At end of April 1915, a group of women from neutral countries and those at war or under occupation realized a plan to meet at The Hague. For four days these non-party affiliated yet organized women, which included members of the International Women’s Suffrage Association (IWSA), the International Council of Women (ICW), and others – a handful compared to the international women’s movement as a whole – convened formal sessions devoted to ideas on how to bring World War I to an end, how to build a lasting peace, and how to promote women’s enfranchisement. They called themselves the International Committee of Women for Permanent Peace (ICWPP). In May 1919, ICWPP delegations reconvened in Zurich in order to demonstrate reconciliation, to offer assistance for civilians and veterans of the battle-scared states, and to influence the Paris peace proceedings. The feminist women’s peace organization they crafted, thereafter named Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) still exists.

Wilmers’s book, based on her dissertation at the University of Tübingen, is divided into five main sections: a solid introduction; a four-country case-study investigation of the ICWPP, enriched by group photographs; an expose on controversies and compromises concerning pacifism and internationalism developing in the national and international women’s movement; a public opinion analysis of these pioneering congresses as reflected in daily newspapers; and a succinct examination of their post-1919 commemorations. Each section may be read independently.1

The author makes excellent use of a wide range of (auto)biographical materials and archival data: correspondence, organizational work, congress and police reports. Many contents are supported by appropriate secondary literature.2 Contemporary media accounts – feminist and mainstream – are also extensively employed.

Wilmers aspires, and quite rightly, to shift the scholarly feminist focus of the origins of the WILPF away from the dominating Anglo-Saxon perspectives to the much less researched Austrian, Belgian, French, and German contexts and positionings. Indeed, Wilmers is quite successful with her comparative analytical approach of these largely marginalized players, of both “allied and beligerent countries, as occupiers and in fully or partially occupied countries, two offensive, two defensive states, and victors and losers of the war“ (p. 14).3 Wilmers also confronts controversies in the historiographical record. For instance, she ably points out lapses in the printed reminiscences of each congress’ “success,” not least by disclosing across-the-board internal personal and structural conflicts and irreconcilable differences that were consciously evaded.

More broadly, Wilmers aims to explain, inter alia: „how the women’s movement related and reacted to pacifism, nationalism and internationalism“ (p. 9); „how the national and international attitude towards war influenced relationships within the women’s movement“ (p. 10); and to which extent feminists trans-

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2 Unfortunately, Wilmers could not include any equally important studies that have appeared since early 2006 (see p. 348).

3 As Wilmers acknowledges, the comparison remains unbalanced, due to the quality and quantity of sources, particularly for the Belgian but also for the Austrian material.
mitted and dismissed national ideas and rea-
sons for the war vis-à-vis their transnational
exchanges (p. 14). Thus Wilmers investiga-
tes how the international feminist commu-
nity evolved during the war – between em-
bracing international solidarity (ICWPP) or
national solidarity (ICW, IWSA) – and how
pacifism was discussed or displayed by both
attendees and opponents of the congresses.

With her four-country case study, she pro-
vides multiple layers of information and anal-
ysis on individuals, countries, organizations,
and issues. At her best, she uncovers a num-
ber of paradoxes in wartime national and in-
ternational positioning on pacifism: for ex-
ample, the counter-intuitive sympathy by the
League of German Women (BDF) for the abso-
lute pacifist French women’s rejection to par-
ticipate in the Hague Congress; or the play-
ing of both sides of the fence by the Austrian
women’s movement, which tended to sup-
port the BDF position but refused to alienate
fellow Austrians participating at The Hague.

I have three main desiderata regarding
Wilmers’ study. First, her objectives would
have been strengthened had she broadened
her sights to include the mainstream peace
movement. That is, Wilmer’s key concern
seems to be the effect of nations at war on
the women’s movement, and not pacifism
per se or even „women pacifists,” a term
she regularly uses without qualification or re-
gard to these pacifists’ fluctuating position-
nings. Likewise, there is too little notice of
the shared cooperation between male pacifist-
feminists and female feminist-pacifists: i.e.,
Ludwig Quidde’s support of the German
feminist „radicals” to attend The Hague
congress, and likewise Theodore Ruyssens’s
and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Baron Paul
Henri d’Estournelles de Constant’s support of
French women pacifists’ refusal to attend it; or
Helene Stöcker’s long-term association with
Quidde, whom she recommended for the No-
bel Peace Prize, and he her. More gener-
ally, it seems to this reader that Wilmers tends
to reduce the many identities of these orga-
nized women who, apart from belonging to
the women’s movement, may also have been
social workers, wives, Quakers or, as Olga
Misaf, anarchists, etc.

Second, although the choice of countries as
case studies contributes a very valuable – if
still western – European dimension, this is
not the international study (think postcolo-
nial studies or the socialist women’s interna-
tional peace movement) promised in the ti-
tle. Her selection of countries to study also
leads Wilmers de facto to minimize the sig-
ificant role played by the location of the in-
ternational movements’ headquarters (all lo-
cated outside the study) in her discussion
of tensions between nationalism and inter-
nationalism. Moreover, by assigning (one)
citizenship to her protagonists, Wilmers ex-
cludes discussion of bi-(or multinational or-
organized women pacifists, such as the gen-
uinely transatlantic Rosika Schwimmer.

Third, by strictly focusing on the years
1915 to 1919, Wilmer tends to avoid exam-
ining especially pre-war (but also postwar)
pacifist-feminist continuities. Thus in her
scrutiny of conflicts of loyalty and identity,
relevant initiatives and individuals are miss-
ing; Bertha von Suttner, for example, superfi-
cially treated on p.18. Suttner was an Austrian
ICW member, feminist, internationalist, and
Nobel Peace Prize laureate (1905). Tributes to
Suttner by Leopoldine Kulka (1913), or in Jus
Suffragii (1914), or at the 3rd WILPF Congress
in Vienna in 1921 intimately relate to her influ-
ence on the pacifist women’s movement, es-
specially in Austria(-Hungary) and Germany.

Two particular technical weaknesses in-
clude the lack of at least a name index and
an abundance of extensive and pertinent foot-
notes that deserve to be part of the main text.

These desiderata notwithstanding, Wilmers
has delivered a sophisticated, ground-
breaking, and thrilling study on an essential
period in the life of the transatlantic women’s
movement(s). Without unduly heroizing
either of the congress’s participants or their
female opponents, she points out the choices
that these women had and the complexities
of sustaining women’s organized movements
between the demands of nationhood and
the spirit of internationalism in times of war
and its often difficult immediate aftermath
(„peace”).

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