

Lazarus Baer Marcowitz, a Conscientious Objector in World War I

On 6 April 1917, the United States entered World War I. The first registration under the Selective Service enacted on 18 May 1917 for all men between the ages 21 to 31 took place on 5 June 1917. My father, Leo Marquit (then named Lazarus B. Marcowitz) registered for the draft as a conscientious objector (CO). Like other socialists in the United States, he strongly opposed U.S. participation in what he regarded as an imperialist war over redivision of the colonies. Denied conscientious objector status, he was conscripted into the U.S. Army in early December 1917 and was assigned to the 16th Company, 152nd Depot Brigade at Camp Upton on Long Island for basic training. After completion of basic training, he was transferred to the 305th Infantry Company for dispatch overseas, whereupon he declined service overseas and was transferred back into the 152nd Depot Brigade. When the next group of soldiers was transferred out of the Depot Brigade for dispatch to Europe, he was not included in the transfer.

From the World War I Conscientious Objectors Database in the Swarthmore College Peace Collection (<http://www.swarthmore.edu/Library/peace/conscientiousobjection/WWI.CO.coverpage.htm>), I learned that some of the conscripts who refused military service after induction were kept in stateside military camps instead of being court-martialed if the officers were convinced that their objection to war was sincere. Obviously, this judgment depended on the attitudes of the officers making that judgment since hundreds of sincere religious and political objectors or pacifist objectors were imprisoned.

Since antiwar socialist activists and draft resisters were being sent to prison, my father's conscience began troubling him. He was concerned that the easy way out being handed to him on a platter was a "cop out." So on May Day, 1918, he went to the YMCA on the base, and drafted a letter to his captain, the first sentence of which read, "I, Private Marcowitz, hereby decline from further military service and in justification of this act make the following statement On three pages of YMCA stationery, he stated stating his reasons for opposing the war as an imperialist war being waged in the interests of the capitalists and in which neither the workers of the United States, Britain, or Germany have an interest. His letter concluded with the words, "I fully realize that I am only going to be another subject of the wrath of the Masters and be crushed by the iron heel of capitalist ruthlessness executed by the unconscious but willing tools, and the whip masters [of] the army authorities. But unless I shall by pain have my consciousness driven out of me by pain I shall not yield." After his signature, he added, "On this day May 1st, International labor day."

He was quite nervous about this. Moreover, he was worried about whether the letter was understandable. So he read it to his sergeant and a barracks buddy in the barracks in the presence of another sergeant who had come into barracks to find his chef. Satisfied that the letter was understandable, he written he handed it to his lieutenant and asked him to deliver to the captain who commanded the Depot Brigade. The captain immediately ordered his arrest. As it happened, his arrest was illegal, because he had not yet disobeyed any order. To make his arrest legal, however, he was subsequently charged with sedition under the Espionage Act "by writing and publishing" the letter.

According to the transcript of the court martial that took place on the evening of 9 July 1917, the two sergeants testified that he had made no attempt to induce them to similar action. The barracks buddy was not called to testify, presumably because he had already been sent overseas. At the end of the three-hour court martial, my father was found guilty as charged and sentenced "to be discharged [from] the service, to forfeit all pay and allowances due and to become due, and to be confined at hard labor at such places as the Reviewing Authority may direct for fifteen years.

He then joined several hundred other conscientious objectors (COs) imprisoned at the Fort Leavenworth Disciplinary Barracks in Kansas. The COs were political and religious objectors, the former being mostly socialists and the latter mostly Mennonites.

From the Swarthmore College Peace Collection's database of World War I COs, I learned that in August 1919, Acting Judge Advocate General E. A. Kreger had authorized the release of World War I COs who were "sincere" conscientious objectors with good conduct during confinement and that my father's prison sentence was remitted on 20 August 1919.

Having lost his civil rights because of the dishonorable discharge, he "regained" them by changing his name to Leo B. Marquit, modeling the change on the leader of the Socialist Party, Morris Hillquit, whose original name had been Morris Hillkowitz. In 1933, President Roosevelt issued an amnesty to the World War I conscientious objects that had lost their civil rights.

