

One hundred years ago, May 1919, some of the women who met in April 1915 at the Hague on the onset of the first world war came together again four years later at the Glockenhof Hotel in central Zurich.

At the historic Hague Congress they laid down 20 Principles for the end of wars and formed the Women's International Committee for Permanent Peace (ICPP). When the carnage would finally come to an end, they resolved that they would meet and be represented during the peace negotiations after the Great War.

The battles ceased in November 1918. The Allied victors come together in January the Palace of Versailles in Paris to set the terms for peace. France would not give visas to Germans, so the ICPP executive committee asked the Swiss Section to host the International Congress of Women in Zurich.

Reflecting on our situation in 2019, our spirits burdened with wars, expanding inequality, anger, migrations, threats of terrorism and ecological breaking points, the Zurich Congress report inspires courage and determination to continue, to persist in our struggle.

The report, in German, English and French more than 489 pages documents the dialogue, speeches, debates and decisions of the 148 delegates and members. With the privilege of holding in my hands this amazing document in Geneva, I spent several days reading, thinking about and imagining its surprising relevance for today.

Major libraries, such as the University of Minnesota, may have the Zurich report. However, though difficult to read 489 pages on a computer screen, the German WILPF Section digitalized it (*includes the table of contents to help you*) in its entirety on line at

<https://wilpf.de/docs/Congress-of-Zurich-Fertig.pdf>

[A Political Pilgrim in Europe (1920), Memoir by UK delegate, socialist, pacifist, suffragist, Ethyl Snowden, not only attended the Women's Congress but also other major conferences at the time.]

The Zurich Congress delegates decided that they would continue with a new name, Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, and move headquarters from Amsterdam to Geneva. the seat of the League of Nations. They adopted a Constitution. and chose a logo.

On the 5th of May 1919, the ICPP International Board arrived in Zurich to prepare for the Congress: Jane Addams, (President), Emily Green Balch (Treasurer/Secretary), Dr. Aletta Jacobs, (Den Haag), Chrystal Macmillan (Edinburg), Clara Ragaz (Zurich), Vilma Gluecklich (Budapest). They planned rules and procedures of the Congress, agenda and evening and closing events with five executive committees from 14 sections.

The agenda was structured around the resolutions. Crystal Macmillan explained to Congress that three Committees were appointed to deal with resolutions:

Committee I dealt with political questions;

Committee II dealt with matters concerning the status of women;

Committee III on questions of education.

Each committee was to consider the subject of the resolutions from three aspects:

- a) suggestions for the Peace Treaty;
- b) suggestions for the League of Nations when established;
- c) suggestions to be referred to National Sections.

The Political Committee was later subdivided into

- Committee IA to present resolutions on the basis of *acceptance* of the covenant of the League of Nations, and
- Committee IB on the basis of "*refusal* to welcome a League of Nations unless it contained certain principles and incorporated in the Paris covenant and unless it admitted all nations on the same terms."
- Later Committee IC was formed to accommodate amendments from the UK delegation.

The Congress Report details the discussion, debate and amendments to the Resolutions as well as speeches, proposals, photos and who's who.

In her opening address, Jane Addams said, "These four years from May 1915 to May 1919, so full of anguish and sorrow for all the world, have yet brought peculiar difficulties to the women assembled here as delegates to our second Congress."

The women these four years were not honored by public opinion or by government action. It became clear to the executive committee and members, representing fourteen both neutral and belligerent nations, in reviewing the resolutions submitted for the Congress with "absolutely no trace of the martyr spirit" that "similar experiences of government espionage and control as to demonstrate without a doubt that the war methods are identical in all nations."

Like-mindedness and bonding were reflected in that the resolutions received stated similar proposals. They only had to select which resolution stated it most clearly.

On behalf of the Swiss Section, Clara Ragaz welcomed the delegates "...gathered together amid the surge of political, national and social struggles to find a common basis for a future reconstruction, or better still, for building anew the life of nations, and the relations of men to one another."

"...we would be foolish to suppose that we who are gathered together pretend to be all of the same mind, or propose to appear before the world with a hard and fast program and to offer it in some sort of solution of the problem."

"...It is a debatable question even among us women, whether the enfranchisement of women will in itself be a weapon for the prevention of future wars..."

