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► **To cite this version:**

Daniel Laqua. Belgian Internationalists, the Great War and the Quest for Peace . Marie-Louise Pelus-Kaplan, Anne-Marie Bernon-Gerth, Liliane Crips et Nicole Gabriel. Être citoyen du monde. Entre destruction et reconstruction du monde: les enfants de Babel XIVe-XXIe siècles, Édition Université Paris Diderot, pp.135-150, 2015, 978-2-7442-0198-1. hal-01322633

HAL Id: hal-01322633

<https://hal.science/hal-01322633>

Submitted on 27 May 2016

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DANIEL LAQUA¹

**BELGIAN INTERNATIONALISTS, THE GREAT WAR AND THE QUEST
FOR PEACE**

In 1932, Henri Pirenne – widely renowned for his work on medieval towns – published the final part of his *Histoire de Belgique*. The first instalment of his *magnum opus* had appeared more than three decades earlier and tackled a period long before Belgium's independent statehood, from Antiquity to end of the High Middle Ages². It was only with volume VII that Pirenne finally reached the era since the Belgian Revolution of 1830. The account drew a wider picture of the country before the First World War. In this context, Pirenne argued that Belgian civilisation was « international at its base » as it was « merely the combination of the influences to which the country is exposed at the sensible spot of Europe that it occupies »³. With such comments, Pirenne helped to nourish national narratives that cast Belgium as an international meeting ground or « crossroads of Europe »⁴.

Evidently, such discourse needs to be approached with caution: after all, ideas of nationhood tend to be based on claims of distinctness. What Pirenne and others seemed to describe as a Belgian speciality – namely receptiveness to external influences – could equally be claimed by many nations. Nonetheless, the assertions about Belgium's international links were more than mere rhetoric. In the Belle Époque, the country was one of the major sites for international congresses. Some of these events coincided with world's fairs that were hosted on Belgian soil. Indeed, Belgians were among the most prolific organisers of world exhibitions. In the three decades between 1885 and 1914, the country staged six such events – not just in Brussels (1897 and 1910), but also in Antwerp (1885 and 1894), Liège (1905) and Ghent (1913)⁵.

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² H. PIRENNE, *Histoire de Belgique*, vol. 1: *Des origines au commencement du XVI^e siècle*, Brussels, Lamertin, 1900. On Pirenne, see S. KEYMEULEN and J. TOLLEBEEK, *Henri Pirenne, Historian: A Life in Pictures*, Leuven, Leuven University Press, 2011.

³ H. PIRENNE, *Histoire de Belgique*, vol. 7: *De la révolution de 1830 à la guerre de 1914*, Brussels: Lamertin, 1932, p. 392.

⁴ J. TOLLEBEEK, « At the Crossroads of Nationalism: Huizinga, Pirenne and the Low Countries in Europe », *European Review of History*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2010, pp. 187–215; idem, « The Hyphen of National Culture: The Paradox of National Distinctiveness », *European Review*, vol. 18, no. 2, 2010, pp. 207–25; D. LAQUA, *The Age of Internationalism and Belgium, 1880–1930: Peace, Progress and Prestige*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2013, esp. pp. 19–23.

⁵ E. STORM and H. VANDEVOORDE, « Bierstubben, Cottages and Art Deco: Regionalism, Nationalism and Internationalism at the Belgian World Fairs », *Revue Belge de Philologie et d'Histoire*, vol. 90, no. 4, 2012, pp. 1373–88; D. LAQUA, *The Age of Internationalism (op. cit.)*, pp. 31–5.

Linked to its proclivity for hosting international gatherings, Belgium became the base for various kinds of international organisations. One such type included scholarly institutions with an explicitly international remit, exemplified by the Institute of International Law in Ghent (1873) and by the Brussels-based Solvay institutes that were established between 1902 and 1913⁶. Furthermore, the Belgian government managed to attract intergovernmental bodies such as the International Maritime Committee (1895) and the Sugar Union (1902), forming part of a foreign-policy agenda that embraced internationalism⁷. Meanwhile, political activists used meetings in Belgium to consolidate their transnational ties, for instance via the International Freethought Federation (1880) and the International Socialist Bureau (1900)⁸. Alongside such institutional processes, there were further dimensions to the country's role as site for international encounters: in the cultural realm, Belgian authors and artists engaged with vibrant cultural movements such as Symbolism and *Art Nouveau*; in religious terms, Belgium became a « laboratory » in which the Catholic Church tested its response to the culture and politics of modernity⁹.

The case of Belgium thus illustrates the extent to which the decades before the First World War were an age of internationalism – a period in which activists and intellectual fostered transnational cooperation in manifold ways¹⁰. Yet, as Pirenne acknowledged, internationalism coexisted with nationalism. In his *Histoire de Belgique*, he described the two phenomena as « contradictory tendencies that characterised the European civilisation of the era »¹¹. Such comments should not lead us into thinking that the forces were diametrically opposed: instead, they frequently intersected. The present essay examines this relationship. In doing so, it addresses one major question: *how did groups and individuals act internationally at a time of intense nationalism?* To this end, the piece considers the ways in which protagonists of internationalism responded to the First World War. Four years of military conflict resulted in death and destruction on an unprecedented scale and the rupturing of many

⁶ On the Institute of International Law, see M. KOSKENNIEMI, *The Gentle Civilizer of Nations: The Rise and Fall of International Law 1870–1960*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 39–41. On institutions funded by Solvay, see L. VIRE, « La 'Cité Scientifique' du Parc Léopold à Bruxelles », *Cahiers Bruxellois*, vol. 19, 1974, pp. 86–180; K. WILS and A. RASMUSSEN, « Sociology in a Transnational Perspective: Brussels, 1890–1925 », *Revue Belge de Philologie et d'Histoire*, vol. 90, no. 4, 2012, pp. 1273–97.

⁷ M. HERREN, *Hintertüren zur Macht: Internationalismus und modernisierungsorientierte Außenpolitik in Belgien, der Schweiz und den USA, 1865–1914*, Munich, Oldenbourg, 2000.

⁸ For a range of examples on this, see D. LAQUA, *The Age of Internationalism (op. cit.)*, chapters 3, 4 and 5.