In what follows is complete transcript of the letter of declination of military service and a photo copy of the first page of his hand-written letter.

16th Co. 152 Depot Brigade
Camp Upton, N.Y. May 1st 1918

From Laz. B. Marcowitz
To Captain

Commanding officer 16th Co. 152 Depot Brigade
Subject

Declination from further military service.

I, Private M. arc6witz, hereby decline from further military service and in justification of this act make the following statement.

I Lazarus B. Marcowitz after eight months of continued: continued consideration have definitely reached the conclusion that the convictions I always held are borne out by the facts as they occurred, namely that this war in which the United States government is participating is a thoroughly imperialistic war and is fought in the interest and at instigation of the capitalists of the country by a systematically enraged and crazed working citizenship who were led to murder their misled brethren under the guise of patriotism.

That the issues of this war are military and world domination by the British capitalists as up to now or the supremacy over the world commerce by the German autocracy as its capitalists aspire.

The United States capitalists are interested in having England as mistress of the Seas and so keep up a continued economic struggle between the two .aforementioned powers for world supremacy, so that its capitalists may benefit thereby.

That the workingman of neither the two countries nor of this country have anything to gain therefore have no interest in the outcome of this contest.

The attitude of the capitalists of this and all other countries toward Russia shows that there is no 'visible difference in the temperament between them. They are all bound together by the solidarity of capitalist viciousness and thoroughly intend to let nothing interfere with their exploitation of the fast laboring mass of the people.

And in order to realize the selfish aims capitalism has shown its ruthlessness in all countries by inciting, cajoling, coercing and then conscripting the youth of the countries and throwing them into the mouth of hell called trenches.

And by the use the press, pulpit and platform through raids and lynching and tar and feathering they have converted a peace loving and democratic people into one vast mob after stamping out all honest opposition driving right thinking people into jails, suicide or submission or by other methods torturing them into complete helplessness, then proclaimed the existence of complete unity and acquiescence among the peoples. The hypocritical justification for our entrance into the war were they true I am opposed to the defense of them.

The right of American vessels to sail on the high seas war or no war ammunition on it or no is parallel to the right of American citizens scab on their fellow workers strike or no strike.

The invasion of Belgium is only the capitalist ideal [of] the survival of the fittest to live in a crazy world.

As to the claim “to make the world safe for democracy” the difference between a political democracy coupled with economic serfdom or industrial absolutism and a benevolent autocracy is so negligible that it is not worth the wasting of one dollar or the injury [of] one workingman for the right of this choice.

And the last claim that that it is to speed up peace I state that the capitalist countries are powerless to make peace. The war is larger than they are and it controls them, at best they can give us a patched up truce. Peace permanent peace can only be brought about by the workingmen of each country assume control of their respective governments the armies and navies, thru revolutionary action, based on the principles of internationalism call an international democratic conclave and proclaim the union of all the workers of the world. Anything short [of] that is valueless. Capitalism being the only greedy and selfish obstacle for the realization of this ideal I therefor decline to be a servant of destruction and a tool in the hands of capitalism slaying workingmen who are driven like I am on the battlefields and with whom I have no quarrel.

I fully realize that I am only going to be another subject of the wrath of the Masters and be crushed by the iron heel of capitalist ruthlessness executed by the unconscious but willing tools, and the whip masters [of] the army authorities. But unless I shall by pain have my consciousness driven out of me by pain I shall not yield.

Signed Lazarus B. Marcowitz.

On this May 1st, 1918, International Labor Day



"WITH THE COLORS"



16th CO 152 Depot Brigade
Camp Upton, N.Y. May 1st 1918

From - Laz. B. Marcovitz

To - Captain

Commanding officer 16th CO 152 Depot Brigade

Subject -

Declination from further military service.

I, Private Marcovitz hereby declines from further military service and in justification of this act makes the following statement.

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Help your Country by Saving. Write on BOTH Sides of this Paper.

EXHIBIT A

