

IN DEPTH

The Practical Internationalism of Esperanto

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“The Esperantists from around the world who went to France to attend the 10th World Congress of Esperanto, in Paris, and who, once there, witnessed the war invasion and experienced the hardship and misery of that tragic retreat by road and rail; those of us who went to France to sing pacifist songs and were answered by cannons; (...) those of us who, refusing to abandon our ideals, locked ourselves up in cellars lacking light and air, we must inevitably be Esperantists.”

Josep Prat i Bonet¹

At the beginning of the 20th century, the rise of nationalism among European powers on the one hand and the need for the internationalization of scientific research on the other had situated the debate about the auxiliary language among the main issues of the international agenda. It was a debate related to the intellectual dilemmas of the time that went from scientific to spiritual issues, from national or ethnic identity to the so-called Jewish problem and, especially, the possibility of peace in international relations.²

According to a contemporary sociological study, if there was something that characterized a large part of a movement as diverse and plural as the Esperantist movement, it was its pacifist nature. In this respect, it is no exaggeration to say that, had it taken place, the World Congress of Paris in 1914 would have been the largest

gathering of pacifists in all of history.³ But war broke out and Esperantists had to adapt to the new situation and perform various tasks either through the press, through humanitarian actions or in pacifist organizations.

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First of all, they informed of ongoing developments through their periodical publications, often from positions that were close to pacifism. One particular case was *Internacia Bulteno*, a periodical that was first published in November 1914 to inform about the war from the official point of view of the German government. Its objective was to counteract English, French and Russian propaganda about German cruelty as well as to criticize the evil deeds of its adversaries. Meanwhile, given the difficulties that periodicals in Esperanto were experiencing in most of the countries of the Triple Entente and its allies, the debate on the neutrality of the international language was taking place in the pages of *The British Esperantist*. It was also in this magazine where Zamenhof published his famous *Call to Diplomats*, to those destined to rebuild Europe after the Great War.⁴

The humanitarian action carried out by the Universal Esperanto Association (UEA) is also worth mentioning. At the time, its head office was in neutral Switzerland. From Geneva and under the leadership of Hector Hodler, it reported on Esperantist prisoners on both sides with new sections in its periodical like “Our dead” or “Esperantist prisoners of war”.⁵ In this mediating role between citizens from enemy countries, UEA volunteers, in collaboration with the International Red Cross, collected hundreds of letters and other private correspondence through their network of local representatives and sent them to their addressees every day.⁶ They also helped trace people, distribute food, clothes and medicines, and repatriate prisoners of war. It is estimated that the total number of these services could have exceeded 100,000 a year.⁷

Apart from Esperantist associations, we can find many supporters of the international language among the leaders of the main pacifist currents of the time: scientific pacifism, feminist pacifism, religious pacifism and proletarian internationalism. With respect to the intellectual world, Nobel Peace Laureate Alfred Fried, co-publisher together with Bertha von Suttner of the journal *Die Waffen Nieder!* ("Lay Down Your Arms!"); and Henri La Fontaine, co-creator of the Universal Decimal Classification and president of the International Peace Bureau (IPB); the painter Felix Moscheles, godson of the musician Felix Mendelssohn and president of the International Arbitration and Peace Association; Gaston Moch, fervent defender of Alfred Dreyfus in what is known today as the Dreyfus Affair and president of the International Peace Institute in Monaco; or journalist William T. Stead, who was very active in the peace conferences of The Hague and who died in the shipwreck of the Titanic two years before the beginning of the Great War.⁸

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As for pacifist and anti-militarist feminism, we shall mention, by way of example, Sylvie Flammarion, who led the Women's Association for Peace and Disarmament, which merged with other organizations to form the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) in 1915. Another prominent figure was the Quaker Priscilla Peckover, who was also a member of the IPB. And the fact is that, at this time, both the WILPF and the IPB defended the use of Esperanto for their correspondence and international meetings. Regarding the relationship between feminism and Esperanto, Roberto Garvía has noted the (relatively) high number of women interested in the international language.⁹

From a religious perspective, the Esperanto movement of the time reflected the universalist message of the language, with ideas close to ecumenism and interfaith dialogue. These proposals were ahead of their time and were in contrast to official Catholicism. In this regard, a fundamental figure was Émile Peltier, an advocate from the journal *Espero Katolika* of what, years later, theorists like Joan Botam would call macro-ecumenism.¹⁰ German priest Josef Metzger was another person who was active in Catholic ecumenism and thus at odds with the Church hierarchy of the time. He founded various organizations such as the World Peace League of the White Cross, an international Catholic organization created in 1916 that used Esperanto as a working language. Metzger later confronted the Nazi regime and was executed in 1944.

