

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Roderick Seidenberg (1890?-1973)

I Refuse to Serve

"I Refuse to Serve" (1932) is a personal testimony against military conscription by a World War I conscientious objector. It was published in H.L. Mencken's and George Jean Nathan's *American Mercury* at just the moment in the 1930's when deepening economic depression was creating widespread belief that the war had not "made the world safe for democracy" but mainly enriched arms makers. Pacifists, therefore, who had once been labeled traitors and been imprisoned and tortured, were now considered prophets. Meanwhile, Gandhi's massive demonstrations in India, such as the "Salt Satyagraha" of 1930, gave hopes that what William James had called "A moral equivalent of war" might indeed be found.

In 1917, the draft law required all men to register and be inducted into the army, after which they were to be given noncombatant service in the medical or supply corps, if their objections to war were considered sincere and based upon membership in recognized pacifist churches. But some, such as Roderick Seidenberg, who had been a friend of Randolph Bourne's at Columbia University, were political and philosophic objectors and also would not accept any form of noncombatant or alternative service. They, along with some religious objectors, became so-called "absolutists" and were all sent eventually to Fort Leavenworth. There, as Seidenberg describes, they pitted their wills against the army's, going on hunger strikes and refusing to work, organizing other prisoners, and secretly sending out reports on prison conditions. By January, 1919, outside journalists were also criticizing the army for continuing to enforce harsh wartime sentences. The result was that when the conscientious objectors turned a prison riot into a nonviolent work stoppage, the army negotiated. This was a major victory for the CO's and their methods, and it anticipated in some ways the nonviolent tactics of both the 1930's labor movement and the 1960's civil rights movement.

A sense of pride and a sense of comradeship thus qualify and even overpower Seidenberg's bitterness. He and his fellow CO's amply proved that they were not cowards and slackers. As autobiographer, he also wants to advertise the CO's' discipline, solidarity, and success in attracting support from the other prisoners. Methods that persuaded both them and the army might persuade readers, too. At the same time he does not want to make pacifists into saints.

After the war, Seidenberg became an architect, and in the 1930's he wrote the segments on architecture for the State Guides series that had been underwritten by Roosevelt's Work Projects Administration (W.P.A.). He also wrote books on social theory, *Post historic Man*, an *Inquiry* (1950) and *Anatomy of the Future* (1961).

The text of "I Refuse to Serve" is taken from *The American Mercury* 25 (January 1932): 91-99. For a more extensive history of conscientious objectors in World War I, see Norman Thomas, *The Conscientious Objector in America* (New York: B. Huebsch, 1923), which was republished as *Is Conscience a Crime?* (New York: Vanguard, 1927). On CO autobiography, see Robert F. Sayre, "Rhetorical Defenses: the Autobiographies of World War I Conscientious Objectors," *Auto/Biography Studies* 7 (Spring 1992): 62-81. There is no biography of Roderick Seidenberg. Some additional information can be found in his obituary in the *New York Times*, August 28, 1973, p. 38.

Reading

War Resistance

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