RECOMMENDATIONS

Materials and resources recommended by the ICIP

Book. The Great War and the Origins of Humanitarianism 1918-1924, by Bruno Cabanes

The aftermath of the First World War resulted in the most turbulent postwar period the world had ever seen. The survivors of what was then known as the Great War were not only those who had fought and been physically or mentally injured, but also the stateless, the children who had suffered the consequences of the war, as well as the victims of the Russian famine of 1921-1923. This situation led to a rethinking of what was until then a very precarious humanitarianism. The challenges facing international society necessitated the reformulation of humanitarian aid, moving from a national to a transnational level, in order to obtain effective responses.

The subject proposed by Bruno Cabanes in this book is precisely an analysis of that transformational moment in the long development of humanitarianism. The author does not analyze the subject from the point of view of the evolution of human rights, but rather as a historian of the First World War and the transition from war to peace. Cabanes focuses on the relationship between humanitarian practice and humanitarian narrative, and in the defense of human rights, which underwent an increasing reformulation during this period. Thus, “the redefinition of rights was not a step in the history of rights, but a key moment in shaping attitudes and values –the pacification of minds and the progressive restoration of peaceful relationships with former enemies.” (page 10).

As for the structure of the book, the author examines the actions of five remarkable activists –René Cassin and Albert Thomas from France, Fridtjof Nansen from Norway, Herbert Hoover from the US, and Eglantyne Jebb from England- to explain the transformation of humanitarianism during the interwar period. These people understood that a new type of transnational organization was needed to deal with problems that went beyond national boundaries and rivalries between factions. On the one hand,
they promoted human rights and, at the same time, their actions helped clarify the redefinition of these rights in the postwar period.

René Cassin defended the rights of war victims, first from the perspective of veteran associations and later at the League of Nations. Albert Thomas promoted a reform of international labor law from the International Labor Office, one of the few institutions created as part of the Treaty of Versailles that still exist today. Fridtjof Nansen, High Commissioner for Refugees of the League of Nations, created a passport originally intended for refugees of the Russian Civil War in 1922 that revolutionized the status of stateless persons. Herbert Hoover organized the two biggest humanitarian operations of the first quarter of the century: he provided aid to Belgium and the countries of Central Europe during the war, and also during the period of Russia’s Great Famine in 1921-1923. Finally, Eglantyne Jebb founded the “Save the Children Fund” in 1919, mobilizing public opinion in Britain in support of Austrian and German children who were suffering the consequences of the Allied blockade after the war; her actions led the League of Nations to adopt the Geneva Declaration of the Rights of the Child in 1924.

The book is therefore a review of a “constituent” moment in international humanitarianism, and, at the same time, an empirical example of how these profound transformations are produced thanks in part to specific people. These individuals are capable of transcending reality to visualize a better future and thus obtain improvements of great importance in the international system. In short, Bruno Cabanes, a pioneer in the study of the aftermath of war and an Associate Professor in the Department of History at Yale University, shows us how and when the right to human dignity became inalienable.


In this book Frances H. Early traces the history of feminist peace activism and the civil liberties movement in the United States through the lives of the people who participated with the New York Bureau of Legal Advice. Created in 1917 by Charles Recht and Frances M. Witherspoon, with funding from the Woman’s Peace Party, the
Bureau was the first organization to offer free legal advice to people who refused to participate in projects related to U.S. participation in World War I. Conscientious objectors, political prisoners and “foreign enemies” found a support tool to confront American war policies.

Frances M. Witherspoon was an important activist in the feminist peace movement against World War I and she participated in the founding of humanitarian and anti-militaristic organizations such as the War Resisters League, in the first half of the 20th century. The Czech-born attorney, poet and linguist, Charles Recht, was a conscientious objector and participated in the defense of many radical activists facing deportation. From 1921 to 1933 he served as the official representative of the Soviet Union’s interests in the United States.

The importance of this book lies in the author’s interpretation of gender relations within the peace movement of the time. In a militarized environment where the dominating cultural image was that of a male warrior and a female caregiver, the Bureau turned things around to deconstruct this reality. Women occupied leadership positions and conscientious objectors became the center of pacifist thought. This gave rise to the creation of a culture of peace as a new way of reflecting on and viewing the world through a criticism of the patriarchic system, seen as inherent to the state and to war. The author is a Professor in the History Department of Mount Saint Vincent University, in Halifax, Nova Scotia. She specializes in historical research on the interaction between gender, war and peace.

