<http://www.satyagrahafoundation.org/andre-trocme-and-the-french-nonviolent-resistance-to-the-wwii-german-occupation/>

**André Trocmé and the French Nonviolent Resistance to the WWII German Occupation**

Posted on 2 November 2014 under [History](http://www.satyagrahafoundation.org/category/history/), [Pacifism](http://www.satyagrahafoundation.org/category/pacifism/), [WRI Project](http://www.satyagrahafoundation.org/category/wri-project/).

**by Peace News**



André & Magda Trocmé, Chambon, 1941; courtesy plu.edu

André Trocmé was almost a pacifist when he was called up into the French Army in the 1920’s. He was in a geographical survey unit in which he hoped he would not have to bear arms. On landing in Morocco, where a rebellion was in progress, he was issued with a rifle, which he returned, and he proceeded into the desert unarmed. His action was discovered when an inspection took place several hundred miles from the coast.

After listening to Trocmé’s explanation an officer told him that he should have known sooner that he was obliged to carry a rifle. Now he was an integral part of a group of 25 men who might be called upon to defend themselves with arms. If the group were attacked he would be indicted before a military court as a deserter. Happily the group was not attacked. Trocmé had learned his lesson and became a fully convinced conscientious objector.

Part of his training for the ministry was undertaken in New York where he met his future wife, Magda Grilli, granddaughter of a Russian Decembrist (officers who revolted against the Czar) exiled in Siberia. Magda completed her training as a teacher after they married. For the following eight years Trocmé worked as a pastor in industrial and mining areas of France, until 1933 when he was transferred to the little Huguenot village of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon in the Province of the Haute Loire of South-East France. In Chambon, along with Edouard Theis, Trocmé founded the College Cévenol, an international secondary school. In the 1930’s the school expanded rapidly until it held 350 pupils and was known outside as well as inside France.

Only now, eight years after the occupation of France, has it become possible to tell one of the most significant stories of the war; a story of French nonviolent Resistance. It has taken so long because it is a different kind of story, about a different kind of resistance. There were no official historians willing to record it. The compilation of this history has been made by ordinary people searching their memories, recovering incidents which at the time were natural and unexceptional, but which the turn of events and the tenor of our time has revealed to be of tremendous importance. They illuminate a pattern of conduct in the face of an intolerable situation, which may yet achieve recognition as a classic experiment in ethics.

Since Gandhi, the cynics of the West have dismissed the arguments of nonviolent resistance which Gandhi made the theme of his life by a contemptuous reference to World War Two. How would you use such a method against people like the Nazis? Yet here is a story of farmers, peasants, pastors, who did in fact use nonviolent resistance against the Nazis and their agents with a measure of success.

In Chambon there were nearly eight thousand Huguenots, who had lived there since the time of the Reformation. They formed a separate world of country folk still loyal to the faith of their fathers. The two pastors of the village were men who interpreted their Christianity as involving the renunciation of violence. From the outset of Hitler’s adventures they proclaimed their conscientious objection to war. After the invasion of Poland public opinion regarded the two men as traitors, accomplices of the Nazis or at least dangerous fanatics. It was a time of complete isolation for them but happily they understood each other.

**The Faith of the Pastors**

Their faith was grounded in the principle that evil cannot be overcome by evil. To oppose the terror spreading across Europe, they were agreed, one had to use non-terrible means, one had to have confidence in the theme of the Founder of their communion, that fear and the threat of death might be cast out by perfect love. As yet their flocks, the inhabitants of Chambon, did not comprehend this.

The war, which now involved France, dealt misery wherever it reached. Refugees from the battle-areas began to fall back along the roads leading south. Then came the nightmare of the fire bombing of Rotterdam by the Luftwaffe  in May of 1940, and soon the collapse of France itself. Chambon was packed with fugitives, many of whom had lost members of their families through air-attacks on the way.

Weeks before the refugees arrived Trocmé and Theis had tried to join the International Red Cross. They had felt that their witness to the pacifist cause was sterile unless it included a positive effort to relieve suffering and promote peace interpersonally. The French military authorities refused them permission to serve with the Red Cross. Now instead of their going out to meet distress, distress had come to them.

June 1940 brought the pact between Hitler and Pétain, and the end of the Republic. In a few hours it had become necessary for the French to reject what they had worshipped and to worship what they had rejected. That liberty for which they had fought was presented by the new Government as a cowardly lapse bringing about the defeat of France. The nationalism against which they had fought was depicted as a noble discipline which created the virtues of “work, family andfatherland”.

