

Pacifism

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Summary

The idea of peace in total war may seem irrelevant, but pacifism, or peace activism, did exist during the First World War. A seemingly robust European peace movement existed before 1914, but it contained internal divisions and mostly collapsed early in the war. Except for some historic peace sects, conscientious objection to military service was not officially accepted among the belligerents. Britain had the largest number of objectors, and new anti-conscription groups supported the “absolutists” among them. Left-leaning women entered the peace movement in much greater numbers with new women’s and mixed gendered organizations promoting neutral mediation of the war.

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Introduction

The idea of “pacifism” in the midst of an extended and horrendously bloody military encounter may seem like an oxymoron. Indeed, the outbreak of the European war in August 1914 quickly spread geographically and would eventually involve twenty nations worldwide, and the relentless and savage fighting ultimately resulted in 30 million casualties, including about 9 million [killed](#). It was surely the Great War, as it was called at the time, but even that name seems inadequate as a brief description of the horrific and destructive effects of [warfare](#), which in fact became a total conflict fought unrelentingly to the finish.

Yet there was a lot of “pacifism” during the Great War, if the word is not treated too narrowly. Dictionaries define “pacifism” as the belief that any violence, including war, is unjustifiable under any circumstances, and that all disputes should be settled by peaceful means. That definition fits absolute pacifists opposed to all wars. It applies to those Christians, with a belief in nonresistance, who refuse as a matter of conscience to participate in war or war-making activity. The historic peace churches – Mennonites, Anabaptists, and Society of Friends (Quakers), for example – subscribe to such beliefs.

Even among the [conscientious objectors](#) (COs), however, there were gradations during the Great War. There were also many women from belligerent as well as [neutral](#) countries who supported conscientious objection but were also involved in other forms of peace activism. Since they were not subject to conscription, their peace actions were limited only by other laws restricting free speech and assembly.

For the purpose of this essay, “pacifism” (or “pacifist”) is defined broadly to include not only COs, but also those individuals who, strongly sensitized to the ongoing slaughter on the battlefields and opposed to military solutions, engaged in concerted peace advocacy, which included nonviolent actions (petitions, meetings), the search for a negotiated end to the conflict, and championing principles for a lasting peace. Such activists usually pursued their ideas and programs through pacifist or quasi-pacifist groups.

At the same time, this account excludes several individuals and groups whose primary focus was on the creation of a post-war world organization. Many pacifists supported the establishment of some kind of post-war association of nations for resolving international disputes and preserving the peace, but, with some exceptions, most were reluctant to give it extensive enforcement powers. They were most interested in the transnational values and sense of community that underlay world politics and were conducive to reform of the international system. Their opposition to unilateral force also made them skittish about the creation of an authoritative international organization that might employ collective military action against recalcitrant or aggressive nation states.

The Pre-war Peace Movement

A peace movement in Europe had existed since the end of the Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815) and had become better organized in the last decades of the 19th century. In 1889, pacifists began annual meetings called Universal Peace Congresses, which friends of peace from many countries attended, and in the same year lawmakers from several European nations established annual inter-parliamentary conferences (soon renamed Inter-parliamentary Union) to discuss major foreign policy questions and recommend measures to reduce

tensions and foster reconciliation.

Peace workers optimistically pointed to tangible signs of an emerging international system. They interpreted the [Hague Peace Conferences](#) of 1899 and 1907, and prospects for a third one in 1915, as evidence that the major powers were responding positively, albeit hesitatingly, to an emerging international spirit among nations. While the conferences had not curtailed the naval armaments race and had focused more on the [laws of war](#) than organizing for peace, they had agreed on procedures for the arbitration of international controversies. The Hague meetings even provided for an informal international arbitral court to which nations could voluntarily submit their disputes. A survey of the seemingly robust European peace movement in early 1914 counted 190 peace societies, some with thousands of members, which published twenty-three periodicals in ten languages. The newly founded Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in the [United States](#) even provided a modest annual subvention to the International Peace Bureau for redistribution to the European peace societies.¹

The movement was not without real tensions and limitations, however. The Carnegie Endowment, for instance, favored “internationalist” groups at the expense of “pacifist” ones, which it held in low esteem. It wanted the peace movement to consolidate, which rankled with the proudly independent groups, while pacifists in Europe perceived the subventions as an unsubtle ploy to control their policies and the future direction of the peace movement. Unsurprisingly, soon after the general European war erupted in August 1914, the endowment cut off all financial assistance to the peace movement.

A more fundamental problem was that most peace reformers, while internationalist in their thinking, were also solid nationalists. The peace advocates on the continent mostly came from diverse middle class backgrounds, but even they could not entirely escape the deep-seated authoritarian traditions of political dominance and war they had inherited. Many Italian peace advocates, for example, had supported their nation’s war of conquest against Turkey in 1911, and during the [two Moroccan crises](#) French and German pacifists revived their bitter disagreements over Germany’s annexation of [Alsace and Lorraine](#) more than a generation earlier.

Resistance to [militarism](#) was particularly problematical in [Germany](#). Prussia’s “blood and iron” policies had brought about German unification by 1871, but the new nation had experienced no democratic revolution. The [German government](#) was at best semi-democratic, with the Emperor still possessing considerable powers in foreign relations while the Reichstag (lower house) had virtually none. Both the educational system and the military preached to impressionable young Germans well-defined images of proud and virtuous

compatriots surrounded by jealous and unfriendly peoples bent on subverting the Fatherland. The emergence of many patriotic societies vigorously championed and reinforced these populist prejudices.

