

CHAPTER

2

AT DAGGERS DRAWN: THE INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S MOVEMENT AND THE STRUGGLE TO AVERT WAR, JULY–AUGUST 1914

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The spirit of internationalism ran high in the British women's movement in July 1914. In part this followed from a chance event: the International Woman Suffrage Alliance (IWSA) happened to be meeting in London in mid-July, bringing inspirational international feminists into contact with the British suffrage organisations. At a series of IWSA events, a group of mainly younger British women (Mary Sheepshanks, Maude Royden, Kathleen Courtney, Emily Leaf, Catherine Marshall and Helena Swanwick) made common cause with their visitors, such as the charismatic Hungarian feminist Rosika Schwimmer. Together these international and British feminists persuaded the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) to mount a public campaign against the threat of war in late July. They prepared a passionate and prescient manifesto, predicting the catastrophic impact of a long war of mechanised killing and urging international arbitration. Prodded into further action by Labor women's organisations, the IWSA/NUWSS leadership also decided upon a large demonstration in London's Kingsway Hall, to be held on Tuesday evening 4 August (as it happened, just hours before Britain declared war). This packed meeting was one for the ages: the international women's movement denounced

any resort to war, on behalf of the powerless and largely voteless women of 26 nations, on the very brink of the ruinous conflict. This chapter, based on the private papers of many of the leading participants, considers the significance of the women's movement's peace activism on the eve of the Great War.

In July–August 1914, the world's forces of human solidarity were beaten by the speed of the European crisis. The organisations run by socialist internationalists, Christian internationalists, and liberal internationalists were mostly overwhelmed – and quickly. By comparison, the international organisation of women stood firm to the last. The women's leaders, who happened to be concentrated in London as peace was snuffed out, staged a last bold defiance of war – a protest demonstration on the evening of Tuesday 4 August, just as the British government declared war upon Germany. It was, as one Liberal journalist wrote, “a last rally of peace forces and common sense.”¹

This chapter aims to examine the peace activism of the international women's movement in London on the eve of the war, and to assess its significance. It will argue that the women's protests had far-reaching consequences. First, their defiance of war was deeply inspirational. For many of the women caught up in these events, the experience turned them into inextinguishable firebrands, whose faith in the internationalist project never dimmed. Second, the women did not merely protest. They sketched out a practical alternative to war – a negotiated peace underpinned by a new international order – anticipating the work of the various progressive internationalist pressure groups that were to emerge during the war in many countries. Third, tensions that developed among leading women in London in July–August 1914 prefigured the future split across the international movement – between those who wished merely to alleviate suffering and those who wished to confront war. The radical women who first cooperated together in London in 1914 would place a crusading internationalism at the very heart of the women's movement during the war. Fourth, the evidence of women's peace activism in London in 1914 casts doubt on the resilient myth that intervention in the European war was wildly popular among the people of Britain. A movement that was building against British intervention was simply overwhelmed by the speed of the crisis and the *fait accompli* of the government's sudden declaration of war deep in the evening of Tuesday 4 August.

Internationalism in the Women's Movement on the Eve of War

Internationalism had become an increasingly important ingredient in the ideology of the women's movement over the decade before 1914.² The International Woman Suffrage Alliance (IWSA), an initiative of German and American women in 1902, had organised successful conferences in various European capitals since its foundation in Berlin in 1904. Agitation on matters of peace and war had begun to be a feature of these and other women's conferences. For example, the fifth meeting of the older International Council of Women (ICW), which had been held in Rome in May 1914, had passed a resolution in favour of arbitration treaties between nations, committing them to the peaceful settlement of disputes at the Permanent Court of Arbitration at The Hague. The conference had also recognised the special vulnerability of women in regions of conflict. The assembled women called on the next Hague Peace Conference to consider measures to achieve the "international protection of women" and the resolution pointed bluntly to "the horrible violation of womanhood that attends all wars."³

In part the energetic reaction of the women's movement in Britain to the danger of war in July 1914 arose from a coincidence: the leaders of the IWSA happened to be meeting in London that month under the presidency of the famous American suffragist Carrie Chapman Catt. The IWSA, which boasted affiliations from 26 countries, was without peer in promoting women's suffrage across the world. On its Board were charismatic agitators. These included Annie Furuhjelm, a member of the Finnish parliament, Marguerite de Witt-Schlumberger from France, Anna Lindemann and Marie Stritt from Germany, Dr Aletta Jacobs from the Netherlands, and Anna Wicksell and Signe Bergman from Sweden. The British were strongly represented. Millicent Garrett Fawcett, the famous leader of the moderate "law-abiding" National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) held the post of First Vice President of the IWSA, Chrystal Macmillan, a path-breaking woman graduate in Science from Edinburgh, was First Recording Secretary, and Mary Sheepshanks was editor of the IWSA's influential monthly journal, *Jus Suffragii*. The Headquarters of the IWSA was also in London. Naturally NUWSS and IWSA officers socialised regularly.

