
Borders and Prisms of Gender, War, and Politics Then and Now:

The International Congress of Women in The Hague in the Spring of 1915 – Topicalities for Our World and Millennium

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Abstract: By outlining categories of crossing and challenging borders as well as the parameters of feminist pacifism and transnationalism, this article aims to unpack the so-called International Congress of Women in The Hague (28 April to 1 May 1915) and especially its aftermath: a tour de force through Europe by two women's delegations, journeying the neutral and belligerent nations and visiting statesmen in Europe, with some even being received by the Pope in Rome, or crossing the Atlantic for audiences with President Wilson. These pacifists, suffragists, and feminists did not simply traverse borders or – literally and metaphorically – frontlines, but also challenged and tried to deconstruct the status quo of patriarchy, militarisms in conjunction with masculinities, and male-dominated diplomacy, which to a certain extent continue to persist to this day.

Setting the scene

Brains – they say – have ruled the world till today. If brains have brought us to what we are in now, I think it is time to allow our hearts to speak. When our sons are killed by millions, let us, mothers, only try to do good by going to the kings and emperors, without any other danger than a refusal!¹

The goings-on before, during, and after the so-called International Congress of Women in The Hague in the spring of 1915 intersect with many elements of gender idiosyncrasies and inequalities, reverberating through the short twentieth century to

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¹ Hungarian-born pacifist, feminist, and suffragist Rosika Schwimmer (1877-1948) at the International Congress in The Hague, as cited in *Report of the International Congress of Women*, Amsterdam 1915, p. 169.

our present. Discernibly, The Hague was chosen for its tradition of peace conferences: in 1899, Tsar Nicholas II initiated the so-called First Hague Conference, the Second followed in 1907². The explicitly pro-peace rather than simply anti-war symbolism of the women's convention in The Hague bore enough negative potential for individual governments to prevent them effectively from leaving the country. Women gathering to address peace, and, subsequently, female envoys to the belligerent and neutral countries – regardless of how ineffective and belittled – still posed a certain threat or at least disruption to the 'official' protocol of warfare. In contradistinction to the patriotic women's groups, signing up to the war effort, these 'renegade' women undermined the common national image of unity and strength, in short, the *Union sacrée* or *Burgfrieden*, to the outside world³. Involuntarily, they formed a diplomatic contraband, sadly achieving only counterproductive results and a negative press.

Next to perils at sea and bureaucratic obstacles, all women travelling to The Hague had to face public ridicule. European and American press sources made fun of the peace evangelists and 'peacettes'. As the women needed a venue that offered capacities for such large numbers of participants, they ended up at the Zoological Gardens in The Hague. This, of course, was a perfect feast for the press, eager to mock the delegates. Overall, the congress was perceived as an oddity by international onlookers. Most correspondents and observers from the media portrayed it as a curiosity, sometimes humorously, sometimes outright disrespectfully. Feminised 'peacettes', naively meddling with international politics, was a frequently appropriated stereotype in cartoons and articles⁴.

All in all, the congress hosted an impressive number of 1,136 attendees, arriving from all over Europe and North America: Austria (6), Belgium (5), Britain (3), Canada (2), Denmark (6), Germany (28), Hungary (9), Italy (1), the Netherlands (1,000), Norway (12), Sweden (12), the United States (47). The deliberate absence of emissaries from France and Russia, however, was also noticeable⁵. The Hungarian pacifist-feminist Rosika Schwimmer later frequently commented on the fact that, although the conference's results remained debatable, the mere fact that such a large

² About pre-1915 Hague conferences, see, for example, Jost Dülffer, *Regeln gegen den Krieg? Die Haager Friedenskonferenzen 1899 und 1907 in der internationalen Politik*, Ullstein, Berlin 1981. Interestingly enough, these peace congresses rather concerned themselves with jus in bello, less with jus ad bellum, hence evoking a certain futility regarding war prevention.

³ For the utilisation of abusive language towards these 'mutineers', see Jo Vellacott, *Feminist Consciousness and the First World War*, in "History Workshop", 1987, 23, 1, pp. 81-101.

⁴ For media coverage of the congress, see the third part in Annika Wilmers, *Pazifismus in der internationalen Frauenbewegung (1914-1920): Handlungsspielräume, politische Konzeptionen und gesellschaftliche Auseinandersetzungen*, Klartext Verlag, Essen 2008.

