It was April 6, 1917 and the nation was now at war. How was a religious sect that renounced all violence going to respond? What would happen to their young men when the draft came? These are the questions that faced members of the Society of Friends (Quakers) in the spring of 1917. Their answer to these two questions was the founding of the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC). Using the English Society of Friends “War Victims Relief Committee” as a model, the AFSC was to provide, it was hoped, their young men and other conscientious objectors (Mennonites and Brethren) an opportunity to engage in European civilian relief work as a military service alternative. Rufus M. Jones was appointed chairman of the Service Committee with headquarters established in the Friends Philadelphia Meeting House at 20 South 12th Street. From 1917 to 1927, in the first ten years of the organization, the AFSC sent volunteer relief workers to France, Russia, Germany, Poland, Austria, and Serbia.

In June 1917, the first group of nine American Friends left for France. Volunteers after that first group received training and French language lessons at Haverford College before leaving for the continent. A continual problem for the first months was that the Army drafted a large number of men who were in the training program. The hope that their members would be exempt from the military draft did not materialize in the first 1917 draft class.

Under the 1917 draft law, conscientious objectors were drafted and offered non-combat jobs; however, many Quakers felt compelled to refuse military service of any type. These men suffered harassment and isolation in the training camps or, in the worst cases, they were court martialed and sent to prison. Not until February 1918 was the law revised to allow the furlough of drafted conscientious objectors for agriculture work in this country or reconstruction work in France.

The AFCS work in France was under a triangular management agreement with the American Red Cross (ARC) and the English Friends “War Victims Relief Committee.” The AFCS unit went to France as a bureau in the ARC Civilian Relief Department. At the same time, the AFSC merged with the English Friends to form the “Anglo-American Mission of the Society of Friends.” The merger also was known as the “Mission de la Société des Amis.” Covers are known with reference to both names and the ARC.

The ARC provided funding and help.
with logistics of moving material to and within France. In the period of joint work, the Friends organization was divided into Service Departments of Medical, Building, “Works,” Manufacturing (prefabricated homes), Agriculture, and Relief. The Departments of Transport, Maintenance and Equipment supported the Service Departments.

By the time of the armistice in November 1918, the combined English and American work force was evenly split between the two countries. The number of AFCS workers in France ranged from sixty-six at the beginning to 347, when reconstruction was in full swing. When the work ended in 1920, an estimated 600 American Friends, Mennonites, and Brethren had worked in France.

In June 1917, as the AFSC sent the first volunteers to France, a group of six also was sent to Russia. The unit finally arrived in the town of Buzuluk in southeastern Russia in August. Here the American Friends joined thirty English Friends working with Polish and Russian refugees who had been driven east by the German advance. The English, working since 1916, had established a system of material relief and medical clinics throughout Buzuluk uyezd (county). With the advance of the Bolshevik Army in 1918, the Buzuluk relief work ended and the last American workers left Buzuluk for home in October 1918, by way of Siberia and Vladivostok.

After a break of fifteen months, the British and American Friends returned to Russia. In August 1920, Anna Haines (American) and Arthur Watts (English), working with local authorities in Moscow, set up a food, clothing and medical relief program for needy children. By June 1921, 35,000 children had received assistance. Support for the relief work came from donations to the AFSC and English Friends, ARC, the Jewish Joint Distribution Committee.
and the Herbert Hoover-run American Relief Administration (ARA).

In 1921 a drought in the Volga River valley created widespread famine and hunger. With the agreement of the Soviet Government, the ARA set up an American-run food relief program throughout the drought-stricken region. In October 1921 a second AFSC unit arrived in Russia and began work as an affiliated ARA unit in Buzuluk County. Initially, the AFSC worked as a separate organization from the English Friends, also now in Buzuluk County. The ARA handled the purchase and transportation of supplies, as well as relations with the Soviet Government. At the peak of the food distribution program, 147,000 Russians in Buzuluk County depended on the AFSC and English Friends for their daily meals. The affiliation with the ARA continued until September 1922, when the AFSC terminated the relationship. The AFSC and English Friends made a separate working agreement with the Soviet Government and continued their relief work as one organization.

In addition to the Buzuluk County work, the Friends, supported by the Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, ran a Minsk (Ukraine) feeding program and, in 1923, extended their relief work into Pugachev County. The work in Buzuluk County continued into 1925, with reconstructive farm aid and medical assistance to fight a malaria and cholera outbreak.

In early July 1919, a group of American and English Friends met in Berlin with a group of German charity organizations to start a feeding and care program for children. Initially working through the represented German relief organizations, $30,000 worth of food and twenty-five tons of clothing was distributed.

The German relief work continued at a low level until
the autumn of 1919. That fall, Herbert Hoover requested the AFSC to act as the ARA European Children’s Fund agent in Germany. Under the final agreement, the ARA contributed $2,000,000 of food, acted as purchasing agent for foodstuffs, and provided transportation to and warehousing in Germany.

The AFSC agreed to manage all fund-raising activities in the United States and distribution expenses in Germany. The feeding program started in February 1920. At its peak in June 1921, the AFSC (assisted by 40,000 German workers in 1,640 communities) fed 1,010,638 persons one meal a day. On July 31, 1922 the program was turned over to a consolidated group of German relief organizations.

In August 1923 the German Government appealed to the AFSC to return and again organize a child feeding program. General Henry Allen, commander of American Forces in Germany, agreed to become chairman of the fund-raising committee. The feeding program started on February 15, 1924, and was run by the AFSC until October 7, 1924, when it turned over management to the German Central Committee of Foreign Relief.

Also in 1919, AFSC sent twenty-five workers to Poland to assist in stamping out the typhus fever epidemic sweeping the country. The unit joined the British Friends in the southwest town of Zawiercie. The combined Friends unit worked to sanitize homes and people, and in a few months had reduced the instance of new cases in the area by 90 percent. The relief work then expanded into reconstructive assistance to farmers to aid in reclaiming land destroyed in the war, including providing seed and tools to work the land. Work in Poland ended in the summer of 1925.

The work in Austria and Serbia was small in comparison to other AFSC efforts. Relief work in Austria was primarily
an English Friends imitation. In late 1919 the AFSC sent a small number of workers from France to assist the English Friends' child feeding work in Vienna. The AFSC work expanded to fund sanitariums to combat childhood tuberculosis that continued until 1927.

In September 1919 another small group of AFSC volunteers was sent to Serbia. The group started a small hospital in Petsh that was turned over to the Serbian government in April 1922.

This article has only briefly sketched the decade of American Quaker relief work in Europe — a work that began in France in 1917 and ended in Austria in 1927. During this period of time the AFSC dispensed approximately $25,200,000 in money and “gifts in kind.” The number of Quaker volunteers in this period has been estimated at approximately 900, not a large number for the scope of their accomplishments. The AFSC was able to leverage its limited resources by working with the English Friends and the larger ARC and ARA organizations whenever possible. Also, unlike the ARC and ARA, which set up separate American-run entities, the smaller AFSC worked through local governments and charitable organizations. Between the two World Wars the AFSC continued its relief work between the two world wars and in World War II again ran relief work for the
needy. The Service Committee’s decades of humanitarian service were recognized in 1947, when the AFSC was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

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