

# Why the Social Gospel turned a Blind Eye to Mass Internment

By Richard Sanders

All mainstream, AngloCanadian churches were keen to support Britain's imperial wars. Besides helping to crush the Northwest Rebellion, they also promoted the Boer War, WWI and the 1918-1921 invasion of Soviet Russia. They used their pulpits to recruit soldiers, and the faithful were herded around glorious, flag-draped altars. The churches also sanctified the carnage of all these wars by supplying them with military chaplains.

Social Gospellers were not immune to war fever. In fact, these progressives helped to lead it. For example, as Gordon Heath, a Christian history professor at McMaster Divinity College, has said, they saw WWI as a great opportunity for progress: "For those church leaders imbued with the often radical ideals of the social gospel, the war was not only a defense of justice in Europe, but also an opportunity to apply a more radical approach to state control of industry...for the Christianization of the nation. It was anticipated that the sacrifice of sons and wealth would lead to a renewed and reinvigorated Christianity and nation, and the 'war to end all wars' would usher in a new world order."<sup>1</sup>

Rev.J.S.Woodsworth was one of the very few Social Gospellers who embraced pacifism.<sup>2</sup> In 1918, when the war was almost over, his qualms about Methodism's avid support for conscription finally lead him to resign from its ministry. However, he never gave up his deep religious faith.

Despite Woodsworth's opposition to WWI, he does not appear to have ever criticised, let alone protested, Canadian policies of mass civilian internment.

Woodsworth spent most of 1916 working for the Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba governments. As Director of their Bureau of Social Research, his main wartime task was to report on *Ukrainian Rural Communities* (1917).<sup>3</sup> Although his 157-page report detailed Ukrainian prairie life—their houses, farms, customs, food, and the perceived blessings and failings of their religious and political beliefs—it made no mention of rural internment camps. This is remarkable since thousands of Ukrainians were being held prisoner in the very provinces under Woodsworth's intense scrutiny.

Discussion of WWI internment is also conspicuously missing from key books chronicling Woodsworth's life. Two chief biographies, by political scientist

Kenneth McNaught and historian Allen Mills, do not mention internment camps or hint that Woodsworth opposed them.<sup>4</sup> Earlier biographies, by YWCA official Olive Ziegler (1934) and by Woodsworth's daughter Grace MacInnis (1953), are also silent on WWI internment.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, a 2010 collection of scholarly essays edited by Jane Pulkingham (*Human Welfare, Rights, and Social Activism: Rethinking the Legacy of J.S. Woodsworth*) makes no reference to internment. If Woodsworth ever spoke out or took action against this major injustice of his era, these experts did not consider it worthy of note.

Canada's Social Gospel movement as a whole appears to have turned a blind eye to Canada's WWI concentration camps. The most important analysis of Canada's Social Gospel is perhaps Richard Allen's *The Social Passion: Religion and Social Reform in Canada, 1914-28* (1971). His account does not mention whether any Social Gospellers ever bothered to oppose the mass captivity and forced labour of civilians during WWI.

Four other key books on Canada's Social Gospel are also silent on civilian internment in WWI.<sup>6</sup> And, a major study of this movement in Canada, the US and Britain, does not mention the mass internment programs in any of these countries.<sup>7</sup>

Besides Canada's ongoing genocide of First Nations, WWI internment was arguably that era's worst attack on human rights. Why was this of no apparent concern to Social Gospellers? And, why has their grave oversight not been raised as a significant issue by leading scholars who have studied the Social Gospel movement?

It is clear that Woodsworth and other Social Gospellers were captivated by the nativistic AngloProtestantism that promoted widespread public fear and contempt for east Europeans, especially those who were radical, atheist socialists. After spending decades stirring up public opposition to such unassimilable "strangers," it would have been nearly impossible—when war-fever struck in 1914—for Social Gospellers to escape the rigid confines of their xenophobic bigotries. Because Woodsworth was so disparaging towards Ukrainians, and snubbed all cooperation with their radical socialist allies, it makes total sense that he would refuse to join or support, let alone initiate and lead, any effort to help victims of Canada's slave labour camps during WWI and the Red Scare.

Even during WWII, when 130 Canadian communists were interned, Woodsworth would not help to gain their release. He articulated his refusal in a 1940 letter<sup>8</sup> to Rose Shapack, the wife of Jacob Penner.<sup>9</sup> Jacob, a Russian-born Marxist, and the alderman for Winnipeg North from 1933 to 1960, was interned for being a communist in 1940. Woodsworth's reply to Rose's request for help focused on criticising communism and justifying Canada's WWII internment of Marxists. (See p.46.) Penner remained interned for 25 months until mid-1942. For decades during the Cold War, Jacob, Rose and their family<sup>10</sup> were targets of Canada's Profunc internment/surveillance program. (See pp.49.)

## References/Notes

1. Gordon L.Heath (ed.), *Canadian Churches and the First World War*, 2014.
2. Woodsworth's pacifism led him to oppose Canadian radicals who went off to fight Franco's fascism in Spain (1936-1939). In 1939, he was the only MP to oppose Canada's entry into WWII. His vote went against the policy of his own party, the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation, which became the NDP in 1961.
3. J.S.Woodsworth, *Ukrainian Rural Communities*, January 25, 1917. Reel H-2277, Vol.11, #38, J.S.Woodsworth fonds heritage.canadiana.ca/view/oocihm.lac\_reel\_h2278/37
4. Kenneth McNaught, *A Prophet in Politics*, 1959. Allen Mills, *Fool for Christ: The Political Thought of J.S. Woodsworth*, 1991.
5. Olive Ziegler, *Woodsworth: Social Pioneer: An Authorized Sketch*, 1934. Grace MacInnis, *J.S. Woodsworth, A Man to Remember*, 1953.
6. (1) Ramsay Cook, *The Regenerators: Social Criticism in Late Victorian English Canada*, 1985.; (2) Brian Fraser, *The Social Uplifters: Presbyterian Progressives and the Social Gospel in Canada, 1875-1915*, 1988; (3) Nancy Christie and Michael Gauvreau, *A Full-Orbed Christianity: The Protestant Churches and Social Welfare in Canada, 1900-1940*, 1996; (4) Mariana Valverde, *The Age of Light, Soap, and Water: Moral Reform in English Canada, 1885-1925*, 2008.
7. Paul Phillips, *A Kingdom on Earth: Anglo-American Social Christianity, 1880-1940*, 1996.
8. J.S.Woodsworth, letter, July 29, 1940. Reprinted in Mills 1991, *Op. Cit.*, p. 144.
9. Jacob met Rose, a Jewish Russian immigrant, at a 1908 speech in Winnipeg by anarchist Emma Goldman. (See p.27.)
10. As youths, their sons Roland and Norman were active in the Communist Party. Roland became an NDP MPP in Manitoba (1981-1988) and was Attorney General, while Norman taught history at York (1972-1995).