While many peace-minded Germans struggled to reconcile their patriotic feelings with an internationalist perspective, most never challenged the authoritarian and [nationalist](#) ethos permeating the social order. They too believed in the superiority of German culture, but instead of the nationalists' threat of encircling, hostile states envious of German power and achievements, they envisioned their nation leading the civilized nations toward a peaceful and lawful world order. They occasionally forged links with some left leaning political parties and feminist and other reform groups, but they had no strong social base from which to mobilize public opinion. Peace advocates were mostly perceived as irrelevant or eccentric. "To be a pacifist in the political culture of Wilhelmine Germany," a historian commented, "was akin to professing communism in Cold War America."²

Despite the personal risks, a strong, insistent attack on war and militarism might have at least challenged the ultra-nationalistic ethos, but the peace movement was moving in a different direction. [Alfred Fried \(1864-1921\)](#), a leader of the German movement, emphasized the "scientific" notion that growing economic and technological interdependence was inevitably leading toward the peaceful resolution of international disputes and a lawful world order. [Norman Angell \(1872-1967\)](#), a British peace theorist, published *The Great Illusion* (1910), which provided a sophisticated rationale for this deterministic view, but he failed to question the ideas and behavior of entrenched ruling elites and further exemplified the declining ethical dimension of the pacifist message.

Another prospective ally to the peace forces was the burgeoning socialist movement. With a large and well organized working class, socialists seemed to provide a mass basis for social mobilization against militarism and war. Believing capitalism led inevitably to [imperialism](#) and war, socialists in the decade before 1914 became more actively interested in foreign policy issues. During the [Balkan Wars \(1912-1913\)](#), for example, Austrian socialists launched a broad-based antiwar campaign, and their huge demonstrations acted as a restraint on their government from expanding the conflicts.

The socialists' victories were pyrrhic, however, and obscured longer term problems. For one thing, many middle class peace workers were skeptical of socialists' analyses of the economic causes of the armament race and war or fearful of their emphasis on class conflict. In consequence, cooperation between the bourgeois and socialist peace movements went nowhere. Socialist leaders were also somewhat lulled into a sense of security by the earlier successes in avoiding general war during previous crises.

Moreover, the political crises in southeastern Europe had little direct effect on the [labor movement in Germany](#), which to some degree accepted the dominant authoritarian and nationalist symbols of a beleaguered, encircled nation. Workers there were unprepared for the real prospect of a general European war, which arose suddenly in the summer of 1914. In the final crisis, the German socialists' antiwar perceptions competed with their acceptance of nationalist and authoritarian assumptions and produced confusion, when only decisive, direct actions by labor, such as a general strike, could have prevented war. In addition, socialists had long accepted the legitimacy of workers' participation in defensive wars, and their leaders in the various European countries generally accepted their governments' emphasis on their own defensive intentions.

In July 1914, many peace advocates were already en route to a Carnegie-funded ecumenical peace conference of churchmen scheduled to open on 2 August at Constance, [Switzerland](#), or to the later annual meeting of the universal peace congress in Vienna. They witnessed first-hand in Germany or [France](#) the escalating diplomatic tension, frenzied street crowds, rising popular hysteria, and anguished farewells among soldiers leaving their loved ones and families to rush off to combat.

To their credit, in the final hours of peacetime many pacifists spoke out. [Henri La Fontaine \(1854-1943\)](#), a Belgian and president of the International Peace Bureau, called an emergency meeting of the organization in [Brussels](#) on 31 July. Despite the travel difficulties, around fifty pacifists representing many national peace groups (except Austria) attended the meeting, which issued urgent appeals to the heads of governments and foreign ministers of the rival alliance blocs to hold back from mobilization and war and also cabled President [Woodrow Wilson \(1856-1924\)](#) urgently requesting his mediation. The Constance gathering issued similar appeals two days later.

These actions of course had no visible effects, and the main continental nations were quickly engulfed in war. There was still the question of British involvement, and the peace movement there was thriving. In the decades leading up to the war, peace societies had expanded rapidly in number and membership, and in 1909 the disparate groups created the National Peace Council to coordinate their activities. The peace people were fairly united in their rejection of balance of power politics and entangling alliances, and in the final crisis Britain's neutrality seemed to be a viable option. They opposed going to war on behalf of the nation's autocratic Russian ally, and they also rejected the Liberal government's case for forward defense in support of their French ally. But many, perhaps two-thirds of the movement, were moved by the government's emotional arguments that Britons had a moral responsibility to come to the aid of [Belgium](#), a small, largely defenseless nation, whose neutrality had been assured by international treaty, in the face of German invasion. When Parliament declared

war on 4 August, the British peace movement split apart but would gradually be reorganized.

As the military conflict escalated, the peace workers argued over the causes of the war. Belgian and French pacifists, supported by their British (and some neutral) cohorts, blamed Prussian and Austrian militarists for the hostile ultimatum to [Serbia](#) that triggered the Balkan showdown and vigorously condemned Germany's invasion of their countries. Germany's naked violation of Belgian neutrality, they emphasized, directly contradicted the peace movement's insistence on peace through law. They also publicized reports of the German army's indiscriminate destruction of towns and brutal treatment of unarmed civilian populations in Belgium.

