts might otherwise have deserved.

The French Revolution evoked from France's new rulers a much wider measure of consideration for conscientious objectors than was again to occur in that country until in 1962 General Charles de Gaulle succeeded in overriding an unfriendly parliament and legalizing

conscientious objection, this time on a broader base than the Revolutionary legislators had contemplated around 170 years earlier. In the 1960s, we may note, numbers at first did not greatly exceed those in the Revolutionary period.<sup>47</sup>

We have already seen the difference between the treatment of Mennonites in 1793 and the response made to the Quaker request for military exemption two and a half years before. The reason for this lay not in any difference in outlook between Girondins and Jacobins, for their attitude on this question was roughly the same, but in the more uncompromising stance toward military requirements taken up by the Quakers. At any rate in theory, they stood for unconditional exemption of their conscripted members. What, despite their belief in war as an effective instrument for defending a free republic and for extending liberty to the rest of humankind, had prompted both Girondins and Jacobins to look benevolently at the noncombatancy of the two peace sects in their midst was a feeling that these sectaries reflected, as it were, the reverse side of their own libertarian belligerency; that these people were already practising brotherhood, the idea of *fraternité* which was still only an aspiration for the revolutionaries themselves; and moreover that they had realized in advance the goal, common to all progressive men and women, of an ultimately peaceful world. The revolutionaries (in their own opinion at any rate) were pacifists at heart; they had been compelled to fight as a result of the otherwise ineradicable warlikeness of the foes of freedom. Quakers in France, and even more the Mennonites in that country, were indeed fortunate in appearing as the heroes of one of the “legends” of the French Enlightenment. But before long legend gave place to reality; young Mennonites and Quakers now found themselves on the battlefields where the Napoleonic armies fought with the rest of Europe. Only one essential characteristic differentiated them from other Frenchmen in uniform: they would not kill.

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#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> Michel Auvray, *Objecteurs, insoumis, déserteurs: Histoire des réfractaires en France* (Paris, 1983); Alan Forrest, *Conscripts and Deserters: The Army and French Society during the Revolution and Empire* (New York and Oxford, 1989). Auvray covers the period between 1789 and 1815 on pages 65-94. On page 5 Forrest writes: ‘The *objecteur*, the man of conscience, emerged in the nineteenth century... In the period that concerns us, those rejecting military obligation would seem to have acted from more prosaic motives... In the hundreds of depositions made to tribunals and the numerous interrogations that accompanied the trials of deserters and *insoumis* there is nothing

to suggest a resistance rooted in a principled opposition to war'. That last sentence is, I am sure, true; one has to look elsewhere for evidence of such principled war resistance. Subsequently Forrest, without mentioning the Quakers, does devote six lines (on page 54) to the 'conscientious objection to war' of 'certain religious groups' like the Alsace Mennonites. He refers, too, to the authorities of Colmar district assigning the latter early in 1796 to work as army teamsters in lieu of bearing arms. For the background problem of religious pacifism and conscientious objection to military service, see in particular Peter Brock, *Pacifism in Europe to 1914* (Princeton, New Jersey, 1972).

- <sup>2</sup> Henry van Etten, *Chronique de la vie Quaker française 1745-1945: Deux siècles de vie religieuse* (second edn. Paris, 1947) 45, 46. See also his article 'Les Quakers et la Révolution française', *Revue internationale d'histoire politique et constitutionnelle*, N.S.6 (1956), 285.
- <sup>3</sup> Library of the Religious Society of Friends (London), MS vol. 314 (France MSS), no.78: 'Note describing the usages of Friends in the south of France, n.d.' Though it is undated, a reference to Marcillac as a former 'captain of horse [who] being convinced of the unlawfulness of arms quitted the Service' indicates that the note was composed in the second half of the 1780s and reflects the pre-Revolutionary situation. The number of persons then belonging to the Congénies Quaker group is estimated here as between 250 and 280.
- <sup>4</sup> Quoted in Margaret E. Hirst, *The Quakers in Peace and War: An Account of Their Peace Principles and Practices* (London, 1923), 466.
- <sup>5</sup> See especially the excellent monograph by Edith Philips, *The Good Quaker in French Legend* (Philadelphia, 1932). Chap. V (133-65) is entitled: 'Quaker Ideas and the French Revolution'.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid., 133.
- <sup>7</sup> See Lenore Loft, 'Quakers, Brissot and Eighteenth-Century Abolitionists', *The Journal of the Friends' Historical Society*, 55 (1989), 277-89.
- <sup>8</sup> J.-P. Brissot de Warville, *New Travels in the United States of America performed in 1788* (London, 1792; reprinted as Brissot de Warville *On America*, vol. I [New York, 1970]), 189-93, 414-16.
- <sup>9</sup> Cf Philips, *Good Quaker*, 200: 'Quakerism seemed to the Deists to be the form which popular religion ought to take. They recognized that the masses needed more than an intellectual concept of God, and here, in Quakerism, was a "natural" religion ready made.' In his discussion of Quaker nonviolence Brissot remarks: 'Reason is the only weapon they use'; *New Travels*, 418.
- <sup>10</sup> Brissot, *New Travels*, 417. I am not sure, however, if Brissot's proposal here would have satisfied the stricter Quakers, who objected in principle to any requirements exacted in exchange for exemption from any act they regarded as in itself wrong. Thus, the suggested 'larger proportion' of an otherwise innocuous tax would seem to be unacceptable according to such - perhaps excessively sensitive - consciences.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid., 418-20.
- <sup>12</sup> Philips was also a personal friend of Brissot and one of the founders of the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade in 1787. Writing to Brissot at the end of 1790 he had pointed out to the latter that the new government was being unfair to the French Quakers in making active citizenship dependent on readiness to bear arms. See James C. Dybikowski, 'Edmond Philip Bridel's Translations of Quaker Writings for French Quakers', *Quaker History* 77 (1988), 111, 116. Bridel had been a schoolmate of Brissot's but later moved to London where he became a teacher and writer of elementary-school textbooks. See *ibid.*, 110.