⁹ On cultural movements, see N. AUBERT, P.-Ph. FRAITURE and P. MCGUINNESS (eds), *From Art Nouveau to Surrealism: Belgium Modernity in the Making*, London, Legenda, 2007. On the Catholic case, albeit with a focus on the period before the *fin de siècle*, see V. VIAENE, *Belgium and the Holy See from Gregory XVI to Pius IX, 1831–1859: Catholic Revival, Society and Politics in 19th-Century Europe*, Institut belge de Rome, Brussels, 2001.

¹⁰ For a plethora of examples, see M. GEYER and J. PAULMANN (eds), *The Mechanics of Internationalism: Culture, Society, and Politics from the 1840s to the First World War*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001.

¹¹ H. PIRENNE, *Histoire de Belgique*, vol. 7 (*op. cit.*), p. 391.

transnational ties. However, it also gave rise to campaigns and projects for a new international order – a quest which the historian William Mulligan has called *The Great War for Peace*. Mulligan has viewed peace as being « at the centre of the First World War, providing meaning to the conflict » while noting the « enduring legacy » of visions of peace that had been articulated in this period¹². A focus on this aspect can highlight the setbacks and possibilities of internationalism under challenging circumstances.

Three Belgians Internationalists

Rather than examining ideological or institutional transformations, the present essay focuses on three individuals whose activism illustrates the tribulations and transformations of internationalism. The choice of examples allows us to consider different movements: we will first consider a pacifist, secondly a key figure of international socialism and, finally, a female campaigner whose efforts shed light on different features of women's activism.

The pacifist in question is Henri La Fontaine (1854–1943), who represented the Belgian Workers' Party (*Parti Ouvrier Belge*) in the Belgian Senate from 1895 onwards. La Fontaine was involved in a wide range of international projects, many of which were collaborative ventures with the bibliographer Paul Otlet¹³. One example was their joint foundation of the Union of International Associations (1910) – a body that aspired to coordinating the efforts of all kinds of international organisations. Later on, this impetus to centralise international efforts was reflected in their campaign for a *Cité Mondiale*, a world capital city for which they regarded Belgium as an ideal site¹⁴. La Fontaine's greatest renown, however, derived from his involvement in the peace movement. Having co-founded the Belgian Arbitration and Peace Society (*Société Belge de l'Arbitrage et de la Paix*) in 1889, he became a key figure in the meetings and organisational structures of international pacifism. From 1907, he chaired the International Peace Bureau, which brought together the representatives of different national peace societies and held near-annual Universal Peace Congresses. In 1913, La Fontaine's efforts were rewarded with a Nobel Peace Prize, with the secretary of the awarding committee praising him as « the true leader of the popular peace movement in Europe »¹⁵.

The second figure under consideration is the socialist Camille Huysmans (1871–1968). In national terms, he is mainly known for two reasons: during the interwar years, Huysmans was a leading figure in promoting Flemish cultural interests within the Belgian state and became

¹² W. MULLIGAN, *The Great War for Peace*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2014, p. 4.

¹³ W. B. RAYWARD, *The Universe of Information: The Work of Paul Otlet for Documentation and International Organisation*, Moscow, Fédération Internationale de Documentation, 1975.

¹⁴ W. VAN ACKER and G. SOMSEN, « A Tale of Two World Capitals: The Internationalisms of Pieter Eijkman and Paul Otlet », *Revue Belge de Philologie et d'Histoire*, vol. 90, no. 4, 2012, pp. 1389–1408.

¹⁵ R. MOE in F. HABERMAN (ed.), *Nobel Lectures in Peace (1901–1925)*, Amsterdam, Elsevier, 1972, p. 269.

Mayor of Antwerp in 1933. In tackling the country's language question, the socialist Huysmans worked across party lines, notably with the liberal Louis Franck and the Catholic Frans Van Cauwelaert. At the same time, he also cooperated with protagonists of the Walloon Movement, drafting the *Compromis des Belges* with Jules Destrée in 1929¹⁶. The second reason why Huysmans's name features in national history books is that in July 1946, he became prime minister – albeit only for seven months¹⁷. His inclusion in the present essay, however, is attributable to another aspect of his life: not his domestic role, but his involvement in international socialism. In 1900, socialist parties from across Europe and North America had established the International Socialist Bureau to coordinate the efforts of the Second International, which had formed eleven years earlier. Based in Brussels, the new body was chaired by Emile Vandervelde, leader of the Belgian Workers' Party. As Vandervelde's biographer Janet Polasky has put it, Vandervelde «nurtured the comradeship that held the [international socialist] movement together until the war and defined the democratic socialist strategy that endured the war»¹⁸. In 1905, Huysmans joined the Brussels-based body as its secretary; his involvement meant that «the Bureau and its executive committee began to operate more smoothly»¹⁹. Over the subsequent years, Huymans maintained a correspondence with socialist leaders from different countries and helped to organise the movement's international congresses.

The third activist is Eugénie Hamer – a female pacifist whose biographical details are somewhat sketchy²⁰. Hamer's trajectory differs from the careers of La Fontaine and Huysmans in that she did not become the leader of a major international association or ascend to high political office. Born in Leuven/Louvain in 1865, much of her pre-war activism occurred within middle-class circles in Antwerp. Her public engagement encompassed different facets of Belgian women's activism, as exemplified by her involvement in the Women's Circle of the Red Cross (*Cercle des Dames de la Croix Rouge*)²¹. For the purposes of our discussion, it is her role in the Belgian Alliance for Peace through Education (*Alliance Belge pour la Paix par l'Éducation*, ABPE) that is most significant. Having been founded in 1906, the ABPE counted around 1,000 members by 1914²². It presented itself as apolitical and was not feminist as such, but it maintained connections to the worlds of feminism. As the historian Julie Carlier has put

¹⁶ J. DESTREE and C. HUYSMANS, «The 'Compromis des Belges' (1929)», in Th. HERMANS (ed.), *The Flemish Movement: A Documentary History*, London: Continuum, 1992, pp. 274–81.

¹⁷ M. CONWAY, *The Sorrows of Belgium: Liberation and Political Reconstruction, 1944–1947*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012, pp. 346–61.

