

Resistance to the violence of World War II

Anarchism & Pacifism shaped later struggles

Eric Laursen

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a review of

War by Other Means: The Pacifists of the Greatest Generation Who Revolutionized Resistance by Daniel Akst. Melville House, 2022

Violence is not all the same. Context matters.

There's something much worse about violence when it's perpetrated by or with the tacit acceptance of the State. It's not just that governments and their allies in the capitalist class and the patriarchy have more resources, more weapons, and fewer ethical qualms about killing than most. Beyond these obvious assets, they can hide behind the veil of legitimacy that the State (allegedly) offers them. Hitler, George W. Bush, and Derek Chauvin may not have a lot in common personally, but all committed their crimes under the reasonable presumption that the social and political order sanctioned such behavior.

This is where anarchism and pacifism—opposition to war—come together, at least some of the time. The case for pacifism, the British anarchist Alex Comfort wrote, “rests solely upon the historic theory of anarchism.” The fact that pacifism “takes its stand upon a pledge of disobedience” is what makes it a relevant form of political action.

To be a pacifist, in other words, you must be at least a little bit of an anarchist, because when it comes to inflicting violence, you don't accept that the State has the final word.

That was the position that a remarkable collection of American pacifists took during what was arguably the most popular and justified war of all time: World War II, the war against fascism. Rather than join the 16 million who served, some 37,000 conscientious objectors (COs) refused to register for the draft, refused to fight, and in many cases, went to prison for their disobedience.

The subtitle of Daniel Akst's new book makes clear that he intends to argue that the COs and their supporters deserve to be regarded as a “greatest generation” as much as those who enlisted, and *War by Other Means* offers the most well-rounded exploration of the wartime pacifists' story I have yet read. Beyond that, it analyzes in depth the personalities and philosophies of some of the most prominent COs, helping us to understand their ethical decisions and the way they went about making their opposition to war felt.

In so doing, Akst, a longtime journalist, sheds light on the intersection between pacifism and anarchism and the critical role the COs played in developing the new politics of protest and direct action that later informed the Civil Rights movement, the campaign to end the Vietnam War, the gay rights struggle, the fight to eliminate nuclear weapons, environmental and AIDS activism, the struggle against corporate globalization, and the Occupy movement. War resistance was not new when Bayard Rustin, David Dellinger, and thousands of others decided to disobey (blues legend Willie Dixon was also one of them, refusing to fight for a country that institutionalized racism), and it's still going on, but their generation of resisters was possibly the most politically transformative of modern times.

It's an often-made argument that pacifism and nonviolence serve the State. But it all depends on how civil one's disobedience is. Certainly, refusal to fight does not undermine the State by itself, especially if one agrees to

alternative, nonviolent forms of service and goes along with the routine. But thousands of wartime COs used their situation to agitate, organize, and expose the injustices of the State.

While many COs served in noncombatant roles as medics, others were interned in Civilian Public Service (CPS) camps where they were put to work outdoors without pay. Many of these camps they turned into “schools for radicalism,” Akst notes. At one camp in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula, they protested their lack of pay by launching a campaign of vandalism and sabotage that included clogging toilets, hiding lightbulbs and silverware, and scrawling obscenities. On leave in a local town, one group of “conchies” (from Conscientious) disabled their vehicle, got drunk at local bars, and got into a fight with a soldier.

When they refused to follow the CPS routine—something that made older pacifists uneasy—COs were often sent to federal prisons, where their treatment was much harsher. Wherever they landed, they found ways to turn their disobedience into a critique of an assortment of American injustices. They opposed racial segregation in prisons, often through work stoppages, slowdowns, and strikes, and documented abuses in mental hospitals where some were assigned to work.

Once back on the outside, they worked with supporters, including the Catholic Worker’s Dorothy Day, the Fellowship of Reconciliation’s (FOR’s) A.J. Muste, and anarchist journalist Dwight Macdonald against the Allied bombing of civilian targets in occupied Europe, restrictions on the admission of Jewish refugees, and the internment of Japanese Americans, and helped focus the American left on the struggle for desegregation. (The Congress for Racial Equality (CORE) was founded during the war as an offshoot of the FOR.) Repeatedly in Akst’s book and the contemporary writings of people like Muste and Dellinger, pacifists made the inconvenient point that in the name of winning an all-out war against Hitler, the U.S. was adopting many aspects of Hitlerism itself.

Was this fair? Probably not, but it prompted at least some people to question whether America’s war really was for freedom and not for America’s own imperial, authoritarian project.

Akst argues, convincingly, that the wartime pacifists were charting a third course “between what appeared to be the corpses of capitalism and communism.” He traces their political roots to Thoreau, William Lloyd Garrison, and the other Abolitionists, whose activism often implicitly rejected the authority of the State. Many of the wartime pacifists, including Dellinger, Muste, and Day (although she had switched to the Catholic Church) had been raised in the same liberal Calvinist tradition, while Rustin was a Quaker. What most of them had in common, more or less, was a loose philosophy that Day called personalism.

The overlap with anarchism is clear. So is the attraction that personalism exerted for Martin Luther King, Jr., and other activists following the war who placed the human above ideology. As such, the wartime pacifists revitalized American radicalism by standing aside from the sectarian squabbling that had crippled the Old Left in the pre-war decades, just as many of them had focused on human rights and their abuse in the CPS camps and federal prisons.

Akst suggests that their refusal to adopt a controlling ideology became a deficit during the struggle against the Vietnam War, preventing it from becoming more organized and effective. But the situation was very different during World War II. The pacifists were a tiny voice that 99 out of 100 Americans at the time barely heard, while the Vietnam antiwar movement was a mass social and cultural phenomenon. As it happens, Muste and Dellinger (“a great person to get arrested with,” his friends said, were among the most effective antiwar figures when it came to holding quarrelsome coalitions together. It’s a fairer criticism that the new radicals of the 1960s never found a way to engage the American labor movement in their struggle, or generate an alternative for working-class people to the increasingly complacent and ineffective mainstream union establishment.

Nor did the wartime pacifists, during or after the war, ever achieve a decisive victory in any of the struggles they waged. Leftist sectarianism has not disappeared, and war, steered by State imperialism, continues to be a way of life for the U.S. So do racism and homophobia. But the new politics that the wartime pacifists pioneered, with its three elements of direct action, civil disobedience, and media-savvy public protest, has become a necessary part of the political landscape as the so-called democratic process increasingly blocks any other avenue to real change.

An example is a campaign that recently issued this call to action: “We refuse to let our forest be bulldozed in favor of the police and sold out to Hollywood. There are many forms of action and advocacy to be taken. This is a broad, decentralized, autonomous movement. Get involved in whatever ways move you.”

Dellinger, Rustin, and their comrades would have heeded the call to Defend the Atlanta Forest in an instant. They were in it for the long haul. *War by Other Means* is a superb account of their lives and achievement.

Eric Laursen writes frequently for the Fifth Estate. His new book, *Polymath: The Life and Professions of Dr. Alex Comfort*, author of *The Joy of Sex*, will be published this fall by AK Press.



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<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/413-spring-2023/resistance-to-the-violence-of-world-war-ii>
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