- <sup>13</sup> I have cited from the contemporary translation in Friends Library (London), MS vol. 314 (France MSS), no.58. Van Etten, *Chronique*, has printed the French original on pages 69-72.
- <sup>14</sup> *Histoire des sectes religieuses* (Paris). This work went through three editions: 2 vols., 1810; 2 vols., 1814; and 6 vols., 1828-45. Grégoire died in 1831.
- <sup>15</sup> Several of the friendly deputies consulted earlier had suggested to Marcillac that he should present Mirabeau beforehand with an outline of Quaker beliefs in French. It is not clear if this was actually done, though Marcillac, in his letter to Phillips, had expressed his intention of doing so and of sending Mirabeau as well several of William Penn's writings recently translated into French. See Dybikowski, 'E.P. Bridel', 116-9.
- <sup>16</sup> Van Etten, *Chronique*, 78.
- <sup>17</sup> William Rotch, *Memorandum written by William Rotch in the Eightieth Year of His Age* (Boston and New York, 1916), 52-56.
- <sup>18</sup> Its full French text, together with that of Mirabeau's response, has been printed at least four times: *Procès-verbal de l'Assemblée Nationale, imprimé par son ordre: Douzième livraison* (Paris), vol. 46, no.558, 12-20 ('Du Jeudi 10 Février 1791, au soir'); *Pétition respectueuse des amis de la Société chrétienne, appelés Quakers, prononcée à l'Assemblée Nationale le Jeudi 10 Février 1791* (À Paris, chez Baudouin, Imprimeur de l'Assemblée Nationale...), 7pp., Van Etten, *Chronique*, 72-78; and Jeanne-Henriette Louis, 'William Rotch, Quaker américain et les Anabaptistes-Mennonites de Salm, avocats de la liberté interieure pendant la Révolution française,' *Revue de littérature comparée* 63, (1989), 588-92. The Friends Library (London) possesses copies of early printings in pamphlet form of English translations of the two documents; see Box 33 and Box 179. Rotch, *Memorandum* also includes translations of the two documents; see 70-81. (The name of the translator is not given.) It is interesting to note also that the petition, at any rate as printed, omits the aristocratic 'de' from Marcillac's signature. See also Louis, 'La pétition présentée par Jean de Marcillac, et William et Benjamin Rotch, à l'Assemblée Nationale le 10 Février 1791', in Elise Marienstras, ed., *L'Amérique et la France: Deux révolutions* (Paris, 1990), 205-10.
- <sup>19</sup> *Pétition respectueuse*, 3,4. I have checked my translation with several of the previous ones.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid., 2,3.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid., 4,5.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid., 5-7.
- <sup>23</sup> Rotch, *Memorandum*, 56-59; Van Etten, *Chronique*, 79,80.
- <sup>24</sup> 'L'Assemblée a ordonné l'impression de l'Adresse et de la réponse, et renvoyé au Comité de Constitution l'examen de la Pétition'. This concluding sentence of the account published in the Assembly's *Procès-verbal*, ibid., 20, was not included in the printed pamphlet, whose text has formed the basis of subsequent reprints. Thus the Assembly's recommendation that the matter be considered by the *Comité de Constitution* has escaped the attention of later researchers.
- <sup>25</sup> A search was most kindly made on my behalf in the Archives de France (Paris) to discover if in fact the *Comité de Constitution* took any action on the Quakers' Petition. Unfortunately nothing was discovered. (See letter from Yves Beauvalot for the Directeur Général, dated 28 February 1994). The relevant documentation may have been lost. But it seems more likely, since the National Assembly was dissolved at the end of September 1791, that the *Comité* had not yet got round to considering the Petition.