¹⁸ J. POLASKY, *The Democratic Socialism of Emile Vandervelde: Between Reform and Revolution*, Oxford, Berg, 1995, p. 84.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

²⁰ E. GUBIN, «Eugénie Hamer», in E. GUBIN, C. JACQUES, V. PIETTE and J. PUISSANT (eds), *Dictionnaire des femmes belges. XIXe et XXe siècles*, Brussels, Racine, 2006, p. 305.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² N. LUBELSKI-BERNARD, *Les mouvements et les idéologies pacifistes en Belgique 1830–1914*, PhD thesis, Université Libre de Bruxelles, 1977, p. 414.

it, the ABPE was « firmly embedded in the same social reformist circles in which feminists moved »²³.

The ABPE's focus resonated with a strand of pre-1914 pacifism that treated education as the foundation for a peaceful future²⁴. Hamer herself was a proponent of this view: at the First National Peace Congress of Belgium in 1913, she presented a report on « pacifist propaganda » and stressed the importance of educational efforts in this context²⁵. Such arguments could be cast in feminine terms: after all, education was a domain in which women had a public role even in places where they lacked political rights. Educational questions thus provided opportunities to speak up on matters of international politics²⁶. The theme of a female contribution to peace could have further political implications. For instance, according to Eliane Gubin, Antwerp activists associated with the ABPE portrayed women's suffrage as a potential safeguard against future wars²⁷. Seen from this angle, Hamer's activism draws attention to the interplay between women's activism, pacifism and feminism. While Hamer's pre-1914 work mostly occurred in the national arena, it was also a form of internationalism. After all, the ABPE pursued the quest for closer international cooperation and was part of the *Alliance Universelle des Femmes pour la Paix par l'Éducation*. In 1910, Hamer represented the ABPE at the Universal Peace Congress held in Stockholm²⁸.

La Fontaine, Huysmans and Hamer differed from one another in terms of their cultural background: La Fontaine was a French-speaker from Brussels and Huysmans a Dutch-speaker from Antwerp. Hamer was Francophone, living in a Dutch-speaking city where French was widespread among the élite²⁹. Even beyond the question of language, the three represented somewhat different milieus. Although both La Fontaine and Huysmans were members of the Belgian Workers' Party, the former exemplified a segment of Belgian socialism that had much in common with the liberals: like many of them, he had trained as a lawyer and, throughout his career, prioritised reform over revolution. The third figure – Hamer –

²³ J. CARLIER, *Moving Beyond Boundaries: An Entangled History of Feminism in Belgium 1890–1914*, PhD thesis, Ghent University, 2010, p. 453.

²⁴ For the ABPE's activities, which involved work with children and the organisation of school festivals, see N. LUBELSKI-BERNARD, « Les mouvements et les idéologies pacifistes » (*op. cit.*), pp. 415–6.

²⁵ *Compte rendu officiel du Premier Congrès National Belge de la Paix, réuni à Bruxelles les 8 et 9 juin 1913*, Brussels, Comité d'organisation, 1913, appendix. For the debates on this report, see *ibid.*, pp. 105–8.

²⁶ A later example is the way in which female educators engaged with the League of Nations in the 1920s and 1930s: J. GOODMAN, « Working for Change Across International Borders: The Association of Headmistresses and Education for International Citizenship », *Paedagogica Historica*, vol. 43, no. 1, 2007, pp. 165–80.

²⁷ E. GUBIN, « Du politique au politique : parcours du féminisme belge (1830–1914) », *Revue Belge de Philologie et d'Histoire*, vol. 77, no. 2, 1999, p. 380 ; J. CARLIER, *Moving Beyond Boundaries* (*op. cit.*), p. 452.

²⁸ See the fleeting reference to an account written by Hamer in « Variétés : Revue des Revues », *Bulletin Polonais Littéraire, Scientifique et Artistique*, no. 271, 15 February 1911, p. 55.

²⁹ As Carlier notes, the ABPE « communicated exclusively in French »: J. CARLIER, *Moving beyond Boundaries* (*op. cit.*), p. 552.

was not associated with socialism. Indeed, in the interwar years, she wrote for a Catholic newspaper, *La Métropole*³⁰.

Notwithstanding such differences, La Fontaine, Huysmans and Hamer shared various experiences and interests. Their commitment to social reform meant that the spheres of their engagement overlapped. Most significantly, all three drew on contacts that cut across national boundaries: the transnational bonds of pacifism, socialism and women's activism. Having introduced La Fontaine, Huysmans and Hamer, we shall now consider what their wartime experience can tell us about the fate of internationalism in a time of conflict.

Henri La Fontaine: The Peace Movement and the Great War

Henri La Fontaine was a widely respected peace leader who moved within international environments with great ease. As a leading historian of Belgian pacifism noted, he « dedicated his whole life » to forging closer connections between people from different nations³¹. However, the German attack on Belgium demonstrated his national attachments. In light of the Belgian experience of invasion and occupation, La Fontaine initially rejected calls to convene a session of the International Peace Bureau. When such a meeting was eventually held in January 1915, he asserted his Belgian identity, asking the German delegates to denounce their government's act of aggression³². The prospects for gaining a satisfactory response were limited during the war: some Germans had swung behind their government, while more critical wartime voices faced censorship and surveillance³³. In this respect, La Fontaine's stance reflected wider ruptures within the international peace movement. Indeed, it took until 1921 before a Universal Peace Congress took place with German involvement.

At the same time, the war generated new international commitments and experiences. In 1915, La Fontaine moved to the USA, where he stayed until the end of the war. This was hardly his first American encounter: for instance, in 1904 he had attended the Universal Peace Congress in Boston. Furthermore, between 1910 and 1914, some of his activities received financial backing from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Compared to these earlier encounters, La Fontaine's wartime stint in the USA resulted in a more sustained engagement with American audiences and debates. In this respect, his experience reflected a wider transatlantic development. Long before the USA's entry into the war, « poor little

³⁰ E. GUBIN, « Eugénie Hamer » (*op. cit.*), p. 305.

³¹ N. LUBELSKI-BERNARD, « Le partisan de la paix », in H. Goffin (ed.), *Henri La Fontaine, un Prix Nobel de la Paix, 1854–1943 : Tracé(s) d'une vie*, Mons, Mundaneum, 2002, p. 72.

