Chapter 12

The Women Who Tried to Stop the Great War: The International Congress of Women at The Hague 1915

John Paull
University of Tasmania, Australia

ABSTRACT

The Congress of Women developed a roadmap for enduring peace. The women passed 20 resolutions including five resolutions which were “Principles of a Permanent Peace.” Theirs was a gendered response to a gendered war. The Congress was a bold and brave initiative. The war was not halted. But neither were the women in their quest for peace. This is their story.

A CONGRESS TO END THE WAR

The International Congress of Women was the major peace initiative of its day. The stakes were high, the odds were low. During the blood-letting of World War 1 (1914-1918), over a thousand women joined together to stop the war. The women came from neutral countries, from belligerent countries of both the Entente and the Central Powers, and from invaded Belgium. These women put their differences - and safety - aside and assembled at The Hague in 1915 (28 April to 1 May).

The Congress developed a road map for enduring peace. The women passed twenty resolutions of which five were “Principles of a Permanent Peace”. Theirs was a gendered response to a gendered war. “We women … protest against the madness and the horror of war, involving as it does a reckless sacrifice of human life and the destruction of so much that humanity has labored through centuries to build up”.

They declared that the Congress “protests vehemently against the odious wrongs of which women are the victims in time of war”. The Congress was conducted in English, French and German, yet they spoke with a united voice. Theirs was a voice of sanity flickering in a maelstrom of insanity.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-4993-2.ch012
The Women Who Tried to Stop the Great War

Envoys were selected to carry their resolutions to “the rulers of the belligerent and neutral nations of Europe and to the President of the United States”. In the months that followed, these envoys of the Congress crisscrossed war-torn Europe pleading with political leaders to halt the madness.

The Congress was a bold and brave initiative. The war was not stopped. But neither were the women halted in their quest for peace. The voices of Congress participants have been mostly lost for a century. This is their story, revealing their hopes and fears, their aspirations, frustrations, and proposed solutions, told where possible in their own words and contextualized with other contemporaneous voices. This account includes the text of the twenty resolutions of the Congress.

When the War Came

The International Woman Suffrage Alliance (IWSA) was due to hold its eighth international conference in June 1915 in Berlin. It could have been a global high-water mark of the suffragette movement. In a wholly unrelated event, Gavrilo Princip (1894-1918) assassinated Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria and his wife, Duchess Sophie von Hohenberg on 28 June 1914 in Sarajevo (Bosnia and Herzegovina) (Prešević & Spahić, 2015). It was a rash action which precipitated Europe into the deadliest war the world has ever known. The outbreak of war on 28 July 1914 led the German Union for Women’s Suffrage to withdraw their hosting of the upcoming IWSA Berlin conference.

The assassination of two minor dignitaries of the Austro-Hungarian Empire might have been relegated to a tiny footnote of world history. Instead, it quickly cascaded the world into an unprecedented conflagration. There had long been preparation for war, most countries of Europe had standing armies, and most had conscription. Most nations cherished derring-do narratives of military adventures. Public statues of military generals populated public spaces. There were interlocking military treaties amongst the countries of Europe. Some cherished aspirations of territorial expansion. And there were politicians who were ready to commit their nations to war, whether for personal aggrandizement, out of righteous indignation, or out of sheer lack of comprehension of what a twentieth century industrial war might entail. The motivations can be contested and speculated upon. What is certain is that, state by state, it was men, not women, who committed their nations to war.

On both sides there was public enthusiasm for the war. This was especially so at the beginning. That enthusiasm waned as the war dragged on, as news trickled back from the front, and as awareness grew of the ghastly cost in wounded and dead.

Whether Entente or Central Power, the soldiers at the front lines had a miserable time. The German soldier Eric Remarque (1898-1970) wrote of the front-line experience:

"it has to stop, it has to stop - perhaps we’ll get through it all … Nobody would believe that there could still be human beings in this churned up wilderness … it’s the French … A whole line of them is wiped out by the machine-gun near us … We are not fighting, we are defending ourselves from annihilation … but you have to turn around and go back into the terror … if we don’t destroy them they will destroy us. (Remarque, 1929, pp.80-83)"

As an eighteen-year-old German, Remarque was sent to the Western Front, he was wounded, and he survived the war.

An Australian soldier, R H Starke, wrote from France: “I can assure you it’s a Hell on Earth here… ‘Can a man escape certain death?’ … there is no thinking; it’s a matter of life or death … Our wounded