German pacifists countered that the issues of causation and responsibilities were too complex to make quick judgments; if blame was to be assessed, all the warring governments should be held accountable for their regrettable violations of international law. They also supported their government's argument that Germany was fighting for the survival of their homeland from hostile enemies and that the invasion of Belgium was a necessary preemptive strike to counter a planned French attack on their country. And to the East, Germans had to defend themselves from the Russians and Slavic hordes descending on their beleaguered nation. As the German Peace Society stated:

Now that the question of war and peace is no longer an issue and our nation is threatened on all sides in a life-and-death struggle, every German must fulfill his duty to the Fatherland regardless of whether or not he believes in peace.³

Indeed, the pacifists' arguments on both sides early on in the conflict anticipated the post-war debate over nations' responsibilities for the war and the question of war guilt.⁴

Conscientious Objection in the Belligerent Countries

One potentially contentious issue during the Great War was military conscription, but opposition to military service never got very far. The warring nations on the continent already had universal military service in place before 1914, and except for a few pacifist sects none countenanced exemptions for COs. In Germany, Mennonites had been exempted from combatant duties since unification; however, during the Great War they had no difficulties in serving in army medical units or other noncombatant roles. Otherwise, Germany gave no legal recognition to conscientious objection. When a conscript refused military orders, whether for religious or political reasons or both, and was willing to accept punishment, military authorities, thinking such recruits might be mentally ill, sometimes referred the objector to a psychiatrist for an "expert opinion." If the "patient" was deemed sane, he was

returned to the army for trial and probable punishment; if he was thought to have a mental disorder, he was confined to a mental institution.⁵

Similar to Germany (and also Austria), Mennonites in Imperial [Russia](#) had been exempted long before the war and were allowed to do alternative service in army medical units. But the Russian situation was more complicated because there were numerous other pacifist sects such as Tolstoyans, who, influenced by the powerful Christian nonresistant writings and personal example of [Leo Tolstoy \(1828-1910\)](#), opposed any cooperation with the military or war activity. There were in fact more resisters in Russia than any other belligerent nation except Britain, although in relation to the nearly seven million men who had served in the Russian army by early 1917, the percentage of COs was infinitesimally small. The outbreak of the [Russian Revolution](#) finally resulted in the release of all political prisoners, including COs.⁶

[Britain](#) was somewhat unique in making military service voluntary before the war, but British pacifists anticipated the pressures for conscription in a protracted maelstrom. In late 1914, religious pacifists, libertarians, and elements of the antiwar left in Britain who, objecting to the failure of the Peace Society, the largest pre-war peace group in Britain, to condemn their nation's entrance into the war, founded the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) and the No-Conscription Fellowship (NCF). These two pacifist organizations led the fight against the Asquith coalition government's decision in late 1915 to push for a military conscription law. Both groups took an absolute pacifist position. Religious pacifists were dominant in the FOR, while the NCF had a more political coloration, but both provided spiritual and emotional support for the anti-draft cause. The NCF required its members to "refuse from conscientious motives to bear arms because they consider human life sacred."⁷ Draft resisters also received sustenance from Quakers, but some of their more radical Friends were also involved in the NCF and FOR.

The anti-conscription forces in Britain failed to prevent Parliament from enacting draft legislation in January 1916; but because of the pacifists' well publicized concerns, the law included a clause allowing COs to apply to local military service tribunals for exemption from the army. More than 16,000 Britons, or 0.7 percent of those drafted (Irish men were exempted), claimed CO status. The courts granted 350 (almost all Quakers) unconditional exemptions, assigned non-combatant duties to about 6,000, and sent 3,300 more to special work camps. Many of the remaining resisters ultimately accepted alternative military or civilian service, so that only 1,298, considering any such duty as supportive of the war, took an absolutist position and refused all service. The absolutists including [Clifford Allen \(1889-1939\)](#), the young, charismatic NCF chairman, were arrested for their continued resistance and incarcerated.

Neutral Mediation

Meanwhile, the ever expanding human tragedy prompted pacifists to launch programs to stop the war, or at least to pressure neutral governments to offer their good offices for bringing the two sides together for a mediated settlement. They often combined their promotion of neutral mediation with the imperative need for embedding principles of an enlightened “new diplomacy” in the peace settlement and the post-war world.

Pacifistic liberals in the [Union of Democratic Control](#) (UDC) in Great Britain provided coherent expression to these internationalist principles. In September 1914, prominent British left-wing Liberal and Labour politicians, intellectuals, and publicists, who had opposed their nation’s involvement in the war, coalesced in the formation of the Union. Among its prominent leaders were well-known members of Parliament, [Charles P. Trevelyan \(1870-1958\)](#), [James Ramsay MacDonald \(1866-1937\)](#), and [Arthur Ponsonby \(1871-1946\)](#); other founders included Norman Angell, [Charles R. Buxton \(1875-1942\)](#), and [Edmund D. Morel \(1873-1924\)](#). A coterie of diplomats and armament syndicates, the UDC charged, caused the war. Calling for the democratization of foreign policy, it advanced four principles as indispensable prerequisites for the peace settlement and post-war diplomacy: no transfer of territory without the consent by plebiscite of the inhabitants (self-determination), parliamentary control of foreign policy to replace secret alliances and agreements, the nationalization of armament manufacture as a prerequisite for international agreement on disarmament, and the replacement of balance-of-power politics with the creation of a democratic league of nations.

The Union also increasingly emphasized a mediated settlement of the war issues. Embodying liberals’ faith in man’s rational nature, its leaders believed that Germany’s civilian rulers were reasonable. The possibility of peace talks with Britain’s enemies should be explored, although the UDC was not an antiwar group and did not at first emphasize negotiations when patriotic feeling in Britain was clearly predominant. For tactical reasons, moreover, it did not frontally oppose conscription but objected to territorial war aims and relentlessly challenged the government to define its peace terms.

Given the early pro-war consensus in all the belligerent countries, it was very difficult for individual civilians and their groups to express doubts about the war or advocate peace through mediation. The repression was extensive in France almost from the onset of the conflict, but in Germany the silencing of contrary voices occurred more gradually. The nation in wartime was divided into military districts, each one overseen by a deputy general commander who had full authority over matters of public order and national security. The result was some regional variations in the treatment of pacifists. Moreover, German pacifists at first were mostly perceived as without influence and, not questioning their government’s

role in bringing on the conflict they posed no threat to the broad citizens' support for the war. Peace societies continued to publish their journals, which appeared with occasional blank columns for articles that had been censored.