Esperanto was also strongly promoted in the conscientious objection movement, and, as a result, many prominent supporters of the international auxiliary language spent the war years behind bars. One of them was the Slovak doctor and writer Albert Škarvan, a follower and friend of one of the main leaders of Esperantist pacifism: Leo Tolstoy. Due to his opposition to military service, Škarvan was arrested on several occasions, the last time in 1915, and he would remain in prison until the end of the World War. Fenner Brockway, who would later become the first president of War Resisters' International (WRI), was also in jail at the time.¹¹

Finally, the Workers' Esperanto Movement is worth mentioning, together with its most prominent figure, Eugène Adam, known as *Lanti*. Lanti was a radical pacifist who sympathized with the anarchist movement and who had learned the international language while serving in an ambulance unit during the war. And it would also be an anarchist, Ángel Pestaña, a follower of Malatesta's anti-militarist position and one of the organizers of the 1915 International Peace Congress of El Ferrol, who would propose, in the context of the Third International, that every delegate should speak in the language that they felt more comfortable in and that there should be only one translation to the international auxiliary language. This proposal would not succeed.¹²

But the debate about neutrality and pacifism regarding the war went beyond the labor movement. Many Esperantists were conscripted and many died in the conflict.¹³ Among those who fought were the aforementioned Gaston Moch and also one of the main Catalan Esperantists, Frederic Pujulà i Vallès, who, like many others, was in Paris at the

outbreak of the war. While Pujulà was fighting with the army, his wife Germaine Rebours, who had been the secretary of the Fifth World Congress of Esperanto (Barcelona, 1909) wrote articles like “Women in War,” in the periodical *El Poble Català*. In this article, she proposed the creation of a war godmother program (similar to one that already existed in France) where these women would take the place of the mother, sister or friend that could not be with the soldier at the front.¹⁴

In the meantime, the war raged on and in April 1917 the Esperantist movement suffered an irreparable loss with the death of Zamenhof, creator of the international language. Affected by the consequences of a militarist environment that hit close to home (a few months earlier, his younger brother Alexander had committed suicide)¹⁵, he would not live to see how most of his descendents perished in the Treblinka extermination camp. However, not everything was bad news. Indeed, violence stirs consciences and new projects can emerge from the ashes of destruction.

At the end of the war, a series of conferences took place in Bilthoven (Holland) that would be vital to the future of international pacifism.¹⁶ Three institutions that still exist today were created: the International Fellowship of Reconciliation, Service Civil International and the aforementioned WRI. The latter was originally called *Paco* (which means peace in Esperanto) and continued using the international language as one of its working languages for many decades.¹⁷

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At this time, Esperantist action was defined as practical internationalism, focusing on its humanitarian dimension. Esperantists from the Austrian region of Styria, for example, put out a desperate call to their comrades from other countries to temporarily take in children who were suffering deprivation in the tough post-war period. In the end, three hundred Austrian children were taken in by Spanish families and some of them

stayed to live in Spain permanently.¹⁸

It is estimated that a total of over 35 million people died as a result of a war that also dealt a severe blow to universalist ideals such as those of Esperanto. Subsequently, the interwar period would provide new prosperity to Esperanto, both at an official level (the debates in this respect that took place at the League of Nations are worth mentioning)¹⁹, and in the labor movement. But that is another story to be told on another occasion.

