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Founding Mothers and Fathers

When the Iraq War began in March 2003, many Americans responded by engaging in a range of direct action protest which, whether most of them knew it or not, had been pioneered by the War Resisters League. In addition to joining massive peace marches, signing petitions, and writing letters, no small number of patriotic citizens sat-in, trespassed, blocked traffic and committed various acts of civil disobedience. Such deeds came naturally. Thanks to several generations of peace movement trailblazers, the American war machine cannot today rev its engine without igniting a requisite spark in the *peace* machine's pistons. The result is a familiar pattern of dissent and protest.

That these forms of protest are normal and routine says a lot about the influence of peace and social justice movements and the role played within those movements by the War Resisters League (WRL). From World War I (when the men and women who later founded the WRL promoted draft resistance) through the Second World War, the Cold War, the Vietnam War, and the dirty wars of the 1980s and 1990s, the WRL has led the antiwar movements in debating protest strategy and tactics, promoting secular pacifism, and in serving as a "movement halfway house"—providing guidance and assistance to other antiwar and social justice organizations.

Astonishingly, in spite of this influence, no organizational history of the WRL has appeared until now. Thanks to Scott H. Bennett's thoroughly researched study of the WRL, we now have a history of the League from 1915-1963—in essence, from birth through early adulthood. Readers will wonder why Bennett does not chronicle the Vietnam War years when the WRL arguably reached its point of greatest influence, but given the prior absence of *any* systematic history, it is clear that Bennett sees the League's early decades—years of marginalization leading to a mid-century radical turn

that shaped the WRL of the 1960s and today—as his priority. The result is a painstakingly detailed chronicle of the WRL's evolution from a tiny, earnest group of secular pacifists meeting in living rooms to a much larger national organization, a steady presence at the heart of the America's mid-century social movements.

Bennett does not merely recover the history of this vital organization; he argues also for the legitimacy of radical pacifism. In addition to asserting that the WRL has long been "the most important vehicle of secular, radical pacifism in the United States," and demonstrating how the League "evolved" from its narrow focus on peace to a multi-issue agenda for social justice, Bennett defends the WRL against the familiar dismissals of pacifism as naive and ineffective. Not so, says Bennett, who began the study with similar beliefs. By the time he finished, he notes in the introduction, he concluded that radical pacifism—distinct from "quietistic passivism"—is "a realistic and effective means of protest, resistance, and social revolution" (p. xv). It is a point he makes repeatedly, and fair enough, though such judgments also hint at the hagiography to come—a steady dose of admiring praise that sometimes, but not always, is supported by the evidence.

Bennett locates the origins of the WRL in the years of the Great War and, in particular, credits Jessie Wallace Hughan (1876-1955) as its main organizational force. During World War I, Hughan founded the Anti-Enlistment League (AEL) which collected more than 3,000 draft resistance pledges; she also garnered national attention in a highly publicized exchange with former president Theodore Roosevelt. Roosevelt called for anyone who had signed an AEL pledge to "be promptly disenfranchised and then sent to the front to dig kitchen sinks, bury dead horses." Hughan responded by mocking Roosevelt's notorious bravado: "there are a few of

us who have so far outgrown the soldierly ambitions of our childhood as really to find more agreeable the task of burying a dead horse than of bayoneting a live man" (p. 11).

The AEL ultimately made little material impact on the American role in the war, but it did lay the groundwork for the founding of the WRL in 1923. And while Hughan maintained her membership in a number of women's peace organizations, she insisted that the WRL, like the AEL, function not only as a secular organization but also as a mixed-gender group; even so, she limited herself to the duties of secretary to keep the WRL from being "smeared as a woman-run organization" (p. 21).

Regardless of who ran the organization, the WRL had a tougher time making a case for its own relevance as it persistently found itself pinned to the margins of political discourse from the 1920s into the 1940s. Actually, this is a view Bennett does not seem to share. Instead, his deep mining of sources led him to reconstruct innumerable public and private debates between WRL members themselves and with their various allies (notably within the Socialist Party) over how to best resist fascism; the result, in Bennett's view, is that the League's pacifism constituted an "important alternate vision" to armed resistance to fascism. Well, maybe. If that alternate vision had received wider circulation beyond the proportionately few American pacifists and socialists who debated it, labeling it "important" might be more persuasive. But Bennett presents no evidence that the broader American public even knew about the WRL or its pacifist proposals.