As the war continued with no apparent end in sight, however, concerns about the purposes of the war and the nation's peace aims surfaced. In the fall of 1914, a new group, *Bund Neues Vaterland* (New Fatherland League), was founded in Berlin. Consisting of intellectuals, liberals, socialists, and pacifists, with sympathetic support from reform-minded diplomats, aristocrats, and businessmen, the league set forth an internationalist program. It hoped for a negotiated peace, but its members were mostly united in their opposition to ultra-nationalists' annexationist war aims. Though comprising only a few hundred members, the group managed to publish and circulate a number of pamphlets that articulated its internationalist program.

One who attended the New Fatherland League's weekly meetings was [Albert Einstein \(1879-1955\)](#), a thirty-five year-old German physicist. The young scientist was deeply involved in his research (and only a year away from setting forth his brilliant general theory of relativity), but he was also a committed pacifist. An unconventional thinker, Einstein was ready to challenge authority, whether the scientific establishment or government policies he opposed. Moreover, as a scientist he operated in an international environment and believed his profession had a public duty to speak out on social and political issues. When the war erupted, he commented, "We scientists in particular must foster internationalism." Privately, Einstein hoped the allies would win the war, "which would smash the power of Prussia and the dynasty." He also began to wonder why humans could engage in such savage killing. Perhaps it was man's sexual drive, he mused, and after the war he would correspondence with Sigmund Freud about psychological explanations of man's violent behavior. Still later, he would actively participate in the antinuclear movement during the Cold War.

The British experience was somewhat different. In the flush of patriotic fervor at the start of the war, the British Parliament had given the government broad powers to suppress dissent and ban foreign travel. In practice, however, the government routinely prohibited only information and its citizens going to and from enemy countries. Britain had a long tradition of respect for dissenting opinions even in wartime, and in general the government tolerated free speech and free press. Not wanting to make pacifism a *cause célèbre*, it mostly prosecuted only the most radical and strident speakers and writers. It was more vigilant, however, in controlling freedom of assembly. Meetings critical of the war or calling for peace negotiations were perceived as organized activity obstructing the war effort and were increasingly broken up and the leaders arrested, although sometimes self-appointed, patriotic goon squads disrupted the gatherings without requiring government interference.

Because of such intimidation, a British pacifist lamented in mid-1916, "It is almost impossible to obtain halls or to hold public meetings."⁸

[Bertrand Russell \(1872-1970\)](#), the liberal philosopher, well exemplified the difficult journey of a committed British pacifist in the face of the government's restrictions on peace activism. Having an "absolutist" personality, he instinctively resisted compromise, and his visceral pacifism emerged during the Great War. He initially cooperated with the Union of Democratic Control but soon found it too timid. "It will be all right after the war," he thought, "but not now. I wish good people were not so mild." By 1916, he was deeply involved in the No-Conscription Fellowship whose support for COs, he felt, would stimulate resistance to conscription and the war itself. Later that year he was prosecuted for an NCF anti-draft pamphlet he wrote, and was fined but escaped imprisonment. He succeeded the incarcerated Clifford Allen for a time as NCF chairman, but sometimes he found his non-resistance friends "so Sunday-schooly - one feels they don't know the volcanic side of human nature, they have little humour, no intensity of will, nothing of what makes men effective." If his relationships with peace groups were not always productive, he remained so effective as a high-profile spokesman of the pacifist position that the government banned him from speaking at public meetings in many parts of Britain.⁹

Women's Activism

An important, new dimension to the anti-conscription and mediation campaigns in Britain and elsewhere was the increasing involvement of women reformers. To be sure, women involved in peace activity were always a small minority of their sex throughout the World War, but they became a visible presence and on some issues would become prime actors in the movement. Many of the liberal women engaged in peace action had also been involved in the pre-war movement although mostly concerned with feminist issues, especially women's [suffrage](#), they were also involved with temperance and various labor issues. Many suffrage organizations in France, for instance, had peace sections, but agitation for the vote was the clear priority.

During the war, women activists used a number of arguments to try to mobilize women for peace but particularly emphasized the "maternal instinct." As [Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence \(1867-1954\)](#)), a longtime suffrage activist in Britain, explained:

The bedrock of humanity is motherhood...Men have conflicting interests and ambitions. Women all the world over, speaking broadly, have one passion and one vocation, and that is the creation and preservation of human life. Deep in the hearts of women of the peasant and industrial classes of every nation, there lies...a denial of the necessity of war.¹⁰

[Pacifistic feminists](#) genuinely believed that women were naturally more peaceful than men and used the “maternal instinct” to rally women to their peace campaigns. [Helena Swanwick \(1864-1939\)](#), who had been a leader of the suffrage movement in Britain charged that “men make wars, not women,” and were playing “the silly, bloody game of massacring the sons of women.”¹¹ In an era when the overwhelming majority of women were not liberated from the home, the notion of a nurturing feminine sex had some appeal to women as relevant to their life experiences.

Swanwick exemplified the pre-war suffrage activist who, appalled by the horrific fighting, joined the peace movement. Despite her anti-[masculine](#) rhetoric, she assumed leadership positions in both mixed gender and women’s peace organizations. Early in the war, she persuaded the Union of Democratic Control to accept women members and thereafter worked closely with E. D. Morel, the main intellectual force behind the union, in promoting its programs.¹² Similarly, prime movers in the anti-draft campaign were [Maude Royden \(1876-1956\)](#) and [Catherine Marshall \(1880-1961\)](#). Royden was a Protestant cleric in London, who early joined the FOR and NCF. In the latter, she assisted Marshall who, drawing on her experience as a publicist in the pre-war suffrage movement, became a dynamic force in the No-Conscription Fellowship. “Marshall,” a NCF history concludes, “contributed more to the fellowship’s success and survival than any other individual.”¹³ In the course of her involvement, she cooperated with the pacifist philosopher Bertrand Russell, fell in love with Clifford Allen, and, suffering from overwork, experienced a nervous breakdown in late 1917.

