

Women's power to stop war: Hubris or hope?

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In the first of a series of articles marking the hundredth year of the [Women's International League for Peace and Freedom](#), Cynthia Cockburn explores the roots of the women's peace movement and its aim not just to outlaw war, but to root out its causes.



(L-R) Jane Addams, Aletta Jacobs, Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence, Rosika Schwimmer

Today, 28 April, ninety-nine years ago, was the sixth day of the [Second Battle of Ypres](#), one of the First World War's most futile and costly engagements. Chlorine gas, a new weapon of choice, was seeping over the trenches. The battle would end in stalemate, leaving 105,000 dead and wounded men.

On that day, a mere hundred miles north of the battlefield, at The Hague, in neutral Netherlands, more than a thousand women assembled to talk peace. They travelled there from twelve countries, on both sides of the Atlantic and both sides of the conflict, drawn by a belief that women could achieve something male leaders were unwilling or unable to do: stop the carnage. When the congress ended, they despatched women envoys to heads of state in belligerent and neutral countries, urging them to initiate a peace commission. In vain. The war continued for another three years until 37 million men, women and children had died..

The organization emerging from the Hague Congress called itself the International Women's Committee for Permanent Peace. A few years on, it would be renamed the [Women's International League for Peace and Freedom](#), and establish an office in Geneva. So, today, we of WILPF are mourning the victims of Ypres and simultaneously marking our 99th birthday. As we do so, and prepare for our centenary a year hence, we are rolling out a world-wide mobilization under the bold banner-headline: [Women's Power to Stop War](#).

Bold... but also bald. The slogan stops people in their tracks, we find. They pause and puzzle over it. Are WILPF making a statement of fact here, or is this mere aspiration? The story of the Hague Congress hardly inspires confidence in women's power to stop war. Besides, the very fact that we have a centenary to 'celebrate', that we have had wars to contest throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, suggests not power but impotence.

If we really mean women have the power to stop war, in what does that ability reside? why has it been ineffective till now? how may we believe in it? Recently I was invited to sketch out the first draft of a new Manifesto for WILPF. It will be debated in the organization throughout this year, and a final version issued at our centenary Congress a year from now, when we shall once more assemble in The Hague. To prepare for this daunting writing job (or to put it off a little longer?) I sat down, as is my wont, to *read*. Setting aside for the moment women's failure in 1915 to achieve a peace initiative and end the war, I took from my shelf some books about women's activism in the preceding period, in the early 20th and late 19th century.

What they reminded me was that the concern with 'peace' of many of our fore-runners emerged from, or combined with, engagement in other social movements. They did not limit themselves to the injunction 'thou shalt not kill', but addressed injustice, inequality, exploitation and unfreedom, laying the groundwork for a women's peace movement in the 20th century that would understand these wrongs as presaging violence, and indeed as of themselves violent. Women's campaigning tended to be joined-up, *holistic*.

The rapid urbanization of Britain, the USA and other industrializing societies in the latter part of the 19th century had brought widespread, and highly visible, suffering to the poor. Exploitative conditions of labour, together with appalling housing conditions, lack of sanitation and consequent disease experienced by the growing industrial workforce and their families gave rise to socialist and social [reform movements](#). Many women gave their energies to humanitarian philanthropic work. Others were active in the anti-slavery movement. And some joined campaigns against war - the Crimean war, the American civil war, the Franco-Prussian war, the Boer war.

Middle class women's exposure to the oppression of others heightened consciousness of their own oppression as women. The more involved they became in social and charitable projects, the more they felt the injustice of their inferiorisation by the confident public men who led these institutions. (For decades after their foundation in 1816 the Peace Societies did not allow women members to speak at meetings. It would be 73 years before the men [agreed](#) to accept a woman on the national committee.) Unlike male pacifists, then, whether secular or religious, women were liable to note the gender implications of war. Had not Mary Wollstonecraft, first and boldest of feminist writers, stated emphatically way back in 1792 that militarism threatened women by reinforcing masculine habits of authority and hierarchy? She wrote, in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, 'Every corps is a chain of despots...submitting and tyrannizing without exercising their reason'. The failure of successive Reform Acts to accord women the vote led to a surging suffrage movement, at its height just before the outbreak of World War I.

Now - look where the founders of WILPF learned their activism. [Jane Addams](#), who presided over the Hague Congress, was already well-known figure in the USA for her pioneering social work. She founded Hull House in Chicago, one of the first settlements, a refuge for the poor. She was incipiently socialist, campaigning nation-wide for child labour laws and trade unions. She espoused women's rights, joining the suffrage movement. Then, as war threatened, she embraced peace campaigning. Addams was nothing if not holistic in her activism. Historian Catherine Foster writes of her, 'Partly because of her work with poor people [she] believed strongly that there could be no peace without social and economic justice'.