A group of mainly younger British women from both organisations gave the internationalist spirit a big push forward in July 1914. Some of these activists made internationalism and anti-militarism integral to their feminist

convictions. The group included women who were to play leading roles in the women's movement and the peace movement far into the future, such as Mary Sheepshanks, Maude Royden, Kathleen Courtney, Catherine Marshall, and Helena Swanwick. Notably, some of these women had been educated in Germany or had German family connections, which led them to question British nationalist simplicities.⁴ In 1914 they held pivotal positions in the women's organisations. Kathleen Courtney was Honorary Secretary of the NUWSS.⁵ Maude Royden held the post of editor of the NUWSS journal *Common Cause*.⁶ Catherine Marshall was Parliamentary Secretary of the NUWSS.⁷ Helena Swanwick, an older mentor to this group, had been editor of *Common Cause* before Royden.⁸ All were firm friends.

The IWSA "Board of Officers" that met in London on 9 July 1914 was chiefly concerned with planning for its next conference scheduled for Berlin in 1915.⁹ But the presence in London of so many suffragist celebrities was soon exploited for its propaganda value thanks to the imaginative efforts of Catherine Marshall of the NUWSS. She organised a series of "meet-and-greet" events to put pressure upon the Asquith Government, which had so spectacularly failed since 1906 to advance the cause of a more democratic suffrage. The major event was a reception on 14 July at the House of Commons, arranged by the Labour MP Arthur Henderson. Chapman Catt and Annie Furuhjelm spoke. "This was the first time in history that a Woman Member of Parliament has ever addressed members of the House of Commons in the British Parliament," noted *Jus Suffragii*.¹⁰ It was a non-party event. Francis Acland conveyed greetings from Sir Edward Grey as a leading Liberal supporter, Robert Cecil spoke for the Conservative Party, and Ramsay MacDonald for the Labour Party. Lord Courtney, a Radical peer, also secured seats in the gallery of the House of Lords for some of the international leaders.¹¹

Among the foreign activists, Rosika Schwimmer, a Hungarian suffragist and peace worker, was especially effective. She had just been appointed Press Secretary of the IWSA.¹² With an eye for publicity, Schwimmer secured a breakfast with Lloyd George at 11 Downing Street on Thursday 9 July to discuss pensions, but took the opportunity to warn him of the danger of war.¹³ During her stay in London she also contacted various British peace leaders. She met Norman Angell, the famous publicist promoting the economic futility of war, and members of the Interparliamentary Union. In late July she gained headlines when she attacked London's prudish bill-posting firms when they objected to displaying a poster pointing out that child mortality was lowest in

nations that had women's suffrage – because the poster featured a naked child beside its mother.¹⁴

The IWSA's Manifesto for Peace, 31 July 1914

The idea of linking the women's movement with British peace activists in response to the Balkan crisis arose in discussions between Schwimmer and three of her local companions, Sheepshanks, Marshall and Emily Leaf, press secretary of the NUWSS. During her visit to London, Schwimmer had been staying with Sheepshanks and Marshall, in shared lodgings at 1 Barton Street just behind Westminster Abbey. The four women decided it was vital that the IWSA should sponsor some high-profile action against the danger of war, even though Catt, the IWSA President, had just departed for America on Tuesday 28 July.¹⁵

Prodded into action by these younger activists, and stirred too by news of the Austro-Hungarian declaration of war against Serbia, the British branch of the IWSA agreed to meet in London on Wednesday 29 July. At this meeting, Fawcett and Macmillan, fulfilling their roles as key office-holders in both the IWSA and the NUWSS, deliberated with Emily Hobhouse, Kathleen Courtney, Swanwick, Marshall and Sheepshanks. The women agreed to plans initially proposed by Schwimmer that the IWSA should put pressure on all the governments caught up in the crisis, in the first instance, by means of a manifesto.¹⁶

This was soon drafted. It implored the various European governments to use the existing machinery of arbitration – created by the Second Hague Peace Congress in 1907 – to achieve a peaceful resolution of the Balkan crisis. Fawcett and Macmillan signed. As these two women spoke for the international body, the appeal was directed to all the European governments. The tone was emphatic and moving. “We, the women of the world,” it began. It did not neglect the fundamental object of the IWSA: women's suffrage. It railed against the stark injustice facing all women: while almost everywhere voteless and excluded from political power, women faced the imminent perils of war. It called upon the governments “to avert the threatened unparalleled disaster.” War, it prophesied, “will leave mankind the poorer, will set back civilisation, and will be a powerful check to the gradual amelioration in the condition of the masses of the people.” It concluded:

We women of twenty-six countries, having banded ourselves together in the International Women's Suffrage Alliance with the object of obtaining the political means of sharing with men the power which shapes the fate of nations, appeal to you to leave untried no method of conciliation or arbitration for arranging international differences which may help to avert deluging half the civilised world in blood.¹⁷

The manifesto was momentous. Those speaking for the women of the world, half of humanity, were shouting their protest against war on the eve of the hideous event.

