

IN DEPTH

First International Congress of Women, La Haya, 1915

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As we approach the 100th anniversary of the break out of what would become known as The Great War, World War I, it would be remiss of us not to celebrate what was one of the most important, creative, and admirable initiatives against war and in favour of a different world order: the International Women's Congress held in The Hague from April 28 to May 1, 1915. Organized by a group of suffragettes, and from which would spring the International Committee of Women for Permanent Peace, an organization of women for peace which in 1919 renamed itself the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF).

It must be admitted that the First World War divided the suffragette movement, a fact which supports our claim that defence and working for peace is not something inherent in women but instead it is an option¹. In fact, the *International Woman Suffrage Alliance* as such, did not support the congress of The Hague which took place due to the efforts of a small group who decided to appeal to women of all nations. Hosted by Aletta H. Jacobs, the first female doctor of medicine in the Netherlands, a meeting was held in Amsterdam in February 1915. In attendance were four Belgians, four Germans and five British women, including the German Anita Augsborg, Chrystall MacMillan from Scotland and Kathleen Courtney and Catherine Marshall from England. At that meeting a preliminary program was developed and it was decided² to set up a committee to raise awareness, send invitations and organize the congress². The call became an appeal to human solidarity that extended beyond Europe, becoming a symbolic milestone

worldwide.

The Hague Congress was attended by over 1,300 women representing one hundred and fifty associations from twelve countries; there were suffragettes and trade union members from various countries, members of the British labour party and women from such diverse organizations as Hungarian Agrarian Workers, the League for the Protection of the Interests of Children from Holland or the American Women Lawyer's Association³. The invitation letters sent out required those attending to agree their support of the preliminary proposals which involved two basic principles: 1) that conflicts should be resolved by peaceful means and 2) that women should have the right to vote⁴.

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Reaching The Hague was no mean feat. The majority of participant countries were at war and their governments as well as public opinion did not approve of the meeting between women from both sides of the conflict. The French and Russians delegates had not been given permission from their governments to attend. The British failed to reach the mainland due to the closure of the North Sea and the Belgians had to make the last part of the journey on foot. The first point stressed by the President of the Congress, Jane Addams⁵, during the opening speech was that the determination of women and the great lengths they went to just to reach The Hague Congress was, in itself, an act of heroism, especially for those coming from belligerent nations. Addams also highlighted the strength of spirit shown in defending civilization as a universal heritage, a strength which has sparked them to meet at a time at which the concept of internationalism was being called into question⁶. Aletta Jacobs encouraged attendees to firmly defend

human rights and took a stance against war, grieving the senseless waste of knowledge which should no longer be used to kill, destroy and annihilate the achievements of previous centuries⁷.

A good move by the organizers, which undoubtedly contributed to the success of the Congress, was to narrow the debate itself, and put certain limits in place. As far as content of the debates was concerned, delegates were not allowed to argue about who had the responsibility for the present war, nor about regulating future wars. As regards procedure, except for those presenting resolutions, no one could speak for more than five minutes.

The Congress adopted 20 resolutions, from which we have selected some of the major proposals:

Protest against the war: “We women, in International Congress assembled, 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 laboured through centuries to build up”⁸.

It also opposed the assumption that women can be protected under the conditions of modern warfare, protesting vehemently against the wrongs of which women are the victims in time of war, and especially against the horrible violation of women.

Proposals for peace and mediation: the Congress urged the governments of the world to put an end to bloodshed, and to begin peace negotiations for a permanent peace, and based on the principles of justice; a resolution to ask the neutral countries to immediately convene a conference to offer continuous mediation for reaching an agreement between belligerent nations.

The resolutions clearly set out the conditions for achieving a permanent peace: respect for nationality; that the right of conquest not be recognized; that all people possess autonomy and democratic parliaments; that foreign policy is subject to democratic control; that the world’s governments agree to resolve future disputes through arbitration and conciliation and that international, moral and economic pressure be brought to bear upon governments that resort to arms, instead of referring their case to

arbitration and conciliation. This was to be a real program for building an international policy to guarantee peace and justice.

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The final report of the Congress, including the interventions of the founding mothers, an account of the proceedings and agreed resolutions, was drafted in the three official languages: English, French and German. Also included were the names of all the delegates, grouped by country and the acknowledgments sent by organizations around the world. In keeping with the wish of the Congress, the report was sent to the governments of the European countries which took a stand against the war and were in favour of the reconstruction of Europe, as well as libraries in the United States and Europe, thereby resulting in widespread international media coverage.

Rosika Schwimmer’s proposal to send delegations to the belligerent and neutral countries to implement the Congress resolutions and try to bring an end to the war sparked controversy and lively debate, but was finally approved. While these women did not have the right to vote in their own countries, their conviction and drive enabled them, in practice, to become ambassadors of peace, and they were received and listened to with respect by the leaders of 14 capitals, prime ministers and ministers of foreign affairs; including the King of Norway, the Pope and the President of the US⁹. Jane Addams led one such delegation and was in charge of meeting with the President of the United States, Woodrow Wilson, who took careful note of what was said: the basic philosophy, as well as some of the proposals of the women from The Hague Congress influenced peace proposals that the President made in 1918 and are known as the “Wilson’s Fourteen Points”.

“ The women from The Hague positioned themselves defiantly on the stage of international politics, even becoming active subjects thereof ”

Those behind The Hague Congress and those who answered their call refused to follow the patriotic and bellicose path which had led their countries to a bloody confrontation. They wished to forcefully express their rejection of war and a negotiated solution. The neutral countries failed to convene the much desired peace conference, but the influence of these women, who, in practice, overcame the stigma of having been deprived of their citizenship rights, extended beyond the Great War. Despite being excluded from the public sphere, the women from The Hague positioned themselves defiantly on the stage of international politics, even becoming active subjects thereof. After the war they continued to criticize the bad policies that excluded the vanquished from negotiations and encouraged others to continue working, just as they had done as precursors for human rights and internationalism. The organization which came into being at the Congress, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom will soon celebrate a hundred years of working for freedom and peace through justice.

1. For peace as a free choice for women, please see chapter 5 of Carmen Magallón's work (2012) *Contar en el mundo. Una mirada sobre las Relaciones Internacionales desde las vidas de las mujeres. (Counting in the world. A look at International Relations from the lives of women).*

2. Invitations were sent out to women's organisations, mixed organisations and to individual women throughout the world. Even though delegates could only be female, the congress was also attended by men acting as observers. Each organisation was allowed to send two delegates.

3. Nash, Mary (2004) *Women in the World. History, Challenges and Movements.* Madrid, Alianza.

4. Report de WILPF 1915, p. 33

5. North American social reformer and Nobel Peace Prize winner 1931.

6. Speech by Jane Addams. Report WILPF 1915, p. 18

7. Aletta Jacobs at the International Women's Congress. Report de WILPF 1915, p. 7

8. WILPF Resolutions: 1st Congress, The Hague, Netherlands, 1915.

9. Carmen Magallón (2006) *Mujeres en pie de paz*, Madrid, Siglo XXI.

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Female delegates to the 1915 Women's Peace Conference in The Hague, aboard the MS Noordam.
April 1915. -

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