Consider, first, Jessie Wallace Hughan's ideas for nonviolent resistance to a hypothetical invasion of the United States and, next, the WRL's response to the Spanish Civil War. In the first case, Hughan argued for nonviolent "resistance to the bitter end," in which, Bennett notes, American "citizens would treat invaders with respect, but civil leaders would not surrender and neither would they obey enemy commands" (p. 48). If the occupiers attempted to wrest control from elected government (as one might reasonably expect), civil servants and the larger citizenry would respond with a general strike that would "paralyze vital public services." Likewise, when war broke out in Spain, and the Socialist Party and others on the left advocated armed resistance to fascism, the WRL again argued for nonviolence and noncooperation. This stand led to considerable division within the League and a serious split with the SP (though the SP's attempt to raise a militia—the Eugene Debs Column—on the side of the Spanish Republicans failed miserably).

There is much to admire in the WRL's consistent position through the 1930s, and Bennett makes the most of it. He describes Hughan's ideas as "a humane, effective, and realistic alternative" to both military defense against invasion and "passive acquiescence" (though one wonders how many Americans would have advocated the latter) (p. 48). Similarly, with regard to Spain, Bennett notes that although the pacifists were a minority in the SP, "the WRL and the New York Socialist War Resisters succeeded in triggering discussion on nonviolent alternatives in Spain" (p. 63). But one might easily argue that these were the League's dark ages, years and years of screaming against a hurricane, the rest of America deaf to its pleas. And then the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. Faced with overwhelming public support for American military action, WRL leader Evan Thomas conceded "we are such a small group that we would kid ourselves if we think we are of any social importance" (p. 74). The WRL may have been advancing "important alternate vision[s]," but who paid attention?

On the other hand, it is worth noting that Bennett's close attention to the intellectual battles that punctuated the WRL's first two decades reminds us that the organization's turn toward radical direct action tactics during and after World War II was not inevitable. Today, peace activists do not hesitate to call for civil disobedience thanks largely to the pioneering examples set by the WRL and other groups in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, so it would be easy to dismiss the prewar debates as mere prologue. It is to Bennett's credit that he takes these debates seriously.

During and after the Second World War, conscientious objectors and war resisters radicalized the WRL and made it into the League familiar to activists today. At first glance, the WRL seemed to lie down in the face of overwhelming public support for the war: it actively took measures to comply with the Espionage Act and ceased all public demonstrations. Instead of calling for resistance, it called for a negotiated settlement. But then there arose the issue of conscientious objectors (COs) conscripted into Civilian Public Service (CPS) camps. Under the Selective Training and Service Act of 1940, drafted COs could choose non-combatant service in the military or "work of national importance under civilian direction"; the government built the camps and provided equipment, and church groups ran the camps. More than twelve thousand COs served in CPS camps over the course of the war, and the WRL closely monitored their treatment and experience. Here again, given the overwhelming public support for the war effort, and with millions of men overseas, it is hard to imagine the average American cared about a handful of COs. Nevertheless,

as Bennett makes clear, the WRL's postwar shift to direct action first sprang up in the fertile fields of the CPS camps and prison.

As early as 1942, a number of COs walked out of CPS camps or engaged in work refusals. In part this arose from the widespread failure of CPS camps to provide "work of national importance," but more than that, many COs finally gave up on trying to find a pacifist home within the "war machine," and deliberately chose civil disobedience instead. As a result, increasing numbers of radical COs soon found themselves in prison. Bennett does a nice job of chronicling the prison experience of a number of these COs and war resisters, among them several who later made their names as WRL leaders: Jim Peck, Bayard Rustin, David Dellinger, and Ralph DiGia. One could argue that the WRL's first political victories came in federal penitentiaries in Danbury, Connecticut; Ashland, Kentucky; and Lewisburg, Pennsylvania where, shocked by prisoner treatment and, in particular, the segregation of black and white prisoners, the war resisters used civil disobedience to win prison concessions. For example, in two campaigns to abolish segregated prison dining rooms, Peck led a successful three-month work strike at Danbury, and Rustin launched an equally successful hunger strike at Ashland. Dellinger likewise led a sixty-four-day hunger strike (during which the COs were force fed with tubes inserted through their noses) against censorship of prisoner reading material.

