
American Women in the Fight for Lasting Peace

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Shortly before the end of her life, Jane Addams addressed a banquet of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom which presented a tribute in her honor. She thanked the speakers for their loving descriptions of her kindness and fortitude. "I do not know any such person as is described here this evening," Addams said, "I think I have never met her...I have never been sure I was right. I have often been doubtful about the next step. We can only feel our way as we go from day to day."¹ Despite her doubts, when the war in Europe broke out in 1914, Addams found herself shifting priorities from her social work at Hull House to the more immediate cause of the peace movement. For Jane Addams, pacifism was at once international and intensely personal. The Great War shifted her focus from more local issues to questions of the international success or failure of reform in a world at war. Addams saw the war as an ideological shift away from human nature, a movement shaped by industrialization, militarism, and racialized nationalism. While President Woodrow Wilson's ideologies initially reflected a pacifist stance on international relations, by 1917 he shifted towards militancy, leaving peace organizations like the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) as minority movements in foreign policy. A clash between president and prominent reformer was inevitable.

Women's reform movements, prohibition, education, and other social initiatives typically took place in areas of social consciousness considered to be the women's sphere. "The doctrine of woman's sphere," argues historian Nancy Cott, "opened to women (and reserved for them) the avenues of domestic influence, religious morality, and child nurture."² Women reformers believed in moral responsibility, not only of women, but of the middle class – a belief which translated to their work in social reform and political movements. Like other Progressive-Era reformers, women reformers believed in the power of education to enact change. With the increasing number of new immigrants, Addams and others became concerned with preserving immigrant culture, while giving immigrants the education and opportunity necessary for success in America. Some programs for immigrant success that Chicago's Hull House offered were adult-English language classes, citizenship classes, and the use of Hull House as a polling place for new citizens of the precinct. Her work with the immigrants of Chicago is part of what opened Addams to a more internationalist perspective.³

It was in the same hall at Hull House where Addams worked with immigrants that she felt a chilling shift in 1917. With Wilson's declaration of war, the hall was used to register men of the Hull House district for the draft.⁴ She recognized many of the men who were there to register as many

¹ Jane Addams, "Response Made by Jane Addams at a Banquet of the WILPF, May 2, 1935," in *Jane Addams: A Centennial Reader*, ed. Emily Cooper Johnson (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1960), 325.

² Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1977), 200.

³ Louis K. Knight, *Jane Addams: Spirit in Action* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2010), 66-67, 148-150.

⁴ Addams, *A Centennial Reader*, 291-292.

had been involved in programs at Hull House. “I really have you to thank if I am sent over to Europe to fight,” confessed one of the new citizens to Addams, “I went into the citizenship class in the first place because you asked me to. If I hadn’t my papers now I would be exempted.”⁵ This shift in the use of Hull House from a bulwark of democracy for new immigrants, many of whom hoped to escape wars in their homeland, to a vanguard of militarism shipping those same immigrants, now citizens, to the battlefield, greatly affected Addams. Having consistently asserted her pacifism,⁶ previously secondary to her social activism, the personal and international nature of the war drove Addams now to put peace at the forefront of her vision for the world.

Other prominent women involved in social reform movements also shifted their attention to the peace movement as US involvement in the war in Europe became inevitable. Julia Ward Howe, a prominent member of the women’s rights movement, was among the first of that group to promote a separate women’s peace movement.⁷ Members of the Anti-Imperialist League also joined; not for the moral reasons of social reformers, but for the continuation of their own moral mission against imperialism. In late 1914, Lillian Wald, founder of New York’s Henry Street Settlement, became the first president of the Union Against Militarism, while Jane Addams became chairman of the Women’s Peace Party (WPP).⁸ As US participation in the WPP grew, so did international women’s peace organizations. In March 1915, the WPP received an invitation to bring a delegation to “an International Congress of Women to be held at The Hague.”⁹ With Addams at its head, the WPP sent forty-seven delegates. It was out of this early international women’s conference that the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom emerged.

A sense of moral responsibility drove progressive reform causes. President Wilson, who viewed himself as a progressive, greatly sympathized with the causes and ideals of progressive reformers. “Wilson’s communion with the American left,” argues historian Thomas Knock, “exerted a profound impact on his diplomacy and, especially, the League of Nations movement.”¹⁰ When the war first broke out in Europe, pacifist progressives were shocked at the violence, but pleased to find that they had a president who did not want the United States to enter the war. Despite these early areas of agreement, differences soon emerged.

Race and ethnicity, an enormous concern of women activists and members of the WILPF, became the dividing line between the administration and the liberal left. Women like Rachel Dubois, Emily Greene Balch, and Anna Melissa Graves – all influenced by the work of Jane Addams – advanced their vision of “an interdependent world humanity,” disputing the view of “race as biology and as a prescriptive determinant of social relations.”¹¹ This view of humanity as interconnected through social and economic problems and systems, regardless of race, ethnicity, or nationality, was in direct conflict with the view of the federal government on national and international affairs.

