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# These Dangerous Women

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The Women who Tried to stop World War One  
By Helen Kay

At the end of April 1915, in the midst of the European carnage of World War One, 1200 women from twelve countries met at The Hague, Holland to protest against the massive destruction caused by the war and to present an alternative analysis of the causes of war. They argued that the use of military force to resolve international disputes should be replaced by mediation and arbitration, '... But, what was it that led women of different nations, for the first time in history, to meet and express their opposition to war?

One month before war was declared in Europe, women of the International Woman Suffrage Alliance (IWSA) had delivered a Manifesto to all the Embassies and the British Foreign Office in London, appealing to the leaders of each country "to leave untried no method of conciliation or arbitration for arranging international differences which may help to avert deluging half the civilised world in blood" (*Jus Suffragii* Vol 8, No 13, September 1914, p1).

With the onset of war, the women of the German section of the IWSA felt that they had no alternative but to cancel the International Congress which had been due to meet in Berlin in June 1915. In response, Dr Aletta Jacobs of the Dutch National Committee wrote to other national suffrage organisations in November 1914, suggesting that the Congress could still be held, but in Holland which was a neutral country.

Several national suffrage leaders in Europe and North America expressed strong reservations about an international gathering, fearing that it might bring a backlash on the suffrage movement. [Crystal Macmillan](#), the IWSA secretary offered an alternative arrangement whereby women might attend a Dutch meeting as individual women.

The women who signed up for the Congress had to agree to two principles:

- that international disputes should be settled by pacific means
- that the parliamentary franchise should be extended to women

To reach the Congress, the women had to brave the threat of shelling or torpedo attacks, and had to cope with disrupted rail and ferry services. No French or Russian women were able to obtain permission to travel, and although twenty-five of the 180 British delegates were granted passports, in the end, only three British women reached the Congress



because all merchant shipping in the North Sea and the Channel was suspended on 27 April 1915 by order of the British Government.

The popular press in Britain condemned the “blundering Englishwomen” (*Daily Graphic*) and “babblers” (*Evening Standard*) and called into question the loyalty of these “Pro-Hun Peacettes” (*Daily Express*). But as nearly every one of the women attending the Congress had relatives involved in military action, “it was a great test of courage for these women to risk the bitterness of their families, the ridicule of their friends and the censure of their governments” (*The Survey*, 5 June 1915).

Some of the German and Austrian press were similarly critical. The Austrian *Ostdeutsche Rundschau* was angered by “false sentimentality of bourgeois organisations” which did not grasp the “justified”, “holy” and “good hatred” against Austria's enemies. The American delegation, led by [Jane Addams](#) was not subject to such severe press criticism at this stage, and indeed the US newspaper cartoons and comments “expressed astonishment that such an archaic institution [war] should be revived in Modern Europe” (Addams, Jane, 1945, *Peace and Bread in Time of War*, p1).

The women worked for three days with a programme of debates and discussions, some in public, some in committee. Speeches were short, delivered in English, French and German. Working in groups, some women acting as translators and interpreters to overcome language barriers and divergent interpretations of correct committee procedure, the Congress reached agreement on twenty resolutions, which still resonate with women today.

The Congress then elected an international team of five envoys who travelled back and forward across war-torn Europe and to USA during the summer months of 1915, visiting fourteen belligerent and neutral countries, and meeting with twenty-four influential leaders: Prime Ministers, Foreign Ministers, Presidents, the King of Norway and the Pope.

The women urged the political leaders to set up Continuous Mediation by neutral countries to end the war. Each statesman declared himself sympathetic. “We heard much the same words spoken in Downing Street as those spoken in Willemstrasse, in Vienna as in Petrograd, in Budapest as in Havre” (*ibid.* p16). But not one leader would take the first step and the war continued unabated.

The women met again in Zurich in 1919: their plans to meet in the same place as the Peace negotiators had to be abandoned as German women would not have been allowed to travel to a Congress in Paris. On the first day of the Congress, the Treaty of Versailles was published. The women sent five envoys to Paris to convey to the statesmen their dismay at the Terms of the Treaty.



With the formalisation of a constitution at the Zurich Congress in 1919, the international women's peace movement which grew out of the Congress at The Hague in 1915 was established; the international organisation and the national committees united under the name of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom [WILPF].

The legacy of these determined women continues to be acknowledged today. Current members of WILPF - the oldest women's international peace organisation – have returned to The Hague in April 2015 - to review their current work and to celebrate 100 years' of women's campaigning for peace.

