

Maria Grazia Suriano. *Percorrere la nonviolenza: L'esperienza politica della Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (1915–1939)*. Roma: Aracne, 2012. 228 S. ISBN 978-88-548-5119-1.

Reviewed by Laurie Cohen

Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (July, 2013)



M. Suriano: Percorrere la nonviolenza

Maria Grazia Suriano's "Percorrere la nonviolenza. L'esperienza politica della Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (1915–1939)" (roughly translated as Advancing nonviolence. The political experience of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom [WILPF]) provides a necessary and valuable European perspective on the early history of this significant feminist-pacifist organization. In so doing, it provides a nice complement to the rush of WILPF monographs published in the 1990s, many by Syracuse University Press, and mostly from the point of view of the League's U.S. section. See among others, Frances H. Early, *A World Without War. How U.S. Feminists and Pacifists Resisted WWI*, Syracuse 1997; Carrie A. Foster, *The Women and the Warriors: The U.S. Section of the WILPF, 1915–1946*, Syracuse 1995; Harriet Hyman Alonso, *Peace as a Women's Issue. A History of the U.S. Movement for World Peace and Women's Rights*, Syracuse 1993; Leila Rupp, *Worlds of Women. The Making of an International Women's Movement*, Princeton 1997; Linda Schott, *Reconstructing Women's Thoughts. The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom before World War II*, Stanford 1997.

Keenly interested in describing how a social movement evolves into an international and woman-run non-governmental organization, Suriano focuses on the League's structure at its top-most level, its international executive committee. Since the executive members mainly comprised a range of leading British, Swedish, German, French, Dutch, Swiss, Italian, Austrian and

Hungarian feminist peace activists, who met regularly in European cities (most of all in Geneva, WILPF's headquarters), Suriano's landscape is primarily Europe. A minor criticism, in my view, is Suriano's failure to analyze the high turnover rate of WILPF's international secretaries (managing directors), including two women from the United States: Emily Greene Balch and Madeleine Z. Doty. Importantly, her framework enables her to concentrate on the international level of decision- and resolution-making that steered WILPF's operations. Discussions of the League's name, its objectives, membership requirements, finances and vicissitudes in arriving at a feminist definition of peace and/or nonviolence are thematically highlighted. WILPF's relationship with the League of Nations is also a focus.

Suriano's is certainly not the first account to examine WILPF's European roots, but it is unique for setting its sights beyond strictly national (French, British, Austrian, etc.) or biographical perspectives. In an appendix, Suriano also includes short biographies of eleven leading WILPF personalities. Why she spotlights a disproportionate number of British leaders is unclear to me. Cf. Emmanuelle Carle, *Women, Anti-Fascism and Peace in Interwar France: Gabrielle Duchêne's Itinerary*, in: *French History* 18/3 (2004), p. 291–314; Detlef Garz/ Anja Knuth, Constanze Hallgarten. *Portrait einer Pazifistin*, Hamburg 2004; Susanne Kinnebrock, *Anita Augspurg (1857–1943). Feministin und Pazifistin zwischen Journalismus und Politik. Eine kommunikationshistorische Biographie*, Herbolzheim 2005; Corinna

Oesch, Yella Hertzka (1873–1948). Eine Auto/Biographie von Beziehungen, in: Österreichische Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaften (ÖZG), 19/2 (2008), p. 118–144; Laurie R. Cohen, Collective Biography of Women Peace Activists, 1914–1941, in: Linda Erker/Alexander Salzmann/Lucile Dreidemy/ Klauđija Sabo (Ed.), Update! Perspektiven der Zeitgeschichte. Zeitgeschichte-tage 2010, Innsbruck 2012, p. 515–521. Moreover, by addressing the organization’s first twenty-five years, Suriano succeeds in critically exploring the continuities and divergences from its beginnings in 1915, within and outside of the international women’s movements, through the politically turbulent 1930s. Annika Wilmer’s fine comparative European study ends before 1921. See Annika Wilmers, Pazifismus in der internationalen Frauenbewegung (1914–1920). Handlungsspielräume, politische Konzeptionen und gesellschaftliche Auseinandersetzungen, Essen 2008. Her chronological structure serves to underline WILPF’s “movement” during the war years and its advocacy work in the interwar years as well as to trace its institutionalization.

Drawing on archival records of WILPF’s executive committee meetings and international congresses as well as WILPF newsletters, even specialists of the League’s history will likely find useful material here, particularly in the volume’s second half: for instance, Suriano’s exploration of the heated debates on changes in the

League’s constitution, on the question of nonviolence, particularly as of the 1930s, and on its resolution on unity in 1933. Additionally, the author’s descriptions of specialized WILPF conferences, such as A New Peace (at The Hague in 1922), which was designed to correct injustices of the Paris Peace Treaties, and the Modern Methods of Warfare (in Frankfurt in 1929), wherein Gertrud Woker, among others, expounded on the dangers of chemical warfare, reminds us of the League’s courageous, earnest and transnational efforts to limit the human and environmental costs of war and to create an enduring peace. Suriano’s final chapter, too, addresses the serious question of the executive committee’s actions vis-à-vis the rise of extreme right-wing regimes: for instance, their “Statement on Fascism” (1933); a “Resolution on behalf of pacifist prisoners in Germany” (1934) and approaches to Italy’s invasion of Ethiopia (1935) and the onset of the Spanish Civil War (1936). On the eve of the Second World War, the committee did not shy away from recognizing its own shortcomings in preventing another war, although these of course were hardly comparable to the failings of the interwar governments.

To sum up, Suriano delivers a clear exposé of the political discussions and strivings of this pioneering transnational feminist peace organization, which within two years will celebrate its first centenary.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/>

Citation: Laurie Cohen. Review of Suriano, Maria Grazia, *Percorrere la nonviolenza: L’esperienza politica della Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (1915–1939)*. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. July, 2013.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=39782>

Copyright © 2013 by H-Net, Clio-online, and the author, all rights reserved. This work may be copied and redistributed for non-commercial, educational purposes, if permission is granted by the author and usage right holders. For permission please contact H-SOZ-U-KULT@H-NET.MSU.EDU.