Despite Wilson’s call in early January of 1916 for a Pan-American Scientific Congress to “settle all disputes arising between us by investigation and arbitration,” the actions of his administration continued along imperialistic lines.¹² The 1916 treaty with Haiti came under heavy

⁵ Ibid., 292.

⁶ Jane Addams, “Newer Ideals of Peace,” 1907, in *The Social Thought of Jane Addams*, ed. Christopher Lasch (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1965), 219-20.

⁷ Marilee Karl, *Women and Empowerment: Participation and Decision Making* (New Jersey: Zed Books Ltd., 1995), 25-26.

⁸ Jane Addams, *Peace and Bread in Time of War* (New York: King’s Crown Press, 1945), 6.

⁹ Ibid., 12-13.

¹⁰ Thomas J. Knock, “Wilson’s Battle for the League: Progressive Internationalists Confront the Forces of Reaction,” in *Major Problems in American Foreign Relations*, 4th ed., vol. 2, eds. Thomas G. Paterson and Dennis Merrill (Lexington, MA: DC Heath and Co., 1995), 62-63.

¹¹ Melinda Plastas, *A Band of Noble Women: Racial Politics in the Women’s Peace Movement* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press: 2011), 84.

¹² Addams, *Peace and Bread*, 53. Addams felt at this time that “we had a right to consider the Administration committed still further to the path of arbitration upon which it had entered in September, 1914.”

investigation of the WPP, led by Sophonisba P. Breckenridge, for its human rights and sovereignty violations. Although the United States had guaranteed Haiti “territorial and political independence,” U.S. Marines had occupied Haiti since 1915, and “had set up a military government, including strict military censorship.”¹³ Borrowing on their approach to domestic social reform, the women of the WPP led careful analytical investigations into U.S. diplomatic relations. Emily Greene Balch worked tirelessly “to expose US imperialism and racialized nationalism” in collaboration with Jane Addams and WILPF membership and worked to educate the nation on “the folly of race-tainted politics.”¹⁴ In their study cities, Chicago and New York, progressive reformers had seen the devastating effects of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, Jim Crow Laws throughout the nation, and anti-immigrant labor policies. Now, with an eye towards peace, reformers in the WPP and WILPF were examining the broader picture of racial and ethnic prejudice in the world at large.

Shortly after the start of the war in Europe, Balch and others began connecting racialized nationalism to the war. In a 1915 article for the *Survey*, Balch argued that “national vanity and national greed,” as well as the promotion of “contempt for those who differ from us” stemmed from a “philosophy of racialized exceptionalism” and contributed to the “defensive and aggressive nationalism” which was taking over war-ideology in Europe.¹⁵ Balch was not the only one to connect nationalism and the war in Europe. Early studies conducted by Addams and Alice Hamilton for the WILPF found that young men were “bidden to go to war on a purely national issue.”¹⁶ Addams and Hamilton also found that there was a significant number of soldiers and civilians who found themselves in opposition to the war, but unable to openly oppose it due to national fervor. This was a revolt “not of nationalist feeling nor of patriotism, but of human nature itself as of hedged in, harassed peoples.”¹⁷ Although Addams admitted that there were probably more soldiers and civilians willing to fight than there were in opposition, she still found these numbers significant enough to report to Washington and the WILPF. With a general consciousness of the racialized nationalism which had consumed Europe, the WILPF was now set to find a way to make a lasting peace. In her 1915 survey of civilian populations, Addams found that there did not exist “an outlet into the larger life of the world” for peaceful, humanitarian sentiments as “no great central authority had been dealing with this sum of human goodwill.”¹⁸ This idea of an international organization for peace is where Wilson’s plans and the plans of the WILPF and WPP intersected.

The WPP, founded by Jane Addams, was created in 1915 with ideals and a platform remarkably similar to many of Wilson’s 1918 Fourteen Points. In fact, both platforms called for a convention for peace and a sense of partnership among nations, a “Concert of Nations.”¹⁹ However, there were many points which the WPP viewed as important which were not addressed by Wilson, more specifically peace, education and international women’s suffrage.²⁰ Here is where the doctrines of progressive reformers differed from Wilson. Where progressive ideology was based on moral responsibility, for Wilson, moral responsibility was based on Christian values. Though he often seemed to be a moralist, historian Arthur S. Link argues, “Wilson’s “higher realism” was the product of insight and wisdom informed by active Christian faith.”²¹ Where moralists believed that positive values could be learned and instituted by legislation and education, Wilson saw positive values as an

¹³ Ibid., 54.

¹⁴ Melinda Plastas, *A Band of Noble Women*, 103-4.

¹⁵ Ibid., 113.

¹⁶ *Jane Addams: A Centennial Reader*, 268-69. This survey was conducted in 1915 by Jane Addams, Dr. Alice Hamilton, Dr. Alletta Jacobs, and Madame Palthe.

¹⁷ Ibid., 272.

¹⁸ Ibid., 275.

¹⁹ Addams, *Peace and Bread*, 7-8.

²⁰ Woodrow Wilson, “The Fourteen Points, 1918,” in *Major Problems in American Foreign Relations: Vol. II: Since 1914*, 38-39.