Some socialist women also became peace activists. The outbreak of the war deeply disturbed [Clara Zetkin \(1857-1933\)](#), a longtime leader of the international socialist women’s movement in Germany. Critical of the [Social Democratic Party](#)’s support of the war and perceiving men’s inaction generally, she decided that women had to take up the peace cause. “If men kill, women must fight for peace,” she said; “if men keep silent, our socialist duty is to raise our voices.” She proceeded to organize an international meeting of antiwar socialist women in Berne, Switzerland, in February 1915. The meeting issued a peace manifesto which declared that the war constituted imperialist aggression to enrich the armament makers and other capitalists, and proclaimed that “the workers have nothing to gain from this war, they have everything to lose, everything, everything that is dear to them.”¹⁴ Most socialist women involved in the peace cause, however, considered feminist issues a distraction from the class struggle, while liberals saw suffrage as the path to women’s empowerment and the promise of a more peaceful world. The class and ideological differences that had divided socialists and bourgeois peace advocates before the war also inhibited cooperation between socialist women and feminists in the wartime peace movement.

The decentralization of enforcing powers in Germany, which extended to the issuing of passports, had permitted Zetkin and other German socialist women to travel to Berne. But because of her outspoken opposition to the war from the start, Zetkin's house had already been searched and the women's socialist journal she edited had been severely censored. After the Berne meeting, however, the government authorities opened her mail and searched her residence again, and sent her to prison for circulating the Berne manifesto. Zetkin's harsh treatment exemplified Germany's increasingly repressive measures against pacifists and anti-annexationist groups.¹⁵ Police surveillance of prominent peace leaders became routine, and the government also banned the New Fatherland League in early 1916. All dissent in Germany was effectively silenced thereafter until the final months of the conflict.¹⁶

The most prominent and enduring peace action emerging from the war grew out of the movement for women's suffrage. Women reformers were already well connected internationally before the war from their participation in biennial meetings of the International Woman Suffrage Alliance (IWSA). Founded in the first years of the century, the IWSA had become by 1914 a loose affiliation of more than twenty national suffrage groups. The international alliance sometimes discussed other feminist issues besides the enfranchisement of women and even before the war had expressed increasing concern over the rising European tensions. It fostered a sense of international sisterhood for suffragists beginning to explore the transnational dimensions of the relationship between feminist issues, on the one hand, and militarism and war, on the other. With the outbreak of the Great War, many of its internationalist-oriented members became engaged in an active citizens' campaign for neutral mediation of the conflict.

The transforming event in this movement was a large women's peace congress at The Hague in late April 1915. Dr. [Aletta Jacobs \(1854-1929\)](#), a Dutch physician and the best known women reformer in her country, supported by like-minded IWSA stalwarts in Holland, England, and Germany, called the four-day congress, which considered prospects for mediation and principles for international reform. The great majority of the 1,100 women in attendance were from the Netherlands, but thirty-eight also came from the northern European neutrals and forty-four from Germany, Austria, and Hungary. Probably more from the Central Powers would have traveled to The Hague, but could not get passports or were pressured to stay at home. A federation of many German women's groups, for example, condemned the congress as "incompatible with the patriotic sentiments and national duties of the German women's movement," and the leader of the German National Council of Women threatened that any member attending the congress could no longer serve as an officer in the organization.¹⁷ In addition, 180 British women signed up for the meeting. The [British government](#), though uneasily tolerant of free speech, drew the line at travel abroad to

a peace conference. It first drastically reduced the number permitted to attend, and then the Admiralty closed the English Channel to British civilians. In consequence, only three (who had earlier left Britain) could get to The Hague.¹⁸

Most of the preliminary resolutions for the Hague meeting borrowed from the UDC principles and the eleven planks in the platform of the Woman's Peace Party (WPP), founded by American women in January 1915. The new group was an outgrowth of an extensive lecture tour the previous fall by Pethick-Lawrence and the passionate Hungarian activist, [Rosika Schwimmer \(1877-1948\)](#), which had aroused considerable interest among American women eager to support an early termination of the conflict and the construction of a liberal post-war order. [Jane Addams \(1860-1935\)](#), founder of Hull House settlement in Chicago and then the most widely admired woman in America, endorsed the women's groundswell for peace. She had worked with men in peace groups before the war but, seeing that "there is no doubt that at this crisis the women are most eager for action," became the first WPP president.¹⁹ She then assembled a delegation of forty-seven accomplished American women who ventured to The Hague and presided over the gathering.

The Hague congress endorsed the establishment of a neutral conference of continuous mediation. Composed of respected private citizens from neutral nations, the conference would serve as a clearing house for peace feelers and hopefully tempt both belligerent sides to consider peace parleys. The congress also passed resolutions identifying underlying causes of war and advancing prescriptive remedies for the post-war world. The resolutions were a coherent synthesis of liberal principles of international reform. Moreover, after lively debate the women delegates by a narrow margin voted to send women envoys to present the resolutions to the governments in Europe and the [United States](#). Despite serious logistical difficulties, the women managed to visit nearly all the warring and neutral European nations (except neutral [Spain](#) and [Portugal](#), the smaller countries in southeastern Europe, and the [Ottoman Empire](#)), and were respectfully received by the prime ministers and foreign ministers as well as [Pope Benedict XV \(1854-1922\)](#). The political leaders of neutral Holland and [Sweden](#) showed considerable interest in mediation.