³² See Fried's diary entry of 11 January 1915: A. H. FRIED, *Mein Kriegstagebuch: 7. August 1914 bis 30. Juni 1919*, Bremen, Donat, 2005, p. 64. The episode is also mentioned in V. GROSSI, *Le pacifisme européen: 1889–1914*, Brussels, Bruylant, 1994, p. 395.

³³ On the challenges for peace activism in wartime Germany, see J. D. SHAND, « German Pacifists and their Government during World War I », *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 10, no. 1, 1975, pp. 95–108.

Belgium » met with sympathy among members of the American public. The creation of the American Committee for the Relief of Belgium was a striking reflection of this development³⁴. Furthermore, as Michaël Amara has shown, the USA were a target for Belgian propaganda efforts that – either explicitly or implicitly – made the case for American support or intervention³⁵.

La Fontaine's role during the war certainly fitted into this category, as he conveyed his country's plight to American audiences. He continued to draw attention to Belgian matters after the USA had joined the war effort³⁶. La Fontaine's concern for the fate of his country became evident as late as May 1918, when he looked ahead to an end of conflict and contemplated the nature of post-war peacemaking. He suggested that Belgium would have to be the place where diplomats would meet. This location was meant to drive home to the Central Powers the damage that they had done:

They have to come, the representatives of the outlaw nations, as to a new and more impressive Canossa, to the land they have crushed, impoverished, spoiled, robbed, slandered, crucified – the land which will remain the symbol of their wickedness, but also the symbol of what right means to a world reborn and enlightened³⁷.

It would, however, be wrong to view La Fontaine's wartime stance as a purely national one. Indeed, he continued to affirm his belief in international cooperation. Even before moving to the USA – and still fresh under the impression of the German invasion – he argued that a peaceful future should not only involve a « remodelling » of European law, but had to extend to the cultural realm. As he put it, « [f]rom our national songs, also, the words of hate and ill-will should disappear »³⁸. Indeed, the most prominent strand of La Fontaine's wartime activism involved ideas about peace and cooperation. Based on his existing profile as a peace leader and Senator, he could present his views alongside other prominent figures. For instance, in May 1915 he spoke at the Lake Mohonk Conference on International Arbitration, whose participants included the US Secretary of War, Lindley Miller Garrison, and in November 1916 he shared a platform with former US Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan³⁹. In the last two war years, La Fontaine also had a lecturing stint at the City College of New York, where he taught « the causes

³⁴ M. BARNETT, *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2011, pp. 86–87.

³⁵ M. AMARA, « La propagande belge et l'image de la Belgique aux États-Unis pendant la Première Guerre Mondiale », *Revue Belge d'Histoire Contemporaine*, vol. 30, no. 1–2, 2000, pp. 173–226.

³⁶ See e.g. « Plea for Belgian Soldiers: Men in Trenches Need Comforts, Says Senator La Fontaine », *New York Times*, 14 March 1918.

³⁷ H. LA FONTAINE, « The Land Where Peace Is to Be Made », *Evening Sun*, 11 May 1918.

³⁸ H. LA FONTAINE, « A Pacifist View », *The Advocate of Peace*, vol. 76, no. 11, 1914, p. 262.

³⁹ « Peace Men Praise President's Course », *New York Times*, 22 May 1915; « Leaders Discuss How Best to Get Permanent Peace », *Christian Science Monitor*, 29 November 1916. On Bryan's contribution to liberal internationalism, see L. W. LEVINE, *Defender of the Faith: William Jennings Bryan: The Last Decade, 1915–1925*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1965, pp. 37–92.

of war », « aspects of the world organization of nations » and « the philosophy of international relations »⁴⁰.

The war did not only result in speaker engagements for La Fontaine, but also inspired him to draw up concrete plans for the future world order. In 1916, he presented his scheme for a *Magnissima Charta*⁴¹. The scheme was published under the auspices of the World Peace Foundation. The latter organisation had originated in a School of Peace founded by the American philanthropist Edwin Ginn⁴². La Fontaine's publication appeared at a time when many American internationalists also discussed plans for a future world organisation⁴³. In his preface to this text – signed on the American Independence Day of 1915 – La Fontaine referenced his transatlantic journey while appealing to the political traditions of his host country. He argued that the text had been

[b]orn in distress and exile, in the midst of the people who, seven centuries ago, was the first to draft for the benefit of mankind a pact of liberty, written on the open sea, the brotherly highway between the peoples, swung by the waves which no human power can ever enslave or subdue, – completed on the soil of the most cosmopolitan democracy, where government of the people, by the people and for the people is a living reality⁴⁴.

According to the Belgian pacifist, the principles that ensured domestic order equally applied to questions of global order. In other words, just as individual states needed laws, so did the « society of states ». The title of his publication emphasised this line of argument through its allusion to Magna Carta⁴⁵. In terms of institutional arrangements, La Fontaine proposed a regular conference of states, which would maintain its own commissions and create new international conventions⁴⁶. To ensure the coordination of these activities, La Fontaine envisaged an International Administrative Council and a Permanent International Secretariat⁴⁷. Nonetheless, there were clear limitations to the new world organisation as he conceived it. While La Fontaine favoured the creation of an international fleet, he stopped short of proposing a body that might impose military sanctions on those who violated international law: he described talk « of police force, of international police force » as « truly somewhat venturesome ».⁴⁸ Instead, La Fontaine preferred

⁴⁰ « Courses of Lectures by La Fontaine », *New York Times*, 23 May 1917; « La Fontaine to Repeat Lectures », *New York Times*, 7 February 1918.

⁴¹ H. LA FONTAINE, *The Greatest Solution – Magnissima Charta: Essay on Evolutionary and Constructive Pacifism*, Boston, World Peace Foundation, 1916.

⁴² R. ROTBERG, *A Leadership for Peace: How Edwin Ginn Tried to Change the World*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2007, pp. 93–121.

⁴³ Th. KNOCK, *To End All Wars: Woodrow Wilson and the Quest for a New World Order*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1992.