The most extraordinary thing was that few Frenchmen noticed the change. Recourse was had to the experience of a few men grouped around the pastors, men who had known Nazism in Germany and who knew that it is impossible to make peace with the powers of darkness. Then it became possible for a few to say No to the new regime.

Those who had been loudest in their denunciation of the pastors at the time of the invasion of Czechoslovakia and Poland now proclaimed that those same men were accomplices of England. This was at the time when the British Fleet destroyed the Vichy Navy in the Bay of Oran.

From 1940 to 1941 the Vichy Government made three efforts to bring into line the ex-servicemen, the churches and French youth. It was at this time that collective resistance began to show itself. There were several incidents in Chambon, which revealed the influence of the pacifist pastors and the growing moral and spiritual strength of the people.

**Pétain’s Oath Altered**

The Legion of War Veterans, which later became Pétain’s party, was set up. With few exceptions, all the men of the district went into it for fear of losing their jobs. Yet, inspired by the two pastors, the Chairman of the Chambon group added to the oath of obedience to the Marshall, these words: “as far as the orders I receive are in conformity with God’s will”. Nothing happened to them. Within a year the local section of the Legion had become useless to the Pétain police for checking on public opinion trends.

The second trick the Government tried was to make compulsory the saluting of the flag in all schools, together with the use of the Fascist salute. In Chambon, a secondary school with a Christian pacifist outlook, the College Cévenol, refused to obey the order. Those staff members who wished went to the nearby state school if they wanted to salute. No saluting was done at Cévenol. At the end of the year the custom was abandoned in all schools in that district.

The next attempt to arouse enthusiasm for Pétain was the order to ring church bells to celebrate the anniversary of the founding of the Legion of War Veterans. The two pastors again refused an order. In spite of the violent conduct of some women parishioners who wanted to ring the bells themselves, a small woman caretaker refused them access to the church. These little serio-comic events contributed to the rousing of the spirit of resistance of the Huguenots.

**Saving Jews and Links with the Quakers**

For some months alarming news had been reaching Chambon about the frightful living conditions of the Jews interned in camps in the south of France (Gurs, Argeles-sur-Mer, Les Milles).

The church was very moved and decided to send one of its pastors with relief to help the social workers who were already at work in the camps. The pastor went and found there a group of American Quakers who were then still active in Marseilles. They proposed that he should take to Chambon any refugee children who might be got out of internment.

Soon “Quespy” was opened, the first house for children at Chambon. In a few months seven other houses to receive the children were opened by various movements.

This move was taken quite consciously at a time when it was dangerous to shelter Jews. It was an action through which the people of Chambon determined their position. With this fraternal gesture, asserting a constructive reply to the fanaticism of the day, nonviolent resistance to the Hitler-Pétain system was born. Conflict with the authorities, daily expected, broke out in the summer of 1942. It was during this period that the news reached Vichy-France of the savage operations against the Jews in Paris. This was the time chosen by the Minister of Youth, M. Lamirand, to pay a visit to the young Protestants of Chambon to rally them around the Marshal.

It was as the congregation was leaving the church after service that a delegation of thirty from the College Cévenol approached the Minister for Youth and the Prefect who was accompanying him, to protest solemnly against the anti-Semitic persecutions and to declare that if similar steps were taken in Chambon they would be resisted through nonviolence.

The Prefect was indignant and while he admitted having received orders, repeated the official theme, “there is no question of persecution but of a re-grouping of the Jews in Poland.” Then turning towards the pastors he warned them, “Look out, I have received letters from seven informants and I know all about your attitude and your doings.”

That very week the youth groups were called together by the pastors to set up a hiding place for the hundred or so Jews in the village. The storm broke out a fortnight later when Vichy police came and occupied the village. Two big coaches intended to carry off the Jews were parked in the village square. The pastors were called upon to give a list of the Jews in the village.

**Jews “Disappear”**

On their refusal they were urged to sign a notice calling on the Jews to give themselves up so as not to disturb the public order and not to endanger the families sheltering them. Again the pastors refused. They were then threatened with arrest if the order was not carried out by mid-day the next day, a Sunday. Instead of obeying the order they put into action the same night the plan arranged for the “disappearance” of the Jews.

The Protestant church was full that Sunday morning, everybody expecting the arrest of the pastors. The village council was in session under threats and had signed the notorious appeal to the Jews. At noon not a single Jew appeared. The pastors were not arrested and forty policemen went through every house in the village in vain. They arrested one Jew and put him into one of the big coaches; the people filed by, loading him with presents!

