



Starting Points

Refusing to kill? Quakers and world war 1

Extracts from The Friend:

Extract 1: 4 September 1914

...Theoretically, we agree wholly that war is wrong; practically, it seems that *this* war has been forced upon us by circumstances, and we do not see how our country's share in it could have been avoided except by refusal to fulfil her obligations of honour [*Britain had promised to defend Belgium, which Germany had invaded*], and to stand up against an unjust attack on a weaker nation, for whose safety she had undertaken responsibility...

Edward Grubb

Extract 2: 21 August 1914

Some members of the Society...feel strongly that in this crisis in public affairs they want to render some service...It has therefore been suggested that young men Friends should form an Ambulance Corps to go to the scene of active operations, either in Belgium or elsewhere [to help treat the wounded from either side of the fighting].

Philip J Baker

Extract 3: 28 August 1914

I have read with much interest, and some concern, Philip Baker's letter in The Friend on the subject of an Ambulance Corps. I should be the last to judge or criticise any Friend, young or old, who felt it to be clearly his personal duty to devote himself to the help of the wounded in battle, but the organisation and equipment of a Quaker Ambulance Corps to go to the seat of war and to form an essential and necessary part of the fighting force, as an ambulance most certainly is, seems to me to need most careful consideration, and to be scarcely consistent with what I have always understood to be the views and principles of Friends.

Henry T Mennell

Extract 4: 4 September 1914

As one who has volunteered for service with the Friends Voluntary Aid Detachment of the Red cross Society, I much regret that Henry J Mennell should think that we are aiding militarism. We are conscious that the awful suffering on the battlefield is the outcome of the gigantic folly of mankind; but knowing, as we do, that our brothers of many nations are dying for want of attention, we feel drawn to perform acts of healing. Ours is the answer of the human heart. Man has sinned, nevertheless we possess a passionate love for humanity and are willing to risk our lives in the endeavour to save those who have erred. Peace is no dead thing; in the midst of war it is not impotent, peace is a living gospel, it demands service of us...

Harold Watts

Extract 5: 4 September 1914

There is reason to fear in this crisis, when our Quaker testimony as to the unlawfulness of all war is so sorely needed, that our message will be dimmed and discarded. The proposed formation of a Friends Ambulance Corps...is an instant in point, for to join such a corps is to forsake our testimony entirely. An ambulance corps at the rear, healing the fighters to fight again, is as much part of the military equipment of today as the man with the bayonet doing his deadly work on the field of battle, and it will be deplorable if any of our young Friends should so fall away from their peace principles as to take part in this work...

Charles Edward Gregory

Extract 6: 4 February 1916

This Yearly Meeting has been specifically called together to consider the situation caused by the Military Service Act which has just become law [*which introduced conscription – compulsory enrolment into the Armed Forces for single men aged 18 -41*]; and we take this the earliest opportunity of re-affirming our entire opposition to compulsory military service, and our desire for the repeal of the Act. War in our view involves the surrender of the Christian ideal and a denial of human brotherhood; it is an evil for the destruction of which the world is longing; but freedom from the scourge of war will only be brought about through the faithfulness of individuals to their inmost convictions, under the guidance of the Spirit of Christ.

London Yearly Meeting Statement