But how was this manifesto to be distributed? The actual delivery of copies of the manifesto on that day gave an early indication of how divisive this kind of peace activism could prove to be. The manifesto was ready for delivery to all the key foreign embassies in London, and to the Foreign Office itself, on Friday 31 July. Fawcett and Macmillan signed the documents on behalf of their absent President, Carrie Chapman Catt. To the disappointment of Macmillan and Schwimmer, it was the more cautious Fawcett, as the most senior IWSA office-bearer, who took command of proceedings. Overriding the wishes of her companions, Fawcett insisted that they would not seek interviews with ambassadors and ministers. Fawcett decreed that she would simply hand over the documents. A cab was hailed. The deputation then delivered copies of the manifesto to the various footmen at the great buildings the cab visited.¹⁸ This self-effacement on the part of Fawcett contrasted altogether with her companions' passion for publicity.

The Planning of a Women's Peace Demonstration

But the manifesto was only the beginning. The activists continued to press the case for peace, and urged that the women's movement should link up with the wider movement seeking British neutrality. Women were already active in the planning of labour protests, an idea endorsed on Friday 31 July by the British National Committee in harmony with the Second International's plans for protests across Europe. A main demonstration was scheduled for Trafalgar Square for the afternoon of Sunday 2 August. Radicals were cooperating too. Norman Angell's Civil Union was providing a procession.¹⁹ Intriguingly, some of the younger activists in the NUWSS felt relief that Grey, the Foreign Secretary, whom they respected as a supporter of women's suffrage, was in

command of Britain's response to the crisis. The NUWSS journal *Common Cause* of Friday 31 July lavished praise upon Grey for "doing all that in him lies to preserve an honourable peace as between the Great Powers."²⁰

But clearly not all women activists were content to leave it to Grey. On Friday 31 July a movement began, pressing for the NUWSS and IWSA to plan a special additional women's protest meeting in favour of peace and neutrality. The very first suggestions reached the NUWSS on that day from "working women," explained *Common Cause*. Marshall was approached by a number of the labour women's organisations, including the Women's Cooperative Guild, the National Federation of Women Workers, and the Women's Labour League. These organisations simply stressed "the vast importance at this juncture of giving women a platform." In this "present ghastly crisis," they argued, it was "in accordance with the fundamental principle of Suffragism – that women have an equal right with men to speak and to be heard."²¹

During the Bank Holiday weekend of 1–2 August, cables from the Continent arrived at the office of the IWSA, from several of the affiliated suffragist organisations in Germany, Denmark, France and Italy. These urged the IWSA to make some more spectacular demonstration for peace.²² From within the NUWSS, Marshall and Sheepshanks implored the suffragist leaders to respond to these calls.²³

The NUWSS executive met in Great Smith Street on Monday 3 August, the day of Grey's famous speech to the House of Commons, to consider the requests for action. Fawcett, again piloting both the IWSA and the NUWSS, decided to support the proposal for a rally. Acting with great haste, the NUWSS officials booked the new Kingsway Hall in Holborn for the evening of the very next day, Tuesday 4 August.²⁴ The purpose, explained Royden in *Common Cause*, was to provide "a public platform in London upon which women of various societies could voice the women's claim to be heard on questions of peace and war." The NUWSS leaders had reacted to "an overwhelming majority of Suffragist opinion." It would be "cowardly and impossible," she wrote, for the women's movement to "stand out" at this moment of crisis.²⁵

In these discussions at the NUWSS offices, Schwimmer in particular pressed for the widest possible representation at the rally. She urged that the NUWSS should invite both the "militant wing" of the women's movement, the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), and some prominent anti-suffragists. This was rejected after some debate. However, Schwimmer did succeed in pressing for invitations to be sent to two famous British female peace activists, Olive

Schreiner and Emily Hobhouse. Both were notorious in some circles, owing to their denunciation of the Boer War. Clearly the organisers accepted the thrust of Schwimmer’s argument. The rally was to be for all women interested in peace. In their advertisements the organisers promoted a “wonderfully representative” list of speakers. As the *Common Cause* reported afterwards, it was to be “a considerable feat of organisation to fill the Kingsway Hall.” There were “only two days in which to do this, and one of these was Bank Holiday. It was triumphantly done.”²⁶

But was the rally directly designed to pressure the Asquith Government to maintain Britain’s neutrality? This was not specifically mentioned in the resolutions prepared for the rally. But it was obviously the motivation of some leading spirits calling the NUWSS executive together. Some of these women were in touch with those who had participated in Labour’s Trafalgar Square rally of Sunday 2 August, such as Marion Phillips, Margaret Bondfield, Charlotte Despard, and Mary Macarthur.²⁷ They clearly favoured British neutrality. There were hints of this in the NUWSS minutes. These explained that the rally was proposed “with the object of strengthening the hands of those who were working to limit the area of the European War, and to provide a platform for which the Women’s Organisations could express their point of view.” But it was appreciated that too “political” a rally could be divisive. Sensitive to the perception that criticism of Britain’s own government might be seen as disloyalty in the face of war, the NUWSS executive decided that “nothing in the resolution involved support of any particular policy in relation to the war.” The NUWSS decided it would provide only two speakers, Fawcett and Swanwick, and that other speakers should come from the ranks of the IWSA and the labour movement. But the executive specified that it must be made clear that each speaker at the rally “spoke only for herself or the organisation which she represented” – and not necessarily for the NUWSS.²⁸ Similarly, the executive decided that the meeting should be “advertised under the non-committal heading, ‘What War Means.’”²⁹