Mediation Activity in the United States

The women, joined increasingly by like-minded men, looked to the United States, as Woodrow Wilson had offered his good offices at the onset of the Great War. During the period of U.S. neutrality, citizen activists had more than twenty face-to-face meetings with the American chief executive. Wilson showed some interest in their presentations. At one of these meetings, for example, he remarked of the Hague resolutions, "I consider them by far

the best formulation which up to the moment has been put out by anybody.”²⁰

On mediation, however, Wilson consistently raised practical difficulties to cooperation with several neutrals, while his aide, Colonel [Edward M. House \(1858-1938\)](#), explored mediation prospects in confidential talks with the belligerent leaders. The president’s procrastination frustrated Schwimmer who, with a young American pacifist [Louis Lochner \(1887-1975\)](#), won over the automobile entrepreneur, [Henry Ford \(1863-1947\)](#), to finance the neutral conference that the Hague congress had promoted.

But Ford’s “pacifism” was mostly an expression of Middle Western populist-progressives’ hostility to special “interests,” especially “war-breeding” armament makers, and had no philosophical or religious basis. He was, moreover, an erratic personality, and he proceeded to obscure the prospect of a conference of neutrals with his hasty decision in late 1915 to charter an ocean liner to take American peace activists to Europe. This tangible demonstration for peace, he believed, would provoke on Christmas day a widespread soldiers’ revolt in which “war-worn men will climb from the trenches, throw down their arms and start home. And then militarism will be dead – dead for evermore.”²¹ Ford did not line up respectable peace people in advance, however, or think through how his venture would proceed in Europe. His peace ship became an object of press ridicule, and Ford was perceived as an uninformed innocent abroad.

Sobered by his quixotic European venture, he began scaling back his financing of his neutral conference, which nonetheless established headquarters first in Stockholm and later at The Hague. European peace activists, such as [Benjamin de Jong van Beek en Donk \(1881-1948\)](#), an energetic leader of the Dutch Anti-War Council, and [Emily Greene Balch \(1867-1961\)](#), an American college professor, cooperated with the neutral conference; its delegates were jurists, academics, politicians, businessmen, and reformers. The conference used its resources to promote demonstrations against neutral governments’ possible entrance into the war and to develop some tentative peace discussions with diplomats on both warring sides.

Peace Action and Collaboration in America and Britain

In the United States, meanwhile, new peace societies geared up in opposition to war and military preparedness. The German sinking of the British passenger liner [Lusitania](#) in May 1915, with the loss of nearly 1,200 lives (including 128 Americans), dramatized the specter of possible U.S. entrance into the maelstrom. Reacting against the escalating pressures for preparedness and war, [Lillian Wald \(1867-1940\)](#), [Oswald Garrison Villard \(1872-1949\)](#), and other pacifistic and antimilitaristic Americans founded the American Union Against Militarism

(AUAM) in late 1915 to resist the Wilson administration's proposed military buildup, which they perceived as a prelude to war. As Jane Addams put it, "If we get ready for war, it will surely come."²² The AUAM cooperated with the Woman's Peace Party and other pacifistic and isolationist elements in organizing speaking tours and testifying before congressional committees against preparedness. Their message resonated among Americans seeking to distance their nation from the European hostilities, and the resulting program passed by the U.S. Congress avoided major increases in the army, and the enlarged naval building legislation program also authorized U.S. participation in a post-war disarmament conference.²³

In Britain, the continuing fighting and stalemate on the battlefields increasingly stimulated war weariness and thoughts of peace. The Union of Democratic Control, along with Quakers and many peace, socialist, labor, and women's groups, created a Peace Negotiations Committee, which circulated a petition describing the continuing war of attrition as a "moral iniquity, involving cruelty and suffering no words can describe" and calling on their government to seek early peace talks.²⁴ Many committee leaders claimed not to support peace at any price, but wanted Britain to take the diplomatic offensive and be ready to explore possible openings. The committee quickly obtained more than 100,000 signatures. Mainly because of the government's growing pessimism over the allies' future prospects in the war, the cabinet actually debated a proposal by [Henry Petty-Fitzmaurice, Marquess of Lansdowne \(1845-1927\)](#), a respected former foreign secretary, to pursue peace talks, but finally turned it down.

Meanwhile, in the United States, pacifists and a diverse group of reformers founded the American Neutral Conference Committee (ANCC), which urged Wilson's mediation; and following his successful reelection in November 1916 he prepared to offer his good offices for peace talks. Pacifistic liberals in the House of Commons, Charles Trevelyan and [John Howard Whitehouse \(1873-1955\)](#), wrote him letters urging him to make a public appeal for his mediation and providing optimistic forecasts for its friendly reception in Europe. Their messages further encouraged Wilson to announce his mediation initiative. Enthusiastically welcoming the president's action, UDC members wrote and circulated pamphlets arguing the case for mediation, which the ANCC publicized in the United States. The capstone of this British-American collaboration was Bertrand Russell's "open letter" to Wilson in early 1917, which forcefully argued for his leadership on peace talks. Released by the ANCC to the press, it became front-page news, and it was also taken by an ANCC delegation to the White House.²⁵

With the Central Powers still having the territorial advantage on the continent, the [German](#)

[government](#) seemed willing to countenance peace talks and had even made their own peace move just before Wilson's own initiative. This mediation offer had not gone very far, however, when Germany abruptly announced all-out [submarine warfare](#) on 31 January 1917. The German action not only ended talk of mediation but threatened U.S. belligerency, and in response the American peace movement underwent another transformation. Within a week religious pacifists and the most staunchly pacifistic elements of the American Neutral Conference Committee and American Peace Society founded a new coordinating entity, the Emergency Peace Federation (EPF), to serve as a clearing house for peace, socialist, trade union, and other groups opposed to U.S. belligerency. In addition to peace demonstrations, the EPF coalition advocated congressional approval of a war referendum, which the pacifistic [William Jennings Bryan \(1860-1925\)](#), Wilson's former secretary of state, and other antiwar progressives championed. But the peace movement lacked the financial resources and sufficient time to promote the nationwide referendum initiative. The AUAM pushed for a league of neutral nations to defend neutrals' rights on the seas stopping short of declarations of war. However, the submarines' destruction of American merchant ships prompted Wilson to call for war against Germany, which Congress obligingly endorsed in early April, with only six dissenting votes in the Senate and fifty in the House of Representatives.^{[26](#)}