⁴⁴ H. LA FONTAINE, *The Greatest Solution (op. cit.)*, p. vii.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 4. See p. vi for a direct reference to Magna Carta.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 45–66.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 75–85.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 144. For La Fontaine's proposals regarding an international fleet, see p. 151.

« indirect means of constraints » – namely measures in terms of diplomacy, finance or communications, to be ordered by an International Court of Justice⁴⁹. In these respects, La Fontaine's text illustrates the competing visions regarding the nature of a future League of Nations, in particular with regard to its potential sanctioning mechanisms⁵⁰.

Many of La Fontaine's ideas seem to resonate with the tenets that we associate with Wilsonian internationalism. This goes for the idea of a world organisation, but also for the emphasis on national self-determination and democracy. At the same time, in focusing on international law, La Fontaine revealed his ongoing adherence to a major trope of pre-war pacifism⁵¹. Indeed, as a step towards a new world order, he proposed a meeting that would continue the work of the Hague Peace Conferences of 1899 and 1907. Such views suggest that La Fontaine did not regard the war itself as a defeat for the principles of the peace movement: the conflict merely seemed to prove that governments had not sufficiently listened to its demands.

Camille Huysmans: The Socialist Dilemma

Similar to the rifts within the peace movement, international socialism underwent major divisions during the war. As late as 29 July 1914, socialists from different countries gathered in Brussels at the Cirque Royal to denounce their governments' war policies. However, shortly afterwards, many socialists rallied around their national cause. As a result, it was mostly minority groups within the respective parties that sought to continue to work across enemy lines. The most radical critics formed the Zimmerwald Left, with the likes of Lenin denouncing others as « social chauvinists »⁵².

Camille Huysmans formed part of neither of these camps: while rejecting the stance of the Zimmerwald Left, he nonetheless worked across enemy lines. As a step towards this aim, he moved the International Socialist Bureau to the neutral Netherlands. Furthermore, Huysmans submitted peace proposals to separate meetings planned by the socialist parties of the neutral countries (Copenhagen, January 1915), of the Entente (London, February 1915) and of the Central Powers (Vienna, April 1915)⁵³. This willingness to reach out attracted criticism among his Belgian comrades. Huysmans

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

⁵⁰ On such debates, see S. WERTHEIM, « The League That Wasn't: American Designs for a Legalist-Sanctionist League of Nations and the Intellectual Origins of International Organization, 1914–1920 », *Diplomatic History*, vol. 35, no. 5, 2011, pp. 797–836.

⁵¹ For an overview of the currents that La Fontaine engaged with, see J.-M. GUIEU, « Le pacifisme européen au temps d'Henri La Fontaine », in MUNDANEUM, *Henri La Fontaine, Prix Nobel de la Paix 1913 : Un Belge épris de justice*, Brussels, Racine, 2012, pp. 52–67.

⁵² R. C. NATION, *War on War: Lenin, the Zimmerwald Left and the Origins of Communist Internationalism*, Durham, Duke University Press, 1989. See also G. ELEY, *Forging Democracy: The History of the Left in Europe, 1850–2000*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002, pp. 127–131.

⁵³ This Copenhagen meeting was, however, cancelled: J. POLASKY, *Democratic Socialism of Emile Vandervelde (op. cit.)*, p. 124.

himself expressed his unhappiness about the « sniping » that he encountered from Allied socialists⁵⁴. Yet, he expressed no regrets:

It is not necessary to say, also, that to a Belgian it was not always very pleasant to find himself [*sic*] with Social-Democrats who had approved the credits which had served to put his country to fire and sword. But I considered it to be my duty not to write a word which would have wounded one of the affiliated parties⁵⁵.

Such statements indicate the difficulty of reconciling international commitments with national concerns. Huysmans did not downplay the injustices carried out by the Germans. He stated that « [n]othing excuses their cruelty; they are covered with shame »⁵⁶. Nonetheless, he championed transnational dialogue instead of operating on a purely national basis. His stance contrasted with that of Emile Vandervelde, who had taken up a post in the Belgian government after the outbreak of war. Janet Polasky, however, suggests that it would be misleading to view the two as complete opposites: « Vandervelde not only tolerated Huysmans's leadership of the International throughout the war, he seems to have been glad that Huysmans was doing what he was doing »⁵⁷.

Huysmans contradicted the notion that the war had seen the collapse of socialist internationalism. In a newspaper interview of March 1916, he claimed that « The war has no more destroyed the International Socialist organisation than it has caused the Catholic Church to disappear »⁵⁸. This comment echoed a point he had raised two months earlier: « Has the Catholic Church ceased to live because some German Catholic soldiers found themselves face to face with Catholic Belgian soldiers, on the two banks of the Yser? »⁵⁹. With such arguments, Huysmans acknowledged the existing conflicts while affirming that they did not diminish the internationalist principles underpinning any form of socialism.

Arguably the most striking effort to defend socialist internationalism occurred in 1917, when Huysmans was the secretary of the projected Stockholm Conference⁶⁰. This peace initiative was prepared by a Dutch-Scandinavian Committee, involving the Dutch socialist Pieter Troelstra and the Swedish social democrat Hjalmar Branting. Over several months, socialist leaders from neutral and enemy nations travelled to the Swedish capital to prepare the conference, including such prominent figures as Friedrich Ebert from Germany and Victor Adler from Austria. Yet, David

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

⁵⁵ « An Address by Camille Huysmans », Arnheim, 9 January 1916, in C. HUYSMANS, *The Policy of the International*, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1916, p. 19.

⁵⁶ Translated version of an interview with *Le Petit Parisien*, 25 March 1916, in *ibid.*, p. 9.

⁵⁷ J. POLASKY, *Democratic Socialism of Emile Vandervelde (op. cit.)*, p. 131.

⁵⁸ C. HUYSMANS, *The Politics of the International (op. cit.)*, p. 6.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁶⁰ For a detailed account, see W. GELDOLF, *Stockholm 1917. Camille Huysmans in de schaduw van titanen*, Antwerpen, Contact, 1996.

Kirby has concluded that the venture « was doomed from the start by the inability of the socialist parties of the belligerent countries to return to the principles of internationalism enunciated by the Second International before 1914 »⁶¹.

