

## **Refusing War, Affirming Peace: A History of Civilian Public Service Camp No. 21 at Cascade Locks**

*Refusing War, Affirming Peace: A History of Civilian Public Service Camp No. 21 at Cascade Locks*

Jeffrey Kovac

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During conflict-based “national crises,” such as the one surrounding US deployment during World War II, pressures to “choose sides,” “rally round the flag,” and “fight for what is right” can be overwhelming. Due to gender roles, these pressures can be particularly intense for young able-bodied men. Jeffrey Kovac presents a case study of one group of combat-age men who felt, mostly for reasons of Christian conscience, that they could not defend the American way of life by joining the military. His chosen focus is an alternative service camp for conscientious objectors located near Cascade Locks, Oregon, between 1941 and 1945.

Kovac is a full professor of Chemistry at the University of Tennessee, who writes mostly about professional ethics for scientists, but Kovac brings a deep personal connection to the subject matter. For one thing, his father-in-law was a camper at Cascade Locks, but more importantly, Kovac was himself a conscientious objector during the Vietnam War. That conflict, especially as it drew to its close, represented a quite contentious period in US history. In contrast, World War II was perceived by the majority of American citizens throughout its course as “the good war.” As Kovac demonstrates, the accompanying cultural climate meant that any accommodation of conscientious objectors would be politically tenuous.

Even prior to the bombing of Pearl Harbour, the three main historic peace churches in America—the Brethren, Quakers and Mennonites—foresaw the possibility of conscription and negotiated directly with the US government for alternative service arrangements. During World War I, the only choices for drafted conscientious objectors were jail or non-combatant service in the military (e.g., as chaplains assistants or in medical corps). The compromise brokered with the Roosevelt administration allowed another option for

recognized conscientious objectors: civilian service in the United States, doing work of national importance while living in assigned camps at least one hundred miles from their home.

Many of the Civilian Public Service (CPS) camps were located on the sites of former New Deal work camps. The site near Cascade Locks has such a heritage. The campers there mostly did forestry work, a normal work week being 51 hours of labour. Some men were consigned to work in mental hospitals or as agricultural labourers. Others were given various duties in CPS camps, such as cooking, that were required for smooth camp functioning. Cascade Locks was initially a joint venture by the Mennonite Central Committee and the Brethren Service Committee, with the latter taking over full administrative responsibility in 1942. Cascade Locks CPS no.21 was a large camp, often hovering near a population of two hundred conscientious objectors. At various times, the camp also operated multiple project specific locations.

Kovac argues that Cascade Locks was “the Athens of the CPS” (150), meaning that the camp was noteworthy for the cultural and political achievements of its campers. In the latter area, Cascade Locks often set an example for other camps in terms of procedure, governance, and financial matters. For instance, when the first director left for employment more suited to the family life, the campers adopted a Christian “conference” model for appointing a successor, which thereafter became standard practice for appointing directors at Brethren camps. It is, however, the cultural achievements that Kovac presents as most significant. Cascade locks was not only a multi-denominational camp, but it was also very much a cross-cultural experiment in that forty percent of the campers were from outside the historic peace Churches; they included Catholics, Orthodox Christians, Jews, and atheist socialists. Building on this diversity, the campers were able to organize, at various times, a library, night classes, guest speakers, poetry readers, full original theatre productions, a camp newspaper, a cultural magazine that was sent nationwide, and a school for pacifist living.

In terms of practical pacifism, the campers also were involved in two remarkable nonviolent actions. When Selective Service wanted to move Japanese American George Yamada to an internment camp in the aftermath of the attack on Pearl Harbour, the camp organized a protest. Although, in the spirit of compromise, he eventually accepted transfer to another inland CPS camp, their action made Yamada the last Japanese American not in jail within

the coastal exclusion zone. On another occasion, when it became clear that involvement in the “Three Lynx” logging project would contribute directly to the war effort (as the military was to be the sole purchaser of the timber), action on the part of the campers resulted in having the entire project terminated. Additionally, on an individual level, some campers even “walked out” of the CPS system so that their subsequent arrests could be used to mount legal challenges that would bring to light the prevailing culture of violence in World War II America.

There is little theoretical analysis presented in *Refusing War, Affirming Peace*. Mainly, Kovac contents himself with explaining the juxtaposition between conscientious objection and prevailing cultural values of the period. The main exception here is his use of Grimsrud’s work as a means to account for the diversity of attitudes among conscientious objectors towards pacifism, the state, and the CPS system. This theoretical lens is the foundation for Kovac’s conclusion that transformation-oriented people, who thought that existing systems could be changed for the better, were best poised to benefit from life in CPS camps. He adds that the relative successes of Cascade Locks is attributable to the large percentage of its campers who were “transformers” and were thus able to accept the compromises that necessarily accompanied involvement with the CPS system.

Given Kovac’s general approach to the subject matter, one feature that is juxtaposed to the rest of his writing is the monograph’s reductionist characterization of some individuals, particularly the Mennonites, within denominational categories. Otherwise, *Refusing War, Affirming Peace* is a well nuanced, clear and readable case study of a remarkable CPS camp that gives insight into the life and times of alternative service conscientious objectors during World War II. As such, reading Kovac’s latest book should represent time well spent for those with an interest in religion, conflict, and peace in twentieth-century American history.

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