Conscientious Objection in the United States

Only six weeks into the war, the U.S. Congress enacted draft legislation, which exempted only religious pacifists who were members of one of the historical peace churches. Of the 2.8 million men drafted, local draft boards classified only about 21,000 as COs. All objectors were nonetheless required to attend army training camps, and most of them, subjected often to very harsh military discipline and pressures, changed their minds and took up arms. Finally, only 3,989 (.0014 percent of those drafted) maintained their CO status. Specifically, about 1,600 of these COs acquiesced in noncombatant military service. Another 1,200 absolutists classified as religious objectors accepted farm furloughs, but the remaining absolutists (about 10 percent of whom were political objectors), refusing even nonmilitary alternate service, were quickly court-martialed and given severe punishments.^{[27](#)}

During American belligerency, the American peace movement disintegrated but gradually was reorganized. Many like Bryan, believing that the people's chosen representatives in Congress had decided on war, accepted U.S. belligerency, but others took up the cause of conscientious objection and the protection of civil liberties. The AUAM underwent several transformations, with one faction eventually founding the American Civil Liberties Union after the war. Other AUAM remnants joined with the U.S. branch of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, more radical members of the Woman's Peace Party, and newcomers to found

the Bureau of Legal Advice, which provided free legal services to drafted men, especially COs. It also defended free speech and individual rights, including those of aliens who were threatened with deportation because of their radical or antiwar views. The new recruits included [Norman Thomas \(1884-1968\)](#), [Roger Baldwin \(1884-1981\)](#), [Tracy Mygatt \(1885-1973\)](#), [Charles Recht \(1887-1965\)](#), [Jessie Hughan \(1875-1955\)](#), and [Frances Witherspoon \(1886-1973\)](#).

Despite their pacifism, the leadership of these new groups did not openly oppose the war and tried to maintain contacts with key personnel in the Wilson administration and the justice system. But because of the strong patriotic surge, President Wilson's own biting criticisms of pacifists in wartime, and, unlike the British Parliament, with no steadfast supporters in Congress, respect for civil liberties in America fared miserably during wartime. Nevertheless, the pacifists' legal advice and service as advocates provided real moral support for COs, and their exposure of objectors' overly harsh treatment in prison life helped to ameliorate some of the worst abuses in the government's treatment of war opponents generally. Their push for government amnesty for resisters failed, but all COs were all released from confinement by 1920.

Conclusion

In the final phase of the war, the Peace Negotiations Committee in Britain continued its agitation for peace negotiations, receiving added support from the growing left-wing Independent Labour Party and endorsements from many other labor groups representing nearly a million members. The onset of the Russian Revolution, with the Bolsheviks' promises of "peace" and a new social utopia, further moved some American and European peace people leftward, although most rejected its violent aspects. A papal appeal for peace failed, however, and a coalition government in Britain rejected another Lansdowne initiative for negotiations with the enemy. Indeed, with the military party firmly in control in Germany and the United States in the war, the already slim prospects for any kind of peace discussions further declined. As Bertrand Russell later conceded, "At intervals, the German Government made peace offers which were, as the Allies said, illusory, but which all pacifists (myself included) took more seriously than they deserved."²⁸

Despite the repression of pacifist ideas in belligerent countries from 1914-1918, peace movements rebounded and became a vibrant force in the politics and diplomacy of the 1920s and 1930s. The growing popular disillusionment with the Great War stimulated a strong, renewed interest in pacifism, which was further nourished by growing fears of another World War. Pacifism became particularly well rooted in the political cultures of France, Britain, and the United States.

The pacifists of the Great War era continued to work actively for peace afterward, and in the following decades they were joined by throngs of newcomers. Many peace workers were attracted, for example, to the passive resistance techniques and nonviolent philosophy of [Mohandas Gandhi \(1869-1948\)](#), a leader for Indian rights and independence. Moreover, new groups supporting conscientious objection like the Peace Pledge Union in Britain and the War Resister's International, with affiliates in many countries, were founded and prospered in these years. Continuing women's peace activity, including the founding of new peace groups like the Women's Peace Union in the United States, also contributed to the upsurge in antiwar feeling. An understanding of the pacifist and antimilitarist activities in the Great War allows for a fuller appreciation of this later revitalization.

David S. Patterson, Independent Scholar

Notes

1. Studies of the pre-1914 movement in Europe include Cooper, Sandi: *Patriotic Pacifism. Waging War on War in Europe, 1815-1914*, New York 1991; and essays by Roger Chickering, Jost Dülffer, Solomon Wank, and Werner Simon in Chatfield, Charles and van den Dungen, Peter (eds.): *Peace Movements and Political Cultures*, Knoxville 1988, pp. 3-80. Brief biographies of almost all the individual peace advocates mentioned in this essay are in Josephson, Harold et al (eds.): *Biographical Dictionary of Modern Peace Leaders*, New York 1985. ↑
2. Cooper, *Patriotic Pacifism*, p. 69. ↑
3. Quoted in Welch, David: *Germany, Propaganda and Total War, 1914-1918. The Sins of Omission*, New Brunswick 2000, p. 138. ↑
4. In January 1915, the International Peace Bureau assembled at its headquarters in Berne, Switzerland, for one last effort to achieve some kind of pacifist consensus on the causes of the war, the possibilities of neutral mediation leading to a negotiated peace, and the principles of a lasting peace, but agreed on nothing of substance. A resolution denouncing Germany and Austria for their egregious violations of international law, for instance, divided evenly ten to ten (including proxies). The bureau remained officially neutral but, its moral authority severely compromised, exerted no influence in the international peace movement for the duration of the Great War. ↑
5. The psychiatrists' analyses were not always "expert," however, as many psychiatrists, like the military officers who referred them, were unfamiliar with religious pacifism, and psychiatry as a new profession lacked experience in such matters. Brock, Peter: *Against the Draft. Essays on Conscientious Objection from the Radical Reformation to the Second World War*, Toronto 2006, pp. 281-300. ↑