1. Josep Prat i Bonet (Berga 1894, Córdoba (Argentina), 1936) was a Catalan who became a pioneer of the Argentinean Esperantist movement. In Argentina he was also a pro-Catalan leader (he was a founding member of the *Orfeo Català* and a very active member of the *Casal Català* of Buenos Aires), as well as a trade unionist. See article by Prat, Patricia (2014). “Vaganta Hirundo. Omaĵoj vortoj honore de Josefo Prat i Bonet, pioniro de Esperanto en Argentino” *Almanako Lorenz* 2014. Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, p. 133.

2. One of the studies that best demonstrates the relevance of the movement for an international auxiliary language in the first decades of the 20th century is Garvía, Roberto (2015). *Esperanto and Its Rivals: The Struggle for an International Language*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

3. This statement is based on three premises. First, already in the 1913 World Congress of Esperanto in Bern, Switzerland, most of the discussions tackled the issues of peace and war. See Künzli, Andreas (2014). “La 9a Universala Kongreso de Esperanto en Berno” *La Gazeto* 169, p. 7-16. See also Van Dik, Ziko (2012). *Historio de UEA*. Vitazna, Eslovàquia: Espero; b) Second, the total number of registered participants was 3,739, three times more than in Bern; c) Third, according to the data gathered in the mentioned contemporary research, at least 30% of the Esperantists of the time had learned the language because they associated it with pacifist values. See Reuben A. Tanquist (1927). *A Study of the Social Psychology of the Diffusion of Esperanto with Special Reference to the English Speaking Peoples*. M.A. thesis, University of Minnesota (cited in Garvía 2015: chapter 12). See also Rašić, Nikola. (1994). *La rondo familia. Sociologiaj esploroj en Esperantio*. Pisa: Edistudio. The reader interested in a comparative analysis with the number of participants in peace conferences of that time can find extensive data in Shenton, Herbert N. (1933). Cosmopolitan conversation: the language problems of

international conferences. New York: Columbia University Press.

4. See Guerrero, Javier (2015). “La premsa en esperanto durant la primera guerra mundial” *Kataluna Esperantisto* 362/363, pp. 11-12.

5. UEA had been founded in 1908 by Edmond Privat – who would become a close friend of Romain Rolland and Gandhi – and Hector Hodler. For a detailed analysis of Hodler’s action at the forefront of UEA see chapter 2 of Lins, Ulrich (2008). *Utila estas aliĝo* Rotterdam: Universala Esperanto-Asocio. Also Künzli has examined Hodler’s role as a theorist of pacifism. See Künzli, Andreas (2013). *Milito kaj paco laŭ Hector Hodler*

6. It should be noted that the Red Cross distributed thousands of copies of various publications in Esperanto. Among them, one containing detailed vocabulary with the translation to the international language of the main medical terms in different languages, intended for those who, in times of war, had to give or receive aid in ambulances and hospitals. See Lavarenne, Christian (2012). *Esperanto: Son idée interne dans ses origines et quelques-unes de ses expressions et manifestations*. Ph.D. thesis in History. University of Paris 13. See also Rodríguez, José María (1996), “The Esperantist Movement’s humanitarian activities in the two World Wars and its relationship with the International Red Cross” *International Review of the Red Cross* 312, pp. 315-322.

7. Jakob, Hans (1958). “La help-agado de UEA 1914-1918”, *Esperanto* 51. Pàg. 55-57. (cited in Lins 2008, p. 66). See also Lins, Ulrich (2000). “The work of the Universal Esperanto Association for a more peaceful world”. *Esperanto Documents* 45 A. Rotterdam: UEA, p. 7. Similarly, the Christian youth association YMCA distributed thousands of books to learn Esperanto among the imprisoned soldiers on both sides. See Privat, Edmond (1927). *Historio de la lingvo esperanto. Parto. 2 La movado 1900-1927*. Ferdinand Hirt & Sohn: Leipzig, p. 95-96. It should be noted that the years spent in prison were a particularly appropriate time for the dissemination of the international language since it allowed for people who did not share a common language to understand each other in a very short time. There were even periodicals in Esperanto published in prison, as in Rennbahn, Germany. See Lavarenne (op. cit.).