Indeed, by August 1917, the initiative had effectively collapsed, owing to three major factors: firstly, national governments in many cases created obstacles for participation in the event. For the British Labour politician Arthur Henderson, support for the Stockholm preparations even resulted in his resignation from Lloyd George's cabinet⁶². The second reason was the Bolsheviks' promotion of an alternative event – and socialists in other countries were divided as to how respond to this⁶³. Indeed, Huysmans himself expressed his scepticism about the Bolshevik stance. A few months later, he commented on the October Revolution and argued that it would not bring about a democratic peace. He described Russia as being « under a new czarist regime which socialists have been invited to admire and which they find impossible to even consider »⁶⁴. The third explanation for the collapse of the Stockholm initiative was that many Allied socialists were too concerned about meeting their former comrades from the Central Powers. This stance extended to Huysmans's own party. G. D. H. Cole argued that « the expatriated Belgians indeed became the most intransigent element in the International, taking a strong stand against meeting the German socialists as long as the war continued »⁶⁵.

Among Belgian socialists, reservations about transnational cooperation continued during and beyond 1918. In August 1918, Emile Vandervelde and Louis de Brouckère rejected an offer to participate in an international conference, claiming that « the declarations, and still less the acts of the German Majority Socialists » did not meet the conditions for such a meeting⁶⁶. In February 1919, the Belgian Workers' Party remained unrepresented at the first major post-war meeting of socialists, the Bern Conference. In this respect, Huysmans proved to be a somewhat exceptional case. He has been described as being « firmly committed to the cause of the Entente »⁶⁷, yet his activism illustrates the ambiguities of international socialism during wartime.

⁶¹ D. KIRBY, « International Socialism and the Question of Peace: The Stockholm Conference of 1917 », *The Historical Journal*, vol. 25, no. 3, 1982, p. 713.

⁶² J. WINTER, *Socialism and the Challenge of War: Ideas and Politics in Britain 1912–1918*, London, Routledge, 1974, pp. 270–288; F.M. LEVENTHAL, *Arthur Henderson*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1989, pp. 64–69.

⁶³ Vandervelde even spoke of three competing plans for a conference: apart from the Dutch–Scandinavian initiative, one planned by the Zimmerwald Left and another by the Petrograd Soviet: E. VANDERVELDE, *Souvenirs d'un militant socialiste*, Paris, Denoël, 1937, p. 237.

⁶⁴ « Hope of 'People's Peace' Killed by Bolsheviks, Says Belgian Socialist Leader », *The Washington Post*, 25 December 1917.

⁶⁵ G. D. H. COLE, *Communism and Social Democracy 1914–1931*, London, Macmillan, 1958, p. 39.

⁶⁶ Letter from Emile Vandervelde and Louis de Brouckère to Arthur Henderson, 19 August 1918, in records of the Labour and Socialist International, folder 2.2, Labour History Archive and Study Centre, Manchester.

⁶⁷ D. KIRBY, « International Socialism and the Question of Peace » (*op. cit.*), p. 714.

Eugénie Hamer: Female Pacifism

Relatively little is known about Eugénie Hamer's wartime experiences. A brief entry in the *Dictionnaire des Femmes Belges* suggests that she remained in Belgium and cared for her brother, who had been injured in combat with the Germans⁶⁸. Despite the lack of biographical detail, Hamer's institutional attachments shed light on the tribulations of women's internationalism during the war. As secretary of the ABPE, her activism played out within the wider arena of Belgian women's activism. This commitment was more than just a national matter: it was shaped by diverse influences from abroad⁶⁹. The outbreak of war, however, led many *militantes* to concentrate on national concerns. Carlier has diagnosed « an upsurge of patriotism and anti-German sentiment, which affected even the most convinced pacifists among them »⁷⁰. One example was the foundation of the Patriotic Union of Belgian Women (*Union Patriotique des Femmes Belges*) shortly after the German attack – a body that placed the activities of different women's groups at the service of the nation⁷¹. The leading Belgian suffragist Jane Brigode became a key figure in this organisation. Having previously been involved in the International Woman Suffrage Alliance, she rejected the idea of a meeting with German feminists even after the war had ended⁷². As Christa Hämmerle, Oswald Überegger and Brigitta Bader Zaar have put it, the First World War « contested the internationalism of the women's movement and exerted a great strain on the latent tension between national interests and the peace agenda within international women's organizations »⁷³.

These developments make it particularly striking that Hamer participated in the International Congress of Women at The Hague. Taking place from 28 April to 1 May 1915, this event was a major episode in the history of women's internationalism. The Dutch feminist Aletta Jacobs had launched this initiative after the planned Berlin congress of the International Woman Suffrage Alliance had been cancelled. The outcome was impressive: the event at The Hague brought together over 1,100 women from belligerent

⁶⁸ E. GUBIN, « Eugénie Hamer » (*op. cit.*), p. 306.

⁶⁹ On the transnational dimensions of Belgian feminism, see J. CARLIER, « Forgotten Transnational Connections and National Contexts: An 'Entangled History' of the Political Transfers that Shaped Belgian Feminism, 1890–1914 », *Women's History Review*, vol. 19, no. 4, 2010, pp. 503–22; idem, « Entangled Feminisms: Rethinking the History of the Belgian Movement for Women's Rights Through Transnational Intersections », *Revue Belge de Philologie et d'Histoire*, vol. 90, no. 4, 2012, pp. 1339–51; M. EVERARD and M. AERTS, « Forgotten Intersections: Wilhelmina Drucker, Early Feminism and the Dutch-Belgian Connection », *Revue Belge de Philologie et d'Histoire*, vol. 77, no. 2, 1999, pp. 440–72; M. AERTS, « Feminism from Amsterdam to Brussels in 1891: Political Transfer as Transformation », *European Review of History*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2005, pp. 367–82.

⁷⁰ J. CARLIER, « Entangled Feminisms » (*op. cit.*), p. 1347.

⁷¹ J. CARLIER, *Moving beyond Boundaries* (*op. cit.*), p. 591.

⁷² Letter from Jane Brigode to Aletta Jacobs, 22 and 24 January 1919 and 24 January 1919, WILPF records, reel 56, microfilm collection of the Faculty of Arts, Design and Social Sciences, Northumbria University.