6. Ibid., pp. 301-312. ↑
7. Quoted in Kennedy, Thomas C.: *The Hound of Conscience. A History of the No-Conscription Fellowship, 1914-1919*, Fayetteville 1981, p. 51. ↑
8. Quoted in Patterson, David S.: *The Search for Negotiated Peace. Women's Activism and Citizen Diplomacy in World War I*, New York 2008, p. 234. ↑
9. *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell*, London 1968, vol. 2, pp. 52-53. ↑
10. Pethick-Lawrence, Emmeline: *Motherhood and War*, in *Harper's Weekly*, 59 (1914), p. 542. ↑
11. Swanwick, Helena: *Women and War*, London 1916, p. 6. ↑
12. After the war Swanwick would edit the union's journal and publish a history of the organization. ↑
13. Kennedy, *Hound of Conscience*, p. 147. ↑
14. Quotations in Sowerwine, Charles: *Sisters or Citizens? Women and Socialism in France since 1876*, Cambridge 1982, pp. 148, 145. Estimates of the number of women at the Berne conference ranged from twenty-five to seventy, with representatives from Germany, France, Belgium, Austria, Hungary, Poland, Russia, and Switzerland. ↑
15. Zetkin reported that before her arrest she and her socialist women cohorts had distributed 300,000 copies of the manifesto to more than 100 places in Germany. She was soon released from prison because of ill health. Louise Saumoneau (1875-1950), the French socialist leader, was also arrested for distributing the manifesto in her country. Evans, Richard J.: *Comrades and Sisters. Feminism, Socialism and Pacifism in Europe, 1870-1945*, New York 1987, pp. 133-137. ↑
16. A few pacifists found refuge in neutral countries. For example, Alfred Fried and Romain Rolland (1866-1944), the most prominent French pacifist to denounce the war, escaped to Switzerland. ↑
17. Quoted in Patterson, *Search for Negotiated Peace*, p. 70. ↑
18. From the warring nations, only Russian and French women were absent. They either could not get passports or objected to mediation while German troops occupied their countries, but fifty-seven French women signed a resolution endorsing the congress and regretting their absence. Belgian and German delegates expressed friendship for one another, although one Belgian delegate, fearful of becoming a subject people, cried out, "[J]e suis Belge avant tout." Quoted in Patterson, *Search for Negotiated Peace*, p. 79. ↑
19. Quoted *ibid.*, p. 47. ↑
20. Quoted *ibid.*, p. 183. ↑
21. Quoted *ibid.*, p. 159. A truce on Christmas day 1914, spontaneously arranged by troops on both sides along hundreds of miles of front lines in Flanders and France did not last, but suggested to many pacifists the uncertainty, if not well articulated, peace yearnings, among the enemy combatants over the continued slaughter in the trenches.

Though there were press accounts of the truce, there is no direct evidence that it prompted Ford's initiative nearly a year later. ↑

22. Quoted *ibid.*, p. 191. ↑

23. In addition, a crisis in U.S.-Mexican relations in mid-1916 galvanized American peace groups into action. Following raids across the southern border by Mexican bandits, which killed numerous American citizens, Wilson dispatched army units in pursuit of the Mexican forces. The AUAM and other U.S. peace groups lobbied vigorously against a U.S. invasion of Mexico and for a peaceful resolution of the conflict. The American citizens' antiwar actions bolstered the President's resolve to avoid full-scale intervention, and soon the U.S. and Mexican Governments established a mixed commission to resolve the outstanding issues. ↑

24. Quoted in Patterson, *Search for Negotiated Peace*, p. 240. ↑

25. To avoid British censorship, these British communications were sent through private or unofficial channels to the United States. Ironically, after U.S. entry into the war against Germany, Russell was prosecuted and sent to jail for remarks critical of Britain's newfound ally. ↑

26. Perhaps symptomatic of American women's emerging public role, Jeanette Rankin (1880-1973), the first woman elected to Congress, was one of the House members voting against war. (Women could then vote in federal elections in twelve states, including her state of Montana.) She served one term, but was elected a second time in 1940 and became the lone member of Congress to vote against U.S. belligerency in World War II. ↑

27. By the end of the war, there were seventeen death sentences (none carried out), 142 life terms, and 345 prison sentences averaging sixteen and one-half years. Sentences were reduced after the war, and all such prisoners were released by 1920. In addition, the War Department reported an estimated 171,000 American draft evaders during the war, so the objectors by comparison were more forthright and willing to accept the penalties of the draft act. Basic information on the draft and draft resistance and the treatment of American COs is in Early, Frances H.: *A World Without War. How U.S. Feminists and Pacifists Resisted World War I*, Syracuse 1997, pp. 93-94, *passim*. Chatfield, Charles: *For Peace and Justice. Pacifism in America, 1914-1941*, Knoxville 1971, pp. 68-87, gives slightly different totals for objector categories and elaborates on the difficulty in classifying the various kinds of objectors. ↑

28. Russell, Bertrand: *Some Psychological Difficulties of Pacifism in Wartime*, in Bell, Julian (ed): *We Did Not Fight: 1914-18 Experiences of War Resisters*, London 1935, p. 332. ↑

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