The “What War Means” Demonstration, Kingsway Hall, Tuesday 4 August

On Tuesday evening 4 August, the British politicians choosing war rushed to their final decision. A rump of the British Cabinet, just five of the nineteen ministers, meeting in the Cabinet Room at Number 10 Downing Street, made the decision for a declaration of war soon after 10.00 pm. Prime Minister

Asquith summoned a Privy Council, of just three men, to meet at Buckingham Palace, with King George V, just before 11.00 pm, to endorse documents indicative of a state of war. As peace was abandoned, only a few blocks away, in Holborn, the British and international women's movement staged the very last mass protest meeting in London urging peace.³⁰

The meeting began at the Kingsway Hall at 8.00 pm. This large modern hall, built in 1912, was then a relatively new venue. It could accommodate over 2,000 people. On the night it was "crowded to overflowing."³¹ This was a startling achievement. With scarcely two days to plan the rally, the various bodies involved "had no time to reach their supporters, and they had therefore to rely on newspaper advertisements and handbills to make the meeting known."³² Nonetheless, news of the rally had evoked a solid response.

As supporters poured into the Kingsway Hall, the spirit of internationalism projected by the women's movement and its labour allies was immediately on display. The women standing on the platform advertised it, through the fortuitous presence of several members of the Board of the IWSA who were still in London. Four international speakers stood ready to participate, representing Hungarian, German, Finnish, and Swiss women. With them stood women from the labour movement. Mary Macarthur, a famous campaigner for labouring women (and the wife of Will Anderson, a Labour MP), represented the National Federation of Women Workers, Marion Phillips represented the Women's Labour League, and Eleanor Barton represented the Women's Cooperative Guild. Charlotte Despard, the flamboyant veteran campaigner for so many radical causes, represented the Women's Freedom League. Another controversial suffragist on the platform was Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence. She and her husband Frederick had been active with the WSPU before being prosecuted by the government for conspiracy and imprisoned in 1912. Showing that the organisers had cast their net wide, Louise Creighton was also on the platform. The widow of the late Bishop of London, Creighton was a prominent moderate who had originally opposed women's suffrage but was more recently linked to the National Union of Women Workers. Elizabeth Cadbury, a prominent Quaker, and head of the Peace Committee of the same union, stood with her. Her husband Henry was the Managing Director of the Radical newspaper *Daily News*, showing the still strong connections between the women's movement and the Radical wing of the Liberal Party. The celebrated anti-war writer Olive Schreiner, who had only just returned from seeing Aletta Jacobs in Holland, took her place on the platform.³³

When the meeting opened, Millicent Garrett Fawcett stepped forward to preside. She pointed immediately to an awful irony. “Voteless women were not responsible for the complicated series of political events which had led up to the war,” she complained. But as her address unfolded, she adopted a fatalistic tone. She appeared to accept that war had become irresistible. She had hoped “four days ago,” she explained, that this gathering “might take the form of a demonstration in favour of European peace.” This hope, she implied, had passed away:

Whilst the child was alive I fasted and wept! But now the time for fasting and weeping had gone by. Europe was already at war, which Britain was to be involved in now. We must therefore concentrate every effort in meeting the calamity, and try to alleviate the sufferings which must ensue.³⁴

In this situation, she advised, women must bind themselves together “for the purpose of rendering the greatest possible aid to our country at this momentous epoch.” She expressed her sadness that, in the face of war, women would have “to put aside the highest and most precious of national and international aspirations and hopes.” This meek tone did not entirely swamp her address. There was “one ray of light,” she told the audience: ten days before only a few people were questioning war, but “millions now were asking, ‘Why should this insensate devilry of war be allowed to go on?’” The phrase “insensate devilry” prompted a burst of applause.³⁵

Fawcett’s speech, by turns pessimistic and defiant, foreshadowed the fractures that would soon split her NUWSS. Indeed, on the eve of the rally Fawcett had privately confessed to Swanwick that she had “very grave doubts” as to the wisdom of the gathering. Fawcett, a long-standing Liberal, was uncomfortably aware that in protesting for peace on the eve of a war she was risking the goodwill of the Liberal government.³⁶