⁷³ Ch. HÄMMERLE, O. ÜBEREGGER and B. BADER ZAAR, « Women's and Gender History of the First World War – Topics, Concepts, Perspectives », in idem (eds), *Gender and the First World War*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2014, p. 9.

as well as neutral nations. The American social reformer Jane Addams later stressed its importance: « During a year when the spirit of internationalism had apparently broken down, they came together to declare the validity of internationalism which surrounds and completes national life. »⁷⁴ Addams herself chaired the proceedings. She had travelled to Europe with other members of the Women's Peace Party, an organisation that American feminists had founded in January 1915 « to demand that war be abolished »⁷⁵. In order to attract support from different camps, the congress organisers concentrated on two principles, namely « the pacific settlement of international disputes and the extension of suffrage to women »⁷⁶. Yet, the very act of convening with activists from the invader nation meant that Belgian participants risked accusations of insufficient patriotism.

What, then, about the Belgian delegation? As late as February 1915, Jacobs had mentioned the difficulty of attracting Belgian supporters⁷⁷. Leading Belgian feminists either declined the Dutch invitation or left it unanswered. Léonie La Fontaine – a key activist and Henri La Fontaine's sister – expressed her sympathy and explained her absence with reference to her ill health. Yet, as Annika Wilmers has noted, her stance was « not free from contradictions »: while speaking of dialogue, she also adopted a « very patriotic and highly Germanophobic attitude »⁷⁸. As a result, the Belgian presence at The Hague only amounted to five women. Hamer represented the ABPE alongside another Belgian delegate, Marguerite Sarten. The sole other Belgian organisation that was listed was a *Cercle de Dames et Jeunes Filles Sionistes* from Antwerp. Owing to their complicated journey from occupied Belgium, the Belgian participants only arrived after the start of the conference, making a celebrated entry. Following a German proposal, all five Belgians were seated at the platform⁷⁹. In this respect, their case suggests the potential for dialogue at a time of hostility. In looking back, the American delegate Emily Balch argued that there had been « not one clash or even danger of clash over national differences », claiming that all participants had shared « the same moving consciousness of the development of a new spirit which is growing in the midst of war as the roots of the wheat grow under the drifts and tempests of the winter ».⁸⁰

⁷⁴ J. ADDAMS, « Women and Internationalism », in J. ADDAMS, E. BALCH and A. HAMILTON, *Women at The Hague: The International Congress of Women and its Results*, New York: Macmillan, 1915, pp. 125–6.

⁷⁵ « Women's Peace Party: Preamble and Platform adopted at Washington, January 10, 1915 », WILPF records, reel 16.

⁷⁶ D. S. PATTERSON, *The Search for Negotiated Peace: Women's Activism and Citizen Diplomacy in World War I*, New York: Routledge, 2008, p. 75.

⁷⁷ A. WILMERS, *Pazifismus in der internationalen Frauenbewegung 1914 – 1920: Handlungsspielräume, politische Konzeptionen und gesellschaftliche Auseinandersetzungen*, Essen, Klartext, 2008, p. 41. A summary by protagonists mentioned that an earlier meeting had involved some Belgian women, but neither of these were well-known: typed manuscript, « The History of the Congress », c. 1915, WILPF records, reel 16.

⁷⁸ A. WILMERS, *Pazifismus* (op. cit.), p. 45.

⁷⁹ E. BALCH, « Journey and Impressions », in J. ADDAMS et al., *Women at The Hague* (op.cit.), p. 7.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

Balch's assessment can partly be explained by the desire to convey an optimistic message to domestic audiences. Closer scrutiny of the events at The Hague reveals that the plight of Belgium clearly affected the proceedings. Although, as chair, Addams rejected the proposal of a specific debate on Belgian matters, Annika Wilmers has argued that « [m]any congress resolutions... can be understood as a reaction to the situation of Belgium »⁸¹. At the same time, she has noted the « tense relations between the Belgians and the other participants »⁸².

In their quest to avoid controversy, the congress organisers excluded questions such as war guilt from the discussions⁸³. By contrast, the Belgian delegates sought recognition for the situation that their country was in. At various points, they protested against statements which, they felt, insufficiently acknowledged their country's condition. For instance, Hamer proclaimed that she was unable to sign up to a general call for peace, as she was « Belgian before everything else »⁸⁴. Her language bore similarities to the stance of Henri La Fontaine who, at the 1915 meeting of the International Peace Bureau, had stated that « As much as I am... an internationalist, I am also... Belgian »⁸⁵. Yet, it is worth noting that Belgian contributions at The Hague could also be cast in more positive terms. The French socialist Jean Longuet claimed that Hamer had spoken « in moving terms » about the need for a peace based on justice. He further mentioned a speech by Bala Birnbaum of the Jewish women's group from Antwerp. As he put it, her contribution stood for all those who had suffered persecution. Birnbaum ended her remarks with the slogan « Vive la Belgique! » – a point at which, according to Longuet, emotion swept through the « systematically neutralist assembly » like « an electric current », with the applause even extending to the German delegation⁸⁶. Such statements illustrate how differently the debates at The Hague could be framed.

Notwithstanding various points of conflict, the Hague congress agreed on resolutions that ranged from a general protest against war to the insistence that any territorial transfer be conditional on the consent of the affected population⁸⁷. Delegates also demanded women's suffrage, describing « the combined influence of women of all countries » as « one of the strongest forces for the prevention of war ». As for the future order of Europe, the participants suggested that a « federation or a council of European powers should not be considered impossible from the very experience of the nations now at war »⁸⁸. In calling for a « Permanent

⁸¹ A. WILMERS, *Pazifismus (op. cit.)*, p. 44.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 45.

⁸³ « Quelques détails sur le congrès : Conditions des débats », in WILPF records, reel 16.

⁸⁴ Cited in A. WILMERS, *Pazifismus (op. cit.)*, p. 44.

⁸⁵ Cited in COOPER, *Patriotic Pacifism (op. cit.)*, p. 196.

⁸⁶ M. BIGOT, « Le Congrès de La Haye », *L'Action Féministe*, no. 40, May–June 1915, p. 1.