- <sup>26</sup> Letter dated 1 May 1791 (English Translation), LSF, MS vol.314 (France MSS), no.61.
- <sup>27</sup> Letter dated 16 July 1792 to Robert Grubb and Mary Dudley, *ibid.*, no.70. (Extracts in Van Etten, *Chronique*, 80,81.)
- <sup>28</sup> Louis-Antoine Majolier to John Eliot, letter dated 18 August 1792, *ibid.*, no.72. In the letter cited above (in note 27), Marcillac reports his arrest in Paris for not wearing 'the national cockade'; he felt himself lucky in obtaining a speedy release.
- <sup>29</sup> Edmond Jaulmes, *Les Quakers français: Étude historique* (Nîmes 1898), 41.
- <sup>30</sup> Brock, *The Quaker Peace Testimony 1660 to 1914* (York, England, 1990), 226.
- <sup>31</sup> See, for example, the document dated 3 August 1793, cited by Charles Mathiot, *Recherches historiques sur les Anabaptistes de l'ancienne principauté de Montbéliard, d'Alsace et du territoire de Belfort* (1922). I have used the edition of 1969, with Roger Boigeol as co-author, published at Flavion (Belgium); see p.141.
- <sup>32</sup> This is suggested as a possibility by Louis, 'William Rotch', 588. If such were indeed the case, it was certainly paradoxical, as she points out, that the Quaker Petition had proved fruitless, whereas the more obscure Mennonites were now to gain their objective, at any rate partially - 'thanks to the analogy established between them and the Quakers'.
- <sup>33</sup> In Montbéliard indeed no militia service seems to have been demanded from anyone; see Mathiot, *Recherches*, 137, n. 196.
- <sup>34</sup> Document dated 16 November 1792 requiring the enrolment in the National Guard of a local Mennonite farmer Peter Eicher; reprinted from the Archives du Doubs by Mathiot, *Recherches*, 138-40. Unexpectedly, on appeal this decision was overturned next year by the Council General of Doubs, which based its position in part on the favourable hearing granted the Quakers' similar stance by the National Assembly in February 1791. The Council General also took into consideration 'the quiet, secluded, and tranquil life of the Anabaptists [i.e., Mennonites], their special aptitude for agricultural work as well as for fruit-growing, their promptness in paying taxes, and the impossibility of their ever becoming disturbers of the peace.' See *ibid.*, 140, 141.
- <sup>35</sup> Jean Séguy, *Les assemblées anabaptistes-Mennonites de France* (Paris and The Hague, 1977), chap. 5, especially its documentary appendices. See also his brief account, *Les Mennonites dans la Révolution française* (Montbéliard, 1989).
- <sup>36</sup> Séguy, *Les assemblées*, 359-61.
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 361, 392, 393. Though from its first printing the date of the *arrêté* is given as 18 August, the correct date is almost certainly one day later. See Mathiot, *Recherches*, 142 n. 201; Séguy, *Les assemblées*, 414, n. 71.
- <sup>38</sup> Séguy, 362; Brock, *Freedom from Violence: Sectarian Nonresistance from the Middle Ages to the Great War* (Toronto, 1991), 145.
- <sup>39</sup> Michel L. Martin in Charles C. Moskos and John Whiteclay Chambers II, eds., *The New Conscientious Objection: From Sacred to Secular Resistance* (New York and Oxford, 1993), 82.
- <sup>40</sup> Séguy, *Les assemblées*, 394-7.
- <sup>41</sup> Mathiot, *Recherches*, 144, 146, 147, 150.
- <sup>42</sup> Letter from the Ministry of War, dated 28 December 1798; cited in full in Séguy, *Les assemblées*, 398. See also *ibid.*, 363.
- <sup>43</sup> Alfred Michiels, *Les Anabaptistes des Vosges*, Paris, 1860, 17. Claude Jérôme, 'Les Anabaptistes-Mennonites de Salm aux XVIIIe et XIXe siècles', *L'Essor* 46, no.91 (April 1976): 18, col. 2, gives a reproduction of the original leaflet containing the text of the *arrêté*.

- <sup>44</sup> Séguy, *Les assemblées*, 363.
- <sup>45</sup> In fact Mennonites usually did not raise strong objections to this - provided only they were not required actually to bear arms and participate in killing.
- <sup>46</sup> Cited in Hirst, *Quakers*, 470. Michiels, *Anabaptistes*, 18, 19, relates how on one occasion a Mennonite in the baggage train of Napoleon's army campaigning against the Prussians saved his life during a skirmish by calling out in German: 'Don't shoot at me, for my religion forbids me to defend myself.' The 'enemy' immediately recognized that he was a Mennonite and did not fire; the lad was then taken prisoner peaceably. Three months later the Prussians, familiar with Mennonite noncombatancy from the settlements of that industrious sect in the Vistula basin, let him go.
- <sup>47</sup> M.L. Martin, *ibid.*, n. 39, p.84: 'there were fewer than one hundred COs between 1945 and 1955, their number reached more than two hundred in the early 1960s.'