Creighton then stepped forward to present the first resolution.³⁷ This resolution borrowed many phrases from the IWSA manifesto of Friday. But there were some significant additions. The resolution opened by stressing how broad-based was the rally at the Kingsway Hall. The resolution was also updated, with a reference to the women’s response to the outbreak of actual fighting: “They deplore the abandonment of peaceful negotiations, the failure to settle the present international differences by conciliation or arbitration, and

the outbreak of war in Europe as an unparalleled disaster.” Then the resolution repeated the essential complaint of the original manifesto: that women were facing war as a result of “decisions which women have no direct power to shape.” The denunciation of industrialised killing was repeated from the manifesto. If war erupted, women would see not only “the horrors of slaughter,” but also “their countries impoverished, their homes broken up, their children and their friends dying of starvation and disease.” The warning was hammered home that war would “set back civilization” by paralysing social progress. A new direct call to the governments was added at the end of the resolution:

The women here assembled call upon the Governments of their several countries to support every effort made to restore peace, and urge all Governments not yet involved to work unceasingly towards a settlement, not by force, but by reason, that by their united efforts the war may be speedily brought to an end.³⁸

Presenting this resolution, Creighton reminded the audience of the spirit that had animated the ICW gathering in Rome just a few weeks before – common hopes, interests and aspirations, eclipsing narrow national divisions. At this moment, women should resist the war fever. She “appealed for the banishment of all bitterness of national feeling” and urged “united prayer” for peace.

The next speaker, Eleanor Barton, struck a much more rebellious tone. “The working people must refuse to have war,” she insisted. “No enmity exists between the work-people of England and the work-people of Germany.” To illustrate this, she related a poignant incident she had witnessed as her train set out from Sheffield to London on the previous day. A tearful family waved off an old sailor. Then two young Germans got in to the same carriage. Barton described the scene:

As the train passed out of the station one of the Germans, a young married man, stood up and put out his hand to the old man, and said, “By God, we are enemies, give me your hand – it is not my fault.” They shook hands, and the old salt replied, “It is hell, my lad. Why could not it have been settled by arbitration? I have traveled all over the world, have given thirty years service to the Navy in China and Japan, and have never made an enemy of a foreigner, but plenty of friends.”³⁹

Barton warmed to her subject. “Wars are made by diplomats, and financiers, and the Jingo press; but the people must resist – if necessary they must down tools. War *must not be*.” According to various reports, Barton’s speech “was given the great reception of the evening.” Her themes “were those which the audience shared and had come to hear.”⁴⁰

Two speakers then brought the subject back to female suffrage. Swanwick acknowledged that the NUWSS “stood for the vote only.” But she immediately rattled that cage. The NUWSS believed that in all things “force was no remedy.” Thus, “the great mass of women were on the side of peace.” Women could bring to international life, she argued, “that human note so fatally lacking” when men pursued diplomacy as if it were merely “a game of chess.” Women must not simply accept war: they had “a duty to think out what the war was about, how it ought to end, and what constructive policy to prepare to prevent its repetition.”⁴¹ In reacting to this deadly crisis, women must “so establish their claim to enfranchisement that their husbands, lovers, brothers, sons would no longer seek to deny it.”

Similarly, Mabel St Clair Stobart, representing the Women Writers’ Suffrage League, told the packed hall that never before had she realised “so deeply” the need for the female suffrage. This crisis showed that the voice of women was indispensable. A shameful double standard of morality prevailed in international affairs, she argued. Under this perverse morality, individuals condemned murder, but nations extolled it when it was carried out in vast numbers. Only when women were given a share of political power could they dismantle this “double standard of morals, international and personal.”⁴²

The international speakers followed. With their foreign names and accents, they gave the rally emotional punch. First Madame Gellrich of Germany stepped forward and she “received a great welcome from that crowded audience.” She spoke of her admiration for Britain, and of her hopes that women’s enfranchisement in both Britain and Germany would build peace. She finished on a defiant note: “And now there came this fatal war. The idea of war was in the air. Men – always so easily influenced – said, ‘There must be war.’ Let women tell them there must be no war.” Schwimmer, speaking for Hungary, gave a vivid picture of the economic dislocation and fear that war was already bringing to her homeland, including the fact that many women had “the horror of dishonour in their minds.” Trade was disrupted and shortages were beginning. The Hungarian Parliament had already closed, because the Speaker and many members “had gone into the firing-line” – a remark that

prompted ironic cheers from those already suspicious that Britain's politicians were not so keen on the warrior's life. "Women must use every effort in their power to stop this war," Schwimmer pleaded. Then, women could look forward to "a human world instead of a man-made world, in which there would be no War Ministers but Peace Ministers. (Applause)."

Next Aino Malmberg, representing Finland, gave proceedings a political twist. First, she offered a dire premonition of the impact of war: "The old civilization will be destroyed," she predicted, and she invited "women and workers" to build "a cleaner world." Then, reminding the audience of the struggle for freedom in her Finnish homeland, Malmberg offered pointed remarks directly critical of Britain's Liberal government and its cultivation of connections with her nation's oppressor, Russia – remarks bound to resonate with Radical Liberals long suspicious of Grey's subservience to St. Petersburg:

The Jingo Press, which was forcing war upon us, for honour's sake, was ashamed to mention Russia as Britain's friend and ally. Britain was really being asked to fight to keep the Czar upon his throne and enable him to beat down the free people of her [Malmberg's] native land.⁴³

Finally, Lucy Thoumaian, speaking for the women of Switzerland, mounted a fierce attack upon militarism. She challenged the social-Darwinist and pseudo-religious maxims underpinning combat. War was not "a dispensation from the Almighty," nor was it "something like measles, that we cannot avoid, and so must accept with patience," she argued. "It is not from God this war. It is a man made war, and it is for woman to unmake it." She called upon women to be inspired by the classic tale of the Sabine women, to "exhaust every effort to attempt to save their menfolk from the horrors of war," and even to "go on strike for peace."⁴⁴ With this echoing through the hall, the first resolution was passed to great applause.