⁸⁷ « Resolutions adopted by the International Congress of Women at The Hague, May, 1, 1934 », in J. ADDAMS et al., *Women at The Hague (op. cit.)*, p. 151 and 153 (the latter under the heading « Respect for Nationality »).

⁸⁸ J. ADDAMS, « Women and Internationalism », in J. ADDAMS et al., *Women at The Hague (op. cit.)*, p. 140.

Conference », one of their demands resembled the ideas that La Fontaine articulated at around the same time⁸⁹.

Another outcome was the creation of the International Women's Committee for a Permanent Peace. Initially, both Hamer and Sarten were listed on its letterhead⁹⁰. Furthermore, several activists from neutral nations became designated envoys who were charged with conveying the congress demands to national governments. David Patterson has examined this « citizen diplomacy » which was based on « the idea of private citizens calling on the heads of European governments »⁹¹. The American members of the Women's Peace Party played a key role in this endeavour. One leg of their journey took them to Le Havre, the site of the Belgian government-in-exile. There, they met with Julien Davignon, the Belgian Minister of Foreign Affairs, whom they described as « a sad, gentle person »⁹². A subsequent report portrayed the meeting as cordial, recording the statesman as saying that « Belgium would rather have the enemy leave their country as the result of negotiations than have the armies fighting over it a second time »⁹³.

While such comments seem to suggest ongoing dialogue even beyond The Hague, the German occupation was a complicating factor. Wilmers has noted that the *Gazet van Brussel* provided positive coverage of the congress, but pointed out that this could have been caused by a misunderstanding: the *Gazet* was a Flemish publication funded by the Germans and its authors may have erroneously perceived the congress as a pro-German initiative⁹⁴. From the other side, nationally-minded Belgian feminists maintained a cautious distance from the International Women's Committee for a Permanent Peace. For instance, when the organisation contacted Élise (Soyer) Nyst of the National Council of Belgian Women (*Comité Nationale des Femmes Belges*) in late 1915, Nyst responded by saying that the National Council was too busy addressing the miseries of Belgium and thus indicated that it would be difficult for her to participate. She claimed that, instead of her own organisation, the ABPE would provide the Belgian response to the International Women's Committee – yet at the time, apparently no letter from the ABPE reached the activists in The Hague⁹⁵. Likewise, when Aletta Jacobs recorded the outcome of a survey among national affiliates of her organisation in March 1917, no Belgian information featured⁹⁶.

This is not to say that the rupture was permanent. In 1921, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) – the body that had developed out of the Women's Committee for a Permanent Peace – gained a

⁸⁹ « Resolutions adopted by the International Congress of Women at The Hague » (*op. cit.*), p. 155.

⁹⁰ Letter from Jane Addams, 8 May 1915, WILPF records, reel 35.

⁹¹ D.S. PATTERSON, *The Search for Negotiated Peace* (*op. cit.*), p. 82.

⁹² A. HAMILTON, « At the War Capitals », in J. ADDAMS et al., *Women at The Hague* (*op. cit.*), p. 50.

⁹³ Account of 16 June 1916, in R. SCHWIMMER and Ch. MACMILLAN, « Proposal for a Conference of Neutral Nations », WILPF records, reel 35, Northumbria University.

⁹⁴ A. WILMERS, *Pazifismus* (*op. cit.*), p. 234.

⁹⁵ Letter from Élise Nyst (Soyer-Nyst) to Rosa Manus, 2 December 1915 and Rosa Manus to Élise Nyst, 20 December 1915, WILPF records, reel 56.

⁹⁶ Letter from Aletta Jacobs to Jane Addams, 15 March 1917, WILPF records, reel 35.

Belgian branch⁹⁷. Hamer herself also engaged in new internationalist ventures after the war, seeking to reconstitute the ABPE as well as fostering Belgo-Polish links⁹⁸.

Conclusions

What do the cases of La Fontaine, Huysmans and Hamer tell us? Their trajectories certainly shed light on the extent to which internationalism had been a lively and multifaceted phenomenon before the war. All three figures were involved in causes that were construed as international in scale, and all three engaged in transnational cooperation to advance their objectives. After the unprovoked aggression on Belgium, they were confronted with a situation whereby their own country had become an international cause in itself. The examples that have been discussed highlight the extent to which the war affected existing transnational bonds.

In this respect, the story seems to be a rather bleak one. Yet, it is not always advisable to view events through the prism of conflict versus cooperation. Each of the three cases provides us with examples of how internationalism survived under difficult circumstances. Furthermore, all three cases in some respects pointed towards the future. For instance, the congress at The Hague ultimately laid the groundwork for WILPF, one of the leading pacifist organisations of the interwar years. Although Huysmans's wartime initiative for a peace conference failed, he continued to make plans for the time ahead, for instance by contributing to the International Affairs Advisory Committee of the British Labour Party⁹⁹. Finally, La Fontaine's wartime writings formed part of wider discussions on the shape of a future League of Nations. His own engagement with such question was far from purely theoretical: he was an advisor to the Belgian delegation at the Paris Peace Conference, remained a tireless presence within the interwar peace movement and lobbied for the creation of an intellectual wing of the League – in a way the antecedent of UNESCO¹⁰⁰. Seen from this angle, the Great War was not simply an end as far as internationalism was concerned: it marked the beginning, continuation or transformation of internationalist commitments.

⁹⁷ D. LAQUA, *The Age of Internationalism* (op. cit.), pp. 129–30.

⁹⁸ E. GUBIN, « Eugénie Hamer » (op. cit.), p. 306.

⁹⁹ J. WINTER, *Socialism and the Challenge of War* (op. cit.), p. 141.

¹⁰⁰ On La Fontaine in the context of intellectual cooperation during the interwar years, see J.-J. RENOLIET, *L'UNESCO oubliée. La Société des Nations et la coopération intellectuelle*, Publications de la Sorbonne, 1999, esp. pp. 11–14 and 17–19; D. LAQUA, « Transnational Intellectual Cooperation, the League of Nations, and the Problem of Order », *Journal of Global History*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2011, pp. 223–247. On wider intellectual continuities, see J.-A. PEMBERTON, « The Changing Shape of Intellectual Cooperation: From the League of Nations to UNESCO », *Australian Journal of History & Politics*, vol. 58, no. 1, 2012, pp. 34–50.