The police were stupefied, realizing they were far from popular. The next day they had to release the prisoner, whose ancestry was but half Jewish. The policemen remained for three weeks in the village, very zealous at first and naively convinced of the rightness of their action; but they soon lost all enthusiasm. The population was educating them as they went from house to house questioning and searching.

For long months after, the police continued to raid Chambon and the neighbouring villages. Many times, on the eve of a search, an unknown voice would telephone to warn of the danger. It undoubtedly belonged to a civil servant who had been converted by the nonviolent resistance of the villagers.

The success of the methods employed at Chambon attracted an increasing flow of Jewish refugees. The Jewish Relief Agency states that more than two thousand of them stayed temporarily in the region, hidden on the farms. That was when “Cimade” came into the picture. It was a youth group composed of members of several youth organizations in the district which took on the job of smuggling Jewish refugees into Switzerland where they were placed in the care of the World Council of Churches. It provided the Jews with false identity papers which were essential to cope with regular police checks, to obtain ration cards and to be able to travel in the company of a girl volunteer as far as the Swiss frontier.

There were few arrests.

**Resistance Without Arms**

A spirit of prayer surrounded the refugees, some speaking of miracles, some of increasing lenience on the part of the authorities. Such lenience, however, was not evident in other parts of the country where the situation was growing worse day by day.

The resisters of Chambon did not hide their activities from the authorities, they merely prevented identities being known, and in the end the police shut their eyes.

But the Vichy government was not satisfied. In the spring of 1943 it ordered the Prefect to arrest the two pastors and the headmaster of the village school; all three were interned.

After three weeks the pastors were offered their liberty if they would swear allegiance to Pétain. They refused, but Pierre Laval (Internal Affairs head) ordered their release in spite of that.

Then it was for the first time that the pastors were contacted by the Secret Army (the Maquis). Whilst expressing their sympathy with the Maquis they made it clear that there was a difference of aim between them and the Chambon movement (national liberation for the Maquis, the defence of man for the others), and also a difference in method (armed resistance for the Maquis, non-collaboration for the people of Chambon).

The two types of action continued side-by-side, often intermingled, right up to the Liberation.

It is difficult to say if the Maquis protected the nonviolent groups, or if the latter saved the Maquis in Haute Loire from the tragic fate of the Maquis in Vercors. In any case the nonviolent ones raised no question of keeping their hands clean or of dissociating themselves from those who, like themselves, were bravely risking their lives. Neither did the Maquisards accuse the nonviolent ones of cowardice, in spite of the fact that they often resisted the Maquis, too.

In the middle of 1943 one of the students’ refugee homes was raided by the Gestapo, who arrested the Director and 23 students. With the exception of three, they all died in extermination camps.

**Into Hiding**

Violence broke out on the day when a Vichy police spy was assassinated by four members of the Maquis. The pastors publicly expressed disapproval of this act, but they were held responsible by the Gestapo and condemned to death!

But amongst the Gestapo themselves there were those who served the Resistance. A warning from one of those enabled the pastors to go into hiding, where they had to stay for ten months.

During their absence the church strengthened its influence and the movement for peaceful resistance spread throughout the district, although many people did slide towards the Marquis.

From the time of the Normandy landing, while one of the pastors continued the work of getting fugitives over the Swiss frontier, the other went back to Chambon. The whole region had come under the authority of De Gaulle’s Fourth Republic and the situation had become complex in the extreme. There were frequent raids by German troops, many people were shot and their houses burnt. The population was swept with waves of tremendous emotion and fear.

Allied planes parachuted arms to the Maquis during the night and many of the youth of the district went over to them. A few preferred to remain nonviolent and served in other ways.

Spying was prevalent for a time and the pastor member of the Liberation committee opposed the execution of suspects. He was not called to any further meetings, but the lives of the suspects were saved.

Six weeks before the Liberation, almost without firing a shot, the Maquis captured 120 Germans who were trying to get to Lyons across the mountain. They included the German Regional Commander, his staff, some Gestapo officers and a body of privates. They were brought to Chambon and imprisoned in a country house. This was the time when the story of the Oradour massacre was being circulated and every German was held responsible for the crime.

The pastor made himself very unpopular with the Maquisards by visiting the prisoners. At first none of the Germans had any sense of guilt, for they believed in the early victory of Hitler and looked on themselves as the innocent victims of Communist terrorists. Every Sunday morning then, in a full church, the pastor preached powerful sermons especially directed to the Maquis members in his congregation.

In the afternoons the same sermon, translated word for word, was repeated to the German prisoners.

On both sides consciences were roused and rarely has the evidence of the Gospel of Peace been so striking.