²¹ Arthur S. Link, “Wilson’s Higher Realism,” in *Major Problems in American Foreign Relations: Vol. II: Since 1914*, 52.

extension of faith. Although Wilson recognized the dangers of militarism, he also felt that nationalizing peace education and the armament industry would not make a difference in the prevention of future wars.

The WPP recognized Wilson's Fourteen Points, whatever his views on peace education and suffrage, as a tacit support for a peaceful reordering of the world. As the war progressed, censorship of anti-war organizations grew, making surveys of the civilian population, as well as international communication, more difficult and often impossible.²² For this reason, the WPP, the domestic branch of the WILPF in the United States, became the main organ of women for peace in the U.S. The WPP advocated for a type of international political system similar to the international fiscal system which had "already been organized...by its bankers."²³ Addams and the WPP believed it "unspeakably stupid that the nations should fail to create [such] an international organization."²⁴ Although the peace crowd widely supported Wilson's call for a League of Nations, some in the WPP, including Addams, believed that such legislation would be better implemented by a neutral party. By the time of Wilson's Fourteen Points speech, the United States had been a belligerent party in the war in Europe for nearly a year, and Americans began looking towards the end of the war.

Although the WPP continued to support Wilson's League of Nations despite the declaration of war, there were many who felt a deep sense of betrayal at the president's declaration, as well as at established peace parties supporting Wilson's war doctrine. These established peace parties, Addams explained, "extolled the President as a great moral leader because he was irrevocably leading the country into war," truly believing that "the world's greatest war was to make an end of all wars."²⁵ Wilson was a prolific speaker, and his consistent support of a peaceful means to ending the war in Europe prior to his April 2, 1917, declaration of war led many in traditional peace organizations to believe that he was still a pacifist in spite of his policies. "The day has come when America is privileged to spend her blood and her might," Wilson stated, "for the principles that gave her birth and happiness and the peace that she has treasured."²⁶ Addams, upon hearing Wilson's war declaration, asked Professor Hull, a former student of Wilson's, to prepare a historical record of American shipping leading to American involvement in European wars. "The President was, of course, familiar with that history, but he brushed it aside," Addams stated.²⁷ For Wilson, war had become inevitable.

The argument presented by the president to the WPP, however, was more concerned with the negotiations of peace than the war itself. The idea of giving the United States a "seat at the table" by entering the war, rather than, as a neutral country calling "through a crack in the door," was a phrase used by Wilson which "stuck firmly" in Addams' memory.²⁸ As a neutral party, the United States would have little say in peace negotiations. It needed to be an active participant, according to the president. To have any hope of realizing Wilson's fourteen points, the United States would have to become a belligerent party in the war in Europe. "Was it a result of my bitter disappointment," Addams asks, "that I...asked myself whether any man had the right to rate his moral leadership so high that he could consider the sacrifice of the lives of thousands of his young countrymen a necessity?"²⁹ Addams and other WILPF and WPP members were deeply disappointed, not only in Wilson's betrayal of pacifism, but also of the lax anti-war measures of the League of Nations. Pacifists had believed that Wilson "expressed their own abhorrence" for the war,

²² Jane Addams: *A Centennial Reader*, 284.

²³ Addams, *Peace and Bread*, 51-52.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 51.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 61.

²⁶ Woodrow Wilson, "Wilson's War Message, 1917," in *Major Problems in American Foreign Relations*, 37.

²⁷ Addams, *Peace and Bread*, 63.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 64.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 64-65.

but when the time came for him to act on his words, militancy won out.³⁰ This shift may simply have been a continuation of Wilson placing morality over peace, as was seen in Haiti, rather than a pro-war shift.

In any case, WILPF members were able to work through their disappointment and distrust of the American administration and continue to work towards peace along with the League of Nations. Both Wilson and the WILPF were disgusted by portions of the Versailles treaty, particularly with the reparations required of Germany and the lack of teeth given to the League of Nations. Addams believed that the League of Nations did not receive the expected support “not because it was too idealistic or too pacifistic but because it permitted war in too many instances.”³¹ In many ways, the social reform movements of the progressive era shaped the ideologies and actions of the WILPF in the First World War.³² Wilson’s ideological shift from pacifism to militarism was the result of a desire to bring about a moral good and a lasting peace through whatever means necessary, an option which the WILPF and other pacifist organizations were unwilling and unable to consider. Failing to keep the United States out of World War I, the WILPF continued to work for international peace, influencing both the isolationist movements of WWII, as well as the Vietnam War protests, as Americans continued to pursue peace as a political responsibility. On May 2, 1935 at the end of her speech at the banquet of the WILPF, Addams espoused Wilson’s statesmanship. “Woodrow Wilson said,” she quoted: “No issue is dead in the world so long as men have courage.’ It would be a great glory if the United States could lead in this new type of statesmanship.”³³

³⁰ Ibid., 67-68.

³¹ Ibid., 67-68.

³² Melinda Plastas, *A Band of Noble Women*, 137. “the lingering power of the Progressive ideals”

³³ Addams, “Response Made by Jane Addams,” in *Jane Addams Centennial Reader*, 325.