Web. War Resisters’ International

War Resisters’ International (WRI) (https://www.wri-irg.org/) is one of the most important pacifist and anti-militarist organizations in the world. It was founded in 1921 in Bilthoven, Netherlands, in the aftermath of World War I. It was originally called Paco, which means peace in the international auxiliary language Esperanto. Its founding declaration, which remains unchanged, states: “War is a crime against humanity. I am therefore determined not to support any kind of war and to strive for the removal of all causes of war.” The organization’s current chair is Christine Schweitzer from Germany.
Devi Prasad (1921-2011), the author of the book we are reviewing, was a nonviolent Indian activist who was very close to Gandhi. He graduated from Shantiniketan, the university founded by Rabindranath Tagore, and held various positions in WRI – among them, general secretary and chair in the 1960s and 70s. He is therefore someone who knows the ins and outs of the organization, as well as the various pacifist ideas that have influenced it over the years.

The book has two parts. In the first part, the author discusses the reasons for anti-militarism and the origins of nonviolence up until World War I. He specifically focuses on various religious denominations, as well as pioneering organizations such as the International Peace Bureau (IPB) or the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF). In the compilation of prominent pacifists offered by Devi Prasad, one of the most renowned individuals mentioned is Russian writer Leo Tolstoy. This part ends with a fundamental chapter that deals with compulsory military service and the opposition to it that arose in various countries, mainly in Europe, but also in America, Africa and Asia. And it is this chapter that connects with the founding of WRI.

The second part of the book is very detailed and explores the evolution of WRI from its origins to the 1970s. It covers more than fifty years of actions, anecdotes and experiences, including various historical contexts such as World War II or the Cold War. Finally, a number of appendices complete the book, including key documents in the history of WRI, as well as various high-definition photos (almost eighty). Particularly worth mentioning are those of the international campaign in support of Spain’s first conscientious objector, Pepe Beunza.

In short, an essential book for anyone interested not only in the history of anti-militarism, but also in the reasons for pacifism and nonviolence, which are as valid today as they were in 1921.
Films. Anti-war films about World War I

Anti-war cinema has demonstrated many times throughout its history why it is an art form. Here we present two well-known films that deserve recognition for their qualities. Besides, they share curious similarities: both were based on true stories, banned for some time and are deeply anti-war.

Paths of Glory, by Stanley Kubrick

The irrational savagery of war is brutally reflected in this film by the American director. A French attempt to conquer a hill ends in failure and the generals want to blame the soldiers, who, in the end, are found guilty. This event really happened and two of the families of those found guilty managed to have them rehabilitated. Humphrey Cobb later wrote the novel of the same name and, in 1956, Kubrick made the film. In Spain, the film was not screened until thirty years later because of its high anti-war content.

The enormous chasm between those who make military decisions and those who have to carry them out becomes clear thanks to Kubrick’s film-making skills. The close-up scenes in the trenches with the camera in constant movement transmit a great realism and are completely opposite to those of the officers –filmed in large rooms, far from the battlefields. The irrationality of military discipline, excessive ambition and the exploitation of the troops are strongly criticized in the film. The movie is a masterpiece, apart from the fact that it is strongly anti-militaristic.

La Grande Illusion (Grand Illusion), by Jean Renoir

Premiering in 1937, La Grande Illusion was promoted as “a film about the war where you don’t see any fighting or spying.” And, in fact, it was an atypical film for that time. Renoir made it as a criticism of the military spirit that led to World War II and that impregnated some of the films of that time period. The director himself talks about it in a video (https://youtu.be/l63xhUUZOH8) made as an introduction.
Diametrically opposed to Kubrick in his film, Renoir preferred to make a much more subtle criticism of war. In the middle of the conflict, several French officers establish a relationship with German officers in their prisoner-of-war camp. Preserving social class ties, the captains on both sides, who are aristocrats, quickly forge links –Erich von Stroheim’s performance as a German officer is particularly noteworthy. Thus the film successfully demonstrates that relationships between people are more important than their sense of national identity and that class is more important when forging bonds with others.