When the hour of Liberation came the popularity of the pastor was not great, but the moral destruction caused by linking violence to the Christian Gospel had been avoided. In addition, many lives had been saved.

**Death Claims Two**

One stage of the nonviolent resistance of the people of Chambon was passed through by two men alone. Daniel Trocmé, teacher, headmaster of two homes for refugee children and students, after a year of untiring devotion, was arrested in 1943 at the same time as his Jewish students. Held a prisoner, he continued to defend the Jews, and the Gestapo identified him with them. He died in the concentration camp at Majdanek, Poland, probably gassed, in the spring of 1944.

Roger Le Forestier, a doctor at Chambon, arrested after an imprudent step taken at the Prefecture, gave so powerful a witness for nonviolent Christianity before the Regional Commander that he was let off, but required to go to Germany as a “volunteer.” He again fell into the hands of the Gestapo at Lyons while being transferred to Germany and was massacred with 120 other innocent victims.

It is certain, according to what was told to the pastor by the German Commander of the region, that Dr Le Forestier’s words on the nonviolent character of the resistance at Chambon encouraged the Germans to spare the region where so many children and innocent people had gone for refuge.

**Assessment: Escaping the Mastery of Radio and Press**

The exceptional nature of the resistance at Chambon arose simply from the fact that it had been possible to organise it in advance, and that its nonviolent nature was maintained to the end. This action would have been much more difficult if it had not been for the presence of “Cimade” and the heroism of its members.

Totalitarian regimes, and the kind of control and censorship exercised in wartime, render it almost impossible to organise nonviolent resistance after either has become established.

If the resistance arises from individuals or from small isolated groups within a hostile mass, the resisters will almost inevitably be denounced, arrested and at times liquidated. One must have lived through the collective emotions developed by skilful propaganda in order to understand how nearly impossible it is to offer open opposition. Large towns will never be favoured ground for open nonviolent resistance.

**Silent Individual Devotion**

Small towns and the countryside where people know one another seem more adapted for this method. In particular peasants escape from the mastery exerted by radio and press; but they are timid conformists, incapable of initiative. Yet the initiative must be taken, and if it coincides with the deepest sentiments of the population they will give reliable if tacit approval.

A religious feeling, rather than collective enthusiasm, is capable of creating that silent individual devotion which is essential to a nonviolent campaign. Those who initiate the campaign and accept the visible risks of the undertaking cannot act without the support of hundreds of other more modest personalities.

Denunciations are inevitable, but the police will generally be reluctant to act when it feels public opinion against it.

All of these conditions existed in the Chambon district between 1939 and 1944. It was impossible to arrest seven or eight thousand persons, so the authorities had to come to terms with them.

**War Resistance Must Include Something Else**

One cannot draw from the success of the nonviolent resistance at Chambon any lesson of a line of conduct, which would inevitably ensure success. Identical circumstances are never repeated.

On the other hand, the attempt at resistance in the Chambon district was very imperfect. Rarely during the course of it did those taking part have a feeling of dazzling success. Only when it was all over, when trying to evaluate what happened to them did they feel obliged to thank God for the daily proof He had given of His existence, and of His intervention in human affairs as soon as a few men place complete confidence in Him. On one point the experience was unsatisfying: it was not possible for nonviolent resisters to avoid using false identity papers.

**Identity Papers: A Moral Problem**

To show a true identity paper was the equivalent of a denunciation. It seemed preferable to violate a formal moral rule (absolute truth), in order to apply a living moral law (the absolute value of the human person).

André Trocmé concludes his account with the comment:

“On another point our experience was positive: to resist war is but half our duty, saying no to evil is not enough. War resistance must include something else — and that something is the salvation of the physical and moral life of mankind threatened with a double destruction.”

**Hope of a Nonviolent Europe**

Salvation is better assured by nonviolent resistance than by violent resistance, but nonviolent resistance also has its failures — and its martyrs. We have never been able to console ourselves for having been unable to save from death the twenty students of the Maison des Roches.

And yet we ask ourselves how much ruin and mourning would have been caused if the two pastors and the Christians of Chambon had felt obliged to lay ambushes and throw bombs.

Let us leave aside the problem of national liberation. Gandhi alone could deal with it. Yet we can imagine a Europe, which is entirely nonviolent, offering total resistance to Hitler, a Europe which the dictator and his police would have been unable to conquer.

**Reference**: IISG/WRI Archive Box 148: Folder 1, Subfolder 7.

EDITOR’S NOTE: This article was first published in *Peace News*, May 29, 1953; with permission of WRI/London.