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# Anna Ruth Fry

## *Women's Responsibilities with Regard to International Problems*

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*a cura di*

*Bruna Bianchi*

Il saggio che segue fu pubblicato da Ruth Fry, segretaria onoraria della *Friends' War Victims Relief Committee*, nell'aprile del 1923<sup>1</sup>. In esso l'autrice traccia un quadro dei più gravi problemi del dopoguerra (gli ingenti movimenti di popolazione, le difficoltà finanziarie e le distruzioni di vasti territori), mette in rilievo il valore del relief work nella riconciliazione internazionale e si sofferma sulla necessità dell'impegno femminile nelle questioni internazionali. Lo scritto fu ristampato nel 1940; nel dicembre di quello stesso anno comparve un altro suo breve scritto sul tema delle donne e la guerra dal titolo: *War on the Home*. Esso apriva la nuova rubrica dedicata alle donne del settimanale della *Peace Pledge Union*, "Peace News". Anche in questo ultimo scritto Ruth Fry ricordava alle donne, le principali vittime della guerra moderna, il diritto, e soprattutto, il dovere di far sentire la propria voce<sup>2</sup>. Per una introduzione a *Women's Responsibilities with Regard to International Problems* si rimanda al saggio dedicato al pensiero e all'attività di Ruth Fry consultabile in questo numero della rivista, nella rubrica Ricerche.

The fact that in this country, women have entered the field of politics at a time of such international crisis, suggests that they may have special responsibilities in the matter, and gives rise to the following thoughts.

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<sup>1</sup> Il saggio pubblicato nell'aprile del 1923 in "The Beacon" è stato in seguito ristampato in proprio dall'autrice, a Thorpeness nel 1940. La trascrizione, a cura di Anna Battaglia, si basa su questa seconda edizione. Non siamo riusciti a risalire ai titolari dei diritti, diritti che ci impegniamo a riconoscere ottemperando a tutti gli obblighi di legge.

<sup>2</sup> Lo scritto apparve il 27 dicembre 1940.

Surely the thoughtful woman will be arrested by the facts as she finds them, and she will ask herself whether, if this be the result of a man-made world, there is no new contribution, no new inspiration, which can be given by women.

Let us consider for a moment what is the state of affairs, and if we can consider it as if we were inhabitants of another planet seeing it for the first time, perhaps we shall see it in truer colour, and we shall begin to ask whether anything so uncommon as common sense ever enters into mundane affairs.

Four years after the Armistices, then we see Europe in the throes of a life and death struggle with economic and psychological forces which have been let loose by the Great War. No one can predict with certainty how such forces act, because they have never been experienced before.

The problems seem to me mainly concerned with three matters with movements of people, with destruction of property, and with money.

As to the first, we find the problem of over-population, as in Germany. It has been said that there are twenty million too many Germans for the land now belonging to the German Republic, and that they must die. Now according to the post-war arrangements, emigrations for Germans is practically impossible, and hardly any of them can leave their country. Then there are the movements for political reasons – the thousands of Russians who dare not, or will not, live under the Soviet, who are scattered in almost every country of Europe. These people are mostly also unwilling or unable to settle down in the new abode, and are dependent on charity, Governmental or otherwise, and they are forming centres of criticism and hatred of their country instead of being absorbed in helping her to solve her problems. [p.3] Their position is a miserable one, they have lost everything, home and possessions and one is bitterly grieved for them. Not many of them are like the lady I met recently, who told me that she felt that her class – that of aristocratic Russians – have richly deserved their fate, because of their utter carelessness of the welfare of others when they themselves were in fortunate circumstances.

Then there are the refugees (e.g. in Hungary) who have returned to their fatherland by reason of part of it being cut off and given to other countries – Serbia and Rumania in the case of Hungary.

In connection to the destruction of property, there are the refugees who, because their home happened to be in the middle of battlefields, were driven out during the war, and came back – in some cases, such as Poland, are still coming back – to find those homes entirely destroyed. Thus, through no fault of their own, they must begin entirely *de novo* to still have villages and even big towns which in consequence of destruction, are to a large extent, uninhabitable, reminding one of Pompeii more than of a modern town. More recently still we have the terrible flights of Greeks from Asia Minor and Thrace at the same tune as the expulsion of Turks from Greek Territory. This has been accompanied by great destruction of property.

The money problems are of the