⁵ Three major protagonists in The Hague, the Hull House founder Jane Addams, acting as the president at the congress, Emily Greene Balch, fired from her professorship in economics at Wellesley College due to her pacifist principles, and Alice Hamilton, a medic and the first female professor at Harvard, reported about the congress in *Women at The Hague: The International Congress of Women and Its Results*, Mcmillan, New York 1915. See also Lela B. Costin, *Feminism, Pacifism, Internationalism and the 1915 International Congress of Women*, in "Women's Studies International Forum", V, 1982, 3-4, pp. 301-315; and further Anne Wiltsher, *Most Dangerous Women: Feminist Peace Campaigners of the Great War*, Pandora, London 1985, esp. ch. 5 and 6.

number of women managed to meet from all corners of the world amidst a war was already astonishing. Indeed, it was also Schwimmer who at the end of the assembly gave a last-minute speech to petition for female envoys to the belligerent and neutral states, and this resolution was subsequently voted for positively.

Lady ambassadors, polarising precedent

Accordingly, two groups of women were formed: Jane Addams and the first female physician of the Netherlands and doyenne of the Dutch woman suffrage movement Aletta Jacobs, representing the neutral countries, headed the delegation to the belligerent nations and were joined by Emily Greene Balch, Baroness Ellen Palmstierna from Sweden, and Cor Ramondt-Hirschmann from the Netherlands. Rosika Schwimmer and the Scottish lawyer Chrystal Macmillan from the belligerent states visited the neutral governments, accompanied by the Italian feminist Rosa Genoni. The two delegations toured the following countries: Austria, Belgium, Britain, Denmark, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Russia, Sweden, Switzerland.

Regardless of whether the delegates' trips are interpreted as a pioneering success or as an utter failure, the statistics remain impressive: in less than three months, eleven women travelled across Europe and some then journeyed to the United States as well. They conducted thirty-five audiences with leading officials in Berlin, Bern, Budapest, Christiania (today's Oslo), Copenhagen, Le Havre (as the Belgian substitute capital), London, Paris, Petrograd, Rome, Stockholm, The Hague, Vienna, and Washington. Their practical and organisational problems were not simply limited to severe checks at various borders, but also involved bypassing surveillance and censorship, especially while trying to record content and the outcome of their visits to statesmen.

The mere fact that these women's itinerary criss-crossed all over Europe amidst the biggest war ever waged on that continent was already a curiosity and spectacle in itself. Their wish to talk to crowned heads and government officials was simply an outrageous and preposterous novelty for their times. This endowed the delegations with an aura of uniqueness, but at the same time undermined their actual political impact and message. Pacifist women received more attention than most other peace proponents, yet their clout was restricted to symbolism and sensationalism. The dichotomy of stereotypes ranged from positive portrayals of them as naturally born, dove-like peace angels to dilettantes and wannabe attachés, tampering with affairs beyond their understanding. By embarking on their trips to individual European governments, they did not simply break every taboo, but also exercised strategies that were still alien to their contemporaries. Amidst warphoria, warmania, nationalism, and patriotism, this undertaking was also highly quixotic.

Curiously, the total war effort also became a total peace effort with pacifist initiatives by individual and private citizens, which would have been unthinkable before 1914. Just as women were temporarily recruited for traditionally masculine tasks on the job market in order to contribute to the war effort, the female cohorts from The Hague also ventured into traditionally masculine domains of diplomacy and ambassadorial efforts. Certainly, the women delegates understood that they had

to describe the politicians, on whose benevolence their activism depended, in the most favourable light, and, either consciously or unconsciously, the women's portrayal of their counterparts was flavoured by a feminine perception of male chivalry.

It was exactly this gallantry which precluded the envoys' political or diplomatic leverage. Receiving women legates did not send the same message as exchanging ideas with male representatives, in fact, as harmless and chit-chat-like conversation with depoliticised citizens, it had no currency for the actual war. As private, disenfranchised, and feminine-labelled persons, they were denied any political authority or significance, which preconditioned their receptions in the first place⁶. Meeting pacifists in a politicised environment would have lent certain validity to their claims and created a prototype for succeeding envoys. It also would have allowed the dimension of peace dialogues or the notion of an armistice to enter the war cabinets. The interest and indulgence demonstrated by the officials in their talks resulted from the private nature of these very same meetings. None of the authorities could be held accountable for what they agreed to or promised, and they decidedly insisted on vague formulations, so as not to offer room for pacifist interpretation.

Although the statesmen received and greeted the women courteously, all of them, unsurprisingly, stayed non-committal, careful not to send any political signals that could be deciphered in any way. As David S. Patterson remarks: "One can plausibly argue in fact that the European statesmen did not take the women seriously and only humored them in order to make a good impression on neutral opinion"⁷. Obviously, any grave and consequential decisions happened behind closed doors and far away from public attention, and, at a closer look, the women delegates were not the only ones pursuing an agenda with these meetings. The envoys' initiatives frequently played into the hands of the officials they contacted, be they belligerent or neutral, and in a paradoxical way, their ideas served statesmen's interests. As the private, apolitical nature of those conversations ensured that they had no impact on the actual war, receiving female pacifists was a safe exercise to demonstrate civility and good will without political liability. Individual governments could appropriate these visits as a ploy to demonstrate cordiality and to divert some attention from military strategizing.