The World War II years marked the beginning of the WRL's shift toward a multi-issue social justice agenda, but it did not happen without difficulty. The immediate postwar years were marked with sustained infighting and personal attacks between some of the stronger personalities in the organization. "Traditionalists" such as Jessie Wallace Hughan and Abraham Kaufman wanted both to maintain a strict organizational focus on peace and emphasize education and lobbying. The "radicals," led by the wartime COs, sought instead to broaden the League's mission to social justice and to commit it to non-violent direct action and civil disobedience. This divide ultimately led to a changing of the guard as key traditionalists such as Kaufman and Evan Thomas resigned and were replaced in the leadership by Rustin, Roy Finch, Ralph DiGia and other radicals.

Against the backdrop of this internal turbulence, the WRL articulated a "third camp" Cold War position that criticized both American and Soviet foreign policy and argued for a "one world community." In addition, some members engaged in increasingly high profile protests such as a 1947 New York draft burning and turn-in.

Jim Peck chained himself to a staircase railing inside the White House and passed out antidraft leaflets while wearing a shirt with "Veto the Draft" painted on it (p. 179). Bennett does not fully explain why the WRL did not mount a major protest campaign during the Korean War, though he notes that Dellinger, DiGia, and others attempted a World Citizens bicycle ride from Paris to Moscow—they made it to Vienna—that garnered some attention. Returning to the theme of his prewar chapters, Bennett concludes that although "the WRL was too marginal to influence the Cold War ... it was a voice of cogent dissent." More important is the fact that the League had "built a radical pacifist community" and the infrastructure for later protest (p. 203).

From the mid-1950s to the eve of the Vietnam War's escalation, the WRL's radicalism flowered. In 1956, it founded the leading movement journal, *Liberation*; each year from 1955 to 1961, it led civil defense protests in New York; and, throughout the period, it played an important role in the civil rights movement. One measure of the organization's growth during the period is how much the civil defense protests grew from year to year. In 1955, twenty-eight people turned out at City Hall Park to protest Operation Alert, a national civil defense drill, by refusing to take refuge in a bomb shelter; they were arrested. By 1960, after years of publicity, more than one thousand protesters took part in similar civil disobedience. Bennett perhaps overstates the WRL's influence on the civil rights movement—which seems limited to Bayard Rustin's indispensable leadership role—but does well to recover the League's help in founding the Committee for Nonviolent Action (CNVA). From the late 1950s to the late 1960s, CNVA members—along with Women Strike for Peace—did more than anyone to dramatize the perils of nuclear proliferation in a series of daring trespasses and civil disobedience actions.

Bennett leaves off, then, with the WRL at the height of its influence—"present at the creation" of the social reform movements of the 1960s. Readers will wish, with the WRL having reached early adulthood, that Bennett had pressed on to cover the era from the Vietnam War through to the present. More attention on the Vietnam War era would surely have strengthened Bennett's argument for the League's relevance and effectiveness. It also would have made more obvious the League's singular contribution as a proving ground for activists who later went on to play prominent roles in the movements of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. We will just have to hope that Bennett follows this book with a second volume to take up the years since 1963.

Radical Pacifism should be required reading for advanced students of American peace history and for activists looking ahead to four more years (and four more wars?) of the Bush administration. As debates now rage over what strategies and tactics have and have not worked in the last three years, and activists ponder how to more effectively confront the current war machine, the example of the War Resisters League offers valuable lessons. Today's antiwar movement cannot afford decades of debating strategy; better to look to the WRL to see what has worked in the past and hope it can work again.

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