Relief of Distress or Defiance of War?

It remained for the meeting to consider a second practical resolution. This urged women to focus their efforts upon the relief of distress arising from any war.⁴⁵ But the British women labour activists who stepped forward on the platform to present this resolution fed the defiant mood. First, Mary

Macarthur railed against the fact that “the people had not been consulted at all in the crisis.” Real courage was required, she argued, to advocate peace. She heaped scorn on those pleading that war was needed to redeem Britain’s honour. Men who argued this way seemed ready to tolerate much dishonour in social conditions. “Was it to the honour of England that millions of women should be toiling for starvation wages and little children should be suffering?” Women must focus upon the daily grinding war at home, as she put it, “the war against poverty.” Next, Elizabeth Cadbury kept to a more moderate script, simply commending voluntary work. But the speech of Marion Phillips, the Australian-born labour activist, resumed the rabble-rousing. Phillips “ended on a note of hope that from the common privation and suffering would arise a real sisterhood, working for common needs, which no government and no wars could ever break again.” The second resolution was then put to the assembly and carried by acclamation.

As the meeting ended, Fawcett quickly formed a deputation. It took a copy of the resolutions around to No. 10 Downing Street, soon after 10.00 pm. An envelope containing the resolutions was posted through the prime minister’s door. This must have landed in the hall just as the clique of ministers gathered around the cabinet-room table decided that Asquith should summon the Privy Council to declare war.

The leaders of the women’s movement then dispersed. They encountered some high spirits in the streets of London. As Schwimmer and Macmillan walked through dense crowds along Whitehall, they saw cars, filled with men and women shouting. Possibly these were stragglers from the main nationalist demonstration in front of Buckingham Palace. For safety’s sake, Macmillan insisted that she would escort her Hungarian colleague all the way to her friends’ home. The two reached Barton Street at 2 a.m. and found Marshall still up. Schwimmer recorded that Marshall, whose family politics were strongly Liberal, was utterly baffled. That Grey, a suffragist, should instigate war was inexplicable to her. “I don’t understand how Sir Edward Grey could be a party to England’s alliance with Russia! There must be a mistake somewhere. How could he, of all our statesmen, enter the war?”⁴⁶

Of course, not all the leading women suffragists saw Britain’s descent into war this way. Fawcett in particular had felt uneasy at the radicalism on display at the Kingsway Hall. Indeed, on Thursday 6 August, at the first meeting of the NUWSS executive after the meeting, Fawcett observed that “she herself did not agree with the views put forward by two of the speakers.”⁴⁷ Moreover,

she was intensely aware that some powerful people were aghast at what had happened.

Robert Cecil, the prominent Conservative frontbencher and, as it happened, a woman suffrage supporter, had sent a letter of protest immediately to Fawcett. The women had been “so unreasonable” in staging such a “peace” meeting, he complained, that his faith in the fitness of women to exercise the suffrage had been badly shaken. He comforted himself, he told Fawcett, with the hope “that in this matter the National Union do not represent the opinions of their fellow country women.”⁴⁸

Similarly, the press was divided. Liberal and Labour newspapers gave the rally friendly coverage.⁴⁹ But *The Times*, in common with other Conservative newspapers, simply looked away. While *The Times* reported on the nationalist demonstrations in front of Buckingham Palace on the last night of peace in some detail, it completely ignored the events at the Kingsway Hall.⁵⁰ Not one word.

The Significance of the Kingsway Hall Meeting

What was the significance of this burst of internationalist enthusiasm in the international women’s movement on the eve of war, and in particular of the women’s last rally for peace? Many books on the war simply ignore it, or speak dismissively of a rally that failed. It is implied that it was a mere exercise in sentimentalism, quite pointless in the face of the reality of German aggression. Such a rapid dismissal of the women’s effort entirely underestimates its significance. One senses in the writings of those who so dismiss it a male eagerness to dispose of the women as irrelevant to the big events.

Of course, it is easy to point to the obvious and note that the demonstration was too late to deflect Britain from the war. Even the women involved felt overwhelmed by a sense of powerlessness as they left the Kingsway Hall. Margaret Bondfield, for example, an ILP activist who had spoken at the Trafalgar Square rally, noted in her diary that straight after leaving the women’s meeting she saw the “Guards on [their] way to Dover.”⁵¹ But to stress the “failure” of the protest is misguided.