The women actually managed to interview and converse with an impressive number of leading European figures in those days: the Dutch Prime Minister Pieter Cort van der Linden and the Minister of Foreign Affairs John Loudon in The Hague; the British Prime Minister Herbert Henry Asquith and the Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey in London; the American ambassador James Gerard in Berlin, the German Foreign Secretary Gottlieb von Jagow, and the Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg in Berlin; the Swedish Foreign Minister Knut Wallenberg in

⁶ In *Peace as a Women's Issue: A History of the U.S. Movement for World Peace and Women's Rights*, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse, 1993, pp. 260-274, for instance, Harriet Hyman Alonso points out that actual and serious diplomacy by women citizens at the expense of their nurturing tasks would have been considered as highly inappropriate and even 'treacherous' by their environments.

⁷ David S. Patterson, *The Search for Negotiated Peace: Women's Activism and Citizen Diplomacy in World War I*, Routledge, New York-London 2008, p. 95.

Stockholm; the Russian Foreign Minister Sergej Sazonov in what was then Petrograd; the Austrian Prime Minister Count Karl von Stürgkh and the Foreign Minister Count Stephan von Burian in Vienna; the Hungarian Prime Minister Count István Tisza in Budapest; the Italian Prime Minister Antonio Salandra and the Foreign Minister Sidney Sonnino in Rome; the French Prime Minister René Viviani and the Minister for Foreign Affairs Théophile Delcassé in Paris; the Foreign Minister of Belgium Julien Davignon in Le Havre; the Danish Prime Minister Carl Theodor Zahle and the Foreign Minister Erik Scavenius in Copenhagen; King Haakon, the Norwegian Prime Minister Gunnar Knudsen, and the Foreign Minister Nils Ihlen in Christiania; Guiseppe Motta of Financial Affairs and Arthur Hoffman of Foreign Affairs in Bern; and “while in Rome the delegation went unofficially, that is to say without a mandate from the congress to the Pope”⁸.

Unsurprisingly, the pacifist deputies were confronted with enormous logistic impediments. They were held up at borders, strip searched, their baggage scrutinised. New military developments also impacted the constellations of their delegations. When Italy entered the war, for instance, Rosa Genoni had to resign as an affiliate delegate. Additionally, the women’s tour tragically coincided with the torpedoing of the *Lusitania*, an incident which made it even harder for them to arouse sympathies for their plans amongst the general public.

Summary and outlook

From a historiographic and socio-political perspective, these envoys attempted to galvanise a first paradigm shift regarding germane and visible roles in the public sphere for female citizens, who at that time were still being deprived of basic rights, such as the franchise, for example. Moreover, the women in The Hague and their succeeding missions of female delegates established a certain form of parallel diplomacy as an ‘amateur’ version, existing laterally to official negotiation tables and hence violating the unwritten code of war and peace politics. Palpably, the connotations and signifiers of the delegations’ para-political trajectories even percolate through to today’s times with yet no female UN Secretary General or US (Vice) President appointed.

Albeit the Great War as the first global, total, and media war introduced (temporary) new roles for women out of necessity, exerting influence on the diplomatic parquet was not one of them. Even when it came to post-war negotiations and treaties, female activists played not even a minor role⁹. This is even more tragic

⁸ Rosika Schwimmer, “Memorandum”, 13 Aug. 1915, Rosika Schwimmer Papers (hereafter RSP). Manuscripts and Archives Division. The New York Public Library. Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations, Box 60. The women delegations always made sure that they experienced a well-balanced spectrum of voices in individual countries. In Germany, for example, Addams’s envoys exchanged ideas with the pacifist Bund Neues Vaterland (Council New Fatherland), as well as with war-supportive women. The delegation to Russia also consulted Alexandra Kollontai. See, for instance, Emily Greene Balch, *Peace Delegates in Scandinavia and Russia*, “The Survey”, 4 September 1915, p. 507, RSP, MF Reel 100:39.

⁹ For women’s reduced and confined power in official peace politics after the ceasefire, see, for example, Erika A. Kuhlman, *The ‘Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom’ and*

in that these women envoys specifically and private peace initiatives generally played their fair share in the birth of modern conflict solutions, taking shape after 1918. Many of their blueprints for mediation were adopted and fostered by future organisations and systems. Hence the irony of the women's peace efforts is quite blatant. While they were overwhelmingly slandered, scorned, and accused of being either pathetic or bizarre by their contemporaries, their mediation template crystallised into being acceptable in the twentieth century and became increasingly 'professionalised' by institutions like the United Nations.

Reconciliation after the Great War', in Alison S. Fell and Ingrid Sharp (eds.), *The Women's Movement in Wartime: International Perspectives, 1914-19*, Palgrave, Basingstoke 2007, pp. 227-243.