Then consider how many of the women who founded WILPF came to it directly from the struggle for women's political representation. In Britain as war approached there were two strong suffrage organizations, the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies with 50,000 members, and the smaller Women's Social and Political Union. Both split on the war issue. While most of their members supported the government, some became the backbone of the women's peace movement. Suffrage and peace activism remained tightly linked in the [International Women's Suffrage Alliance](#), to which many anti-war pro-suffrage women shifted their allegiance.

Consider two women who travelled from Europe to the USA in 1914 to galvanize women's opposition to the war and support the launch of a National Woman's Peace Party in Washington. One was [Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence](#), a British woman whose activism had been formed in both socialist and suffrage movements and whose concern with peace was founded, as she wrote, on 'the idea of the solidarity of women [that] had taken a deep hold upon many of us; so deep that it could not be shaken even by the fact that men of many nations were at war'. Another was [Rosika Schwimmer](#), a Hungarian feminist and suffragist, member of the IWSA. Often sharing a platform, these two women from enemy nations would later be present at the Hague Congress and go on to be active in the League. [Aletta Jacobs](#), an opening speaker at the Congress, was president of the Dutch suffrage movement. Thus there was in the 1915 peace initiative a deeply embedded belief that women's entry into politics

bringing with them a wealth of fresh and gender-specific experience, their full acceptance on equal terms in public life, would of itself contribute to ending militarism and the taken-for-granted use of war as foreign policy.

The imbrication of struggles for social reform and women's rights with the women's peace movement showed its effects in WILPF's campaign for a just peace after the 1918 Armistice. The leaders that gathered in Paris in 1919 to dictate the terms of peace to the defeated Central Powers were all men, despite women's appeal for the inclusion of women delegates. Women from seventeen countries therefore autonomously organized their own congress. It took place in Zurich just as the text of the [Treaty of Versailles](#) was issued. The women were shocked by its savagely punitive terms which condemned the defeated populations to hunger, poverty and disease for a generation to come. And here we see clearly women's distinctive 'take' on war - a recognition of the link between the power relations of the powerful and weak nations, the ruling and ruled class, and the dominant and subordinated sex.

The Women's Charter issued by WILPF (which took its present name at the Zurich congress) was of course an appeal for universal disarmament, an international mechanism to ensure permanent peace and an end to the 'right' of any government to make war. But it also called for the social, political and economic status of women to be recognized as of supreme international importance. They demanded the franchise, freedom from dependence and full equality for women universally. They called for recognition that women's services to the world as wage earners and homemakers are essential to peace. Women should be eligible for every position in the anticipated League of Nations. In addition, they showed concern for minority rights and racial equality; called for self-government for colonized peoples; the right of asylum for those fleeing persecution. They also had a revolutionary economic vision: fair distribution; and controls on capitalists and profiteers. They expressed sympathy for workers' (nonviolent) uprising.

In this way, in explicitly seeking, beyond the end of one war, the eradication of war itself, WILPF was obliged to identify and address war's root causes. It thus became a holistic movement for freedom and justice, against oppression and exploitation - in other words a movement against both physical violence and what would come to be termed 'structural violence'. In doing so it drew strength and experience from the campaigns from which it had originally sprung: those for social reform and women's rights.

It is this holistic, multi-faceted struggle for a nonviolent revolution in the relations of gender, class, ethnicity and nation to which we shall soon commit ourselves anew in our forthcoming centenary Manifesto. If we assert, with breath-taking optimism, *Women's Power to Stop War*, it's not to suggest that women 'have power' - on most counts we have little. Rather, it's to remind ourselves that we have *agency*. Of course, not all women lack privilege and security. Nonetheless, women as a sex have seen millennia of injustice, many of us have learned how to organize, and above all we have *reach*, into every corner of life, into the heart of families, into civil society and, increasingly, into the structures of governance. '[Our weapons](#)', [reads our campaign website](#), '[are dialogue, knowledge and insistence](#).' Women as women are the ones who have the potential to translate the principle and practice of 'care' from the individual to collective, so that a caring society becomes the principle of politics, embraced by men and women alike. And war becomes unthinkable.

This is the first in a major series of articles that 50.50 will be publishing regularly in the run up to the Centenary Conference of WILPF [Uniting a Global Movement of Women's Power to Stop War](#), and our writers will report from the worldwide gathering in April 2015