What was its true significance? First, this was simply fabulous defiance. The meeting was one for the ages. Leading women had done something quite unprecedented. Affiliated to the IWSA in 1914 were some 12 million women.⁵² For these, the leaders of the movement had spoken up – boldly claiming to

speak for the whole sisterhood. In a world where women's lives were blighted by systematic denial of status and rights, leading women had presumed to address powerful men – and not on an issue that was by common consent a “women's issue.” They had spoken up to denounce war – a war they correctly apprehended would be protracted and ghastly. For the key women involved – Schwimmer, Marshall, Macmillan, Royden, and Swanwick – the spirit born of this defiance was implacable. Evelyn Sharp, the new editor of the Pethick-Lawrences' journal, *Votes for Women*, saw that the spirit behind the rally was “even more wonderful than the occasion that had called it forth; much more significant.” She wrote:

Never before had such disaster threatened the world; never before had the conscious, organised articulate women of all classes and parties and of several nations met to make, on behalf of womanhood and childhood and the home, a protest against the time-honoured methods of brutal force by which men – regardless of half the race – have seen fit to settle their national disputes. It was a protest, passionate, sane, and practical, of the civilised against the barbaric; of the spiritual against the material and of the mother who takes thought for the future happiness of her children against the destructiveness of a brief, insensate rage.⁵³

Second, the practical proposals the women had put forward were eminently sensible and prescient. What exactly? They had pressed the case for stronger international law, stronger international institutions, and a powerful presumption in favour of international arbitration over war to resolve disputes. Unfortunately, the decision-makers of Europe had left international arbitration at the Permanent Court at The Hague as a mere option for statesmen to consider. In their manifesto and resolutions of 1914, the women's leaders had acknowledged that war was actually beginning on 4 August. But they had urged the still neutral nations to stand firm. In the face of war itself, they pleaded for a negotiated settlement as soon as possible, rather than an insistence upon a military victory. They predicted the hideous impact of a long war on European civilisation.

Was the women's insistence upon arbitration realistic in 1914? During the crisis, the Serbs had offered to take the dispute to The Hague. The Russians had suggested it also, only to flag it away once bilateral negotiations between

Vienna and St. Petersburg got under way. No European power had pursued the option of international arbitration seriously. Yet, on the very evening of the Kingsway Hall rally, President Wilson of the United States had indeed offered to sponsor mediation in an official cable to the monarchs of Germany, Austria, Russia, Britain, and to the President of France, pointing to his “duty” under the Hague Convention and informing them all that he would “welcome an opportunity to act in the interests of European peace.”⁵⁴ All the powers quickly turned the offer aside. All wanted a military resolution. But even on 4 August, it can be argued, the war was entirely avoidable, had there been the political will to explore the alternative.

In the aftermath of 4 August, the women sought to build the public opinion that would create such a political will. They pointed the way to stronger international machinery to contain war in the future – proposals to be taken up, of course, by President Wilson and various propagandists for a “League of Nations.” The women, in promoting international arbitration, were lighting the path for the great progressive internationalist movement that sprang up during the war, directed by such leagues as the Union of Democratic Control and the League of Nations Society in Britain, the *Bund Neues Vaterland* in Germany, the Central Organisation for a Durable Peace based in Holland, and the League to Enforce Peace in the United States.⁵⁵

Third, the tensions that developed inside the women’s movement over peace agitation in July–August 1914 had important consequences. They foreshadowed the split that was coming in the British movement. Between February and April 1915, the conservative position – that women should focus simply on alleviating distress – so infuriated the younger women that half the executive of the NUWSS resigned. The indignant dissenters included Royden, Marshall, Courtney and Swanwick.⁵⁶ For them, active campaigning for a negotiated peace was by far the nobler endeavour for all women. The split catapulted the more dynamic agitators into leading roles in such organisations as the Union of Democratic Control (Swanwick) and the No-Conscription Fellowship (Marshall). So too, from the ranks of the London agitators of 1914 came the women keen to promote still bolder initiatives: the International Congress of Women held at The Hague in April 1915, which set up the International Women’s Committee for Permanent Peace (Schwimmer, Pethick-Lawrence, Macmillan); the Women’s International League from October 1915 (Swanwick, Kathleen Courtney, Royden, Bondfield); and the experimental Neutral Conference for Continuous Mediation that met at Stockholm in 1916

(Schwimmer). It was Schwimmer and her British friends, assisted especially by Dutch and American women, who kick-started efforts to give women a central role in the wider campaign for a negotiated peace during the war.⁵⁷

Fourth, the evidence of the Kingsway Hall meeting undermines the war-makers' self-serving fable that the mood of the British in August 1914 was perfectly exemplified by the well-to-do Londoners who gathered at Buckingham Palace to cheer the King on the last three nights of peace.⁵⁸ The spirit on display at the women's meeting brings into question the legend manufactured in 1914 that the people of Britain had enthusiastically embraced the prospect of war.⁵⁹ The truth is that the crisis came so quickly upon the people of Britain that they scarcely had time to take stock of the situation before the declaration of war was tossed into their laps as a *fait accompli*. Was it only a contemptible rump of opinion that preached neutrality during the crisis? The large Trafalgar Square rally on Sunday 2 August, the 17 speeches delivered in the House of Commons against intervention on Monday 3 August, and the steadfast opposition of the bulk of the Liberal and Labour press, even on the morning of 4 August, indicate a potential deep well of opposition to war.⁶⁰

On the morning of the women's meeting, Elizabeth Cadbury wandered through the major streets of London and saw no enthusiasm, only crowds of people "quietly and anxiously" waiting for news.⁶¹ Similarly, Liberal journalists who remembered the "mafficking" at the time of the Boer War were struck by the absence of any such nationalist hysteria in August 1914.⁶² Writing in the *Common Cause* after the women's meeting, Royden argued that the audience at the rally had made its preferences clear. She recalled that there were loud interjections of "Down tools!" at several points, as speakers touched on what women could do to prevent wars. "To many," she concluded, "the tone of this meeting, gathered together in so haphazard a way, was a revelation of the force of anti-war feeling amongst women of the working class." She explained that, so swiftly was the rally organised that "no one could anticipate with certainty what the spirit and tone of the meeting would be."

But all doubt was soon dispelled. The meeting did not rely on the speakers to tell it what to think. Those hundreds of women had clearly come, with few exceptions, with the object only to protest with all the strength that was in them against war, and, above all, against the participation of Britain in a European war. The speakers who spoke of resignation and acceptance of the burden were coldly received.

All the enthusiasm and response of the meeting was for those who denounced the war, and called on the women of Europe, even at the eleventh hour, to fling themselves between the combatants.⁶³

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Endnotes

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- ⁵ Francesca Wilson, “Kathleen Courtney,” Courtney Papers, KDC/K12/13 (Women’s Library, LSE).
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- ⁸ Johanna Alberti, *Beyond Suffrage: Feminists in War and Peace, 1914–1928* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989), 11–15.
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- ¹² Carrie Chapman Catt to Rosika Schwimmer, 25 July 1914, Schwimmer Papers, Box A38 (New York Public Library).

- ¹³ Schwimmer, Diary fragment, 9 July 1914, Schwimmer Papers, Box A38.
- ¹⁴ M. Talmadge to Schwimmer, 16 July 1914; printed invitation to attend an “At Home” at the home of Sir John and Lady Barlow to meet Norman Angell, 16 July 1914; circular from the Organising Committee of the Interparliamentary Union, 13 July 1914; cutting from *Daily Chronicle*, 29 July 1914; all in Schwimmer Papers, Box A38.
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- ¹⁶ Alberti, *Beyond Suffrage*, 8–11, 18–20, and Wiltsher, *Most Dangerous Women*, 11–12.
- ¹⁷ “International Manifesto of Women,” *Jus Suffragii*, Vol. 8, No. 13, 1 September 1914.
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- ²⁰ “Notes and Comments – War,” *Common Cause*, 31 July 1914.
- ²¹ “What War Means – Great Women’s Meeting at Kingsway Hall,” *Common Cause*, 7 August 1914.
- ²² Wiltsher notes enquiries from Frida Perlen in Germany, Elna Munch in Denmark, Marguerite de Witt-Schlumberger in France, and Anita Dobelli-Zampetti in Italy, urging the IWSA to act. See Wiltsher, *Most Dangerous Women*, 20–21.
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- ²⁷ On Labour’s Trafalgar Square rally, see “Anti-War Demonstration in London,” *Manchester Guardian*, 3 August 1914, “The Workers’ War on War,” *Daily Herald*, 3 August, 1914, “Labour’s War on War,” *Labour Leader*, 6 August 1914.
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- ³⁵ Fawcett’s speech, and others, are summarised in “What War Means,” *Common Cause*, 7 August 1914; “Protest Against War – International Meeting of Women in London, August 4,” reprinted from *Votes for Women*, in *Jus Suffragii*, Vol. 8, No. 13, 1 September, 1914; “Women’s Protest Against War,” *Daily News*, 5 August 1914; and “Women Denounce War,” *Daily Herald*, 5 August 1914.

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- ³⁷ The original resolutions are in a document entitled “International Crisis – Great Women’s Meeting,” 4 August 1914, Marshall Papers, D MAR 3/37.
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- ⁴⁴ The speeches of Gellrich, Schwimmer, Malmberg and Thoumaian are summarised in “Protest Against War,” in *Jus Suffragii*, Vol. 8, No. 13, 1 September 1914, and in the *Daily News*, 5 August 1914.
- ⁴⁵ The full resolution is reproduced in *Common Cause*, 7. August 1914.
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- ⁵³ Reprinted from *Votes for Women* in “Protest Against War”. Evelyn Sharp, the former assistant editor, became editor of *Votes for Women* on 1 August 1914; see Alberti, *Beyond Suffrage*, 29.
- ⁵⁴ The text is given in “The Secretary of State to the Ambassador in Austria-Hungary,” Washington, 4 August 1914, 7pm., in *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, 1914. Supplement: The World War* (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1928), 42.
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