8. Other pacifist intellectuals and advocates of the international language include the Nobel Laureate in Medicine Charles Richet, the Nobel Laureate in Chemistry Wilhelm

Ostwald and psychiatrist Auguste Forel. All of them, as well as many of the examples mentioned of scientific pacifism, feminist pacifism, and religious pacifism, are dealt with in more detail in chapter 13 of Garvía (op. cit.). In addition, Hèctor Alòs, in the introduction of Catalan Esperantists: Pacifists in a Globalised World (ICIP Working Papers 2012/03) includes other prominent figures such as Paul Berthelot, Jean Jaurès and Julia Isbrücker. Possibly Gaston Moch was the one who worked the most to strengthen the link between pacifism and Esperantism. See Bourrelrier, Paul-Henri (2008). “Gaston Moch, polytechnicien combattant de la paix”. *Annales des Mines – Réalités industrielles* 2008/3, p. 48-61.

9. In this regard, several contemporaries stressed the “effeminate character of the movement: more emotional than rational, and lacking in virile values such as patriotism or militarism” (Garvía op. cit.: p. 97).

10. “It makes us happy to see that socialists, as well as Jews, Protestants and Masons have their own [Esperantist] periodicals. We will go even further. We will open our periodical to everyone. To be fair, we do not believe that we possess the universal truth, and [therefore] we are prepared to concede that people whose religious ideas diverge from ours can teach us many things.” *Espero Katolika I* (1903), cited in Garvía (op. cit.: p. 190).

11. In his autobiography, Brockway recounts that, while in isolation, he was only allowed to have one book at a time and that, for a period of time, it was an edition of the New Testament in Esperanto. See Brockway, Fenner (1977). *Towards Tomorrow: The Autobiography of Fenner Brockway*. London: Hart-Davis, MacGibbon, p. 54. Not far from the UK, another Esperantist who was supportive of the objection of consciousness was assassinated during the Easter Rising in 1916. His name was Francis Sheehy-Skeffington and he was a friend of James Joyce and a follower of the pacifist and feminist ideas of T. W. Stead. See Levenson, Leah (1983). *With Wooden Sword: a portrait of Francis Sheehy-Skeffington, militant pacifist*. Boston: Northeastern University Press. The relationship between this Irish journalist, mentioned by Leah (op. cit.: p. 13), was confirmed by Christopher Fettes – disciple of the politician and professor Owen Sheehy-Skeffington, Francis’ son – in a personal communication with the author of this article on 31 July 2015 in Lille, France.

12. See del Barrio, Toño (2009) “Anarkiisto proponis Esperanton al la komunista internacion” *Sennaciulo* 05/06, n-ro 1247-1248. On another front, a study about the relationship between anarchism and the international auxiliary language in Spain can be found in chapter 2 of Marin, Dolors (2010). *Anarquistas: un siglo de movimiento libertario en España*. Barcelona: Ariel.

13. An example is Tivadar Soros (father of George Soros), who recounted his experiences in Siberia as a prisoner of war in *Modernaj Robinzonoj*. New York: Mondial 1999 [1923]. Hungarian writer Julio Baghy also wrote his main works precisely during his years of captivity in Siberia.

14. See chapter 6 of Maria Marchese’s thesis “*Visca França, Visca Catalunya!*” *La Catalogna durante la Prima Guerra mondiale: una prospettiva di genere*. University of Naples.

15. Alexander Zamenhof would have decided to end his life because of the atrocities and the cruelty of the war. See Banet-Fornalowa, Zofia (2000). *La familio Zamenhof*. La Chaux-de-Fonds: Kooperativo de Literatura Foiro.

16. One of the most active participants of these conferences was the aforementioned Josef Metzger. See Prasad, Devi (2005). *War Is a Crime Against Humanity: The Story of War Resisters’ International*. London: War Resisters’ International, p. 89.

17. See Prasad, Op. Cit., pp. 89, 95, 143 and 478.

18. See Cortès, Lurdes (2011). “Els nens austríacs acollits a Osona (1920-1923)”. AUSA, XXV (167), p. 209-247.

19. See report by Under Secretary-General of the League of Nations, Inazo Nitobe: *Esperanto and the Language Question at the League of Nations*, (1921).

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