

Socialist women's organisations, the bourgeois women's movement and the First World War: National and transnational perspectives

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The story of international pacifist feminism is generally regarded as one of failure. In the light of the failure of feminist organisations in the interwar period after 1933 and during the Second World War, the years of the First World War appear to have marked the decline of the international feminist activism that had flourished at the turn of the century. The paper proposes an alternative hypothesis to the theory of failure. It suggests that the movement succeeded in the first year of the war in maintaining and giving impetus, under the conditions of war, to a transnational sphere of communication. This impetus was provided, among other things, by the International Conference of Socialist Women organised by Clara Zetkin and held in Bern in March 1915. The 1912 Socialist Congress was relevant to the extent that it created a framework for the discussions in Bern. Another key event was the Women's Peace Congress in The Hague, organised by sections of the bourgeois women's movement (18 April – 1 May 1915). The paper examines the conditions, methods and limits of a transnational feminist sphere of communication in the period prior to and at the beginning of World War I. It explores in particular the many contradictions that structured this sphere of communication. In this context, it seeks to understand the reasons for the failure to overcome the divide between the bourgeois and the proletarian women's movement in the name of pacifism.