"...it seems to me that one thing is undeniable, that is, the woman can only come into her full inheritance in a state or a community life, which is founded not on force but on justice, for where mere force dominates, the lesser part will always fall to her share."(p.15-16)

Most members of the ICPP had not seen each other for four years. The 23 delegates from the USA were stunned when they could barely recognize the gaunt faces of their colleagues from Germany, Austria, Belgium and elsewhere who had endured the ravages and devastation of the war itself and now the famine and blockade of food and necessities imposed by the Allied Powers.

There was no denying that there was bitterness and anger. Guilt and humility, as well, for women also bore responsibility for the war.

Their first action, after discussion of wording and amendments sent to a committee, was debate on a telegraph to the Allied victors convened in Versailles to demand an end to the food and supply blockade. The famine, pestilence, unemployment through Central and Eastern Europe into Asia was "a disgrace to civilization."

"...That, if there is insufficiency of either food or of transport facilities to supply all demands, luxuries shall not be allowed,,,until supplies necessary for life is supplied to all; and the people of every country shall be rationed, in order that all the starving may be fed...."

On the second day they received the Treaty of Peace document from Versailles which they were able to circulate using copies of the *Journal de Genève*. Stunned and angry at the harsh terms of the cease fire, they were convinced that bitterness and revenge would lead to another war. Through the night a statement was drafted to telegram to US President Wilson, to Churchill and the negotiators who were also preparing a Charter for the League of Nations.

Resolution on Peace Terms (p 60)

"This International Congress of Women expresses its deep regret that the terms of peace proposed at Versailles should so seriously violate the principles upon which alone a just and lasting peace can be secured, and which the democracies of the world have come to expect.

"By guaranteeing the fruits of the secret treaties to the conquerors, the terms of the peace tacitly sanction secret diplomacy, deny the principles of self-determination, recognize the right of the victors to the spoils of war, and create all over Europe discords and animosities, which can only lead to future wars.

"By demand for the disarmament of one set of belligerents only, the principle of justice is violated and the rule of force is continued.

“By financial and economic proposals a hundred million people of this generation in the heart of Europe are condemned to poverty, disease and despair, which must result in the spread of hatred and anarchy within each nation.

“With a deep sense of responsibility this Congress strongly urges the Allied and Associated Governments to accept such amendments of the Terms as shall bring the Peace into harmony with the principles first enumerated by President Wilson upon the faithful carrying out of which the honor of the Allied peoples depends.”

The Political Committees presented the results of their deliberations and draft resolutions on the League of Nations and the Peace Treaty.

Lucia Ames Mead (National Secretary of the Women’s Peace Party, USA) reported for Committee A on Political Relations:

“...join with liberals everywhere in condemning the many features of the treaty which were unjust, imperialistic, and a severe handicap upon the Covenant [*of the League of Nations*]. ...the Covenant was by far the best feature of the treaty, and marked a great advance in international cooperation.

“In its revised and improved form, it contained within it the means for the redemption of the world from war and the power to remedy the grievous errors in the peace settlement. The little body of men who framed it would soon pass away from office and the great democratic forces of the world must take control and utilize its possibilities.”

“The world now faced disintegration, chaos and despair unless some League of Nations was established as the effective organ of a world that had now become organic. In any case, revolution was inevitable. The only question was, should it be bloody or a peaceful one, by bullets or by ballots?...”

The latter question of revolution and the transformation of society is studied and debated by WILPF for more than a century.

Some select points to demonstrate the boldness and courage of the women meeting in Zurich:

They prepared a Women’s Charter to be inserted in the Peace Treaty by the Peace Conference.

Elected a French and German representatives to the Socialist Congress convening the same year in Lucerne.

Elected a delegation to go to Versailles and meet with the Allied Powers.

Right to declare war and conscription should be abolished.

Endorsed a principle of total disarmament (land, air and sea).

Immediate reduction of armaments in the same terms for all.

Abolition of private manufacture and traffic munitions.

Abolition of secret agreements.

Universal free trade; trade routes by land, air and sea should be open to all nations on equal terms.

Methods of production, trade and trust should be adopted as should insure a just distribution of the necessities of life at the least cost.

Right to protect investments of capitalists in one country in the resources of another should be abolished.

Ethyl Snowden in her memoir describes personal interactions and scenes at the Congress. One of the four delegates from Austria had spent all her money for travel and hotel and had nothing left for food. Isabel from the UK received a telegram that her daughter, who weakened by the ravages of the war, had died. The three Australian delegates had traveled the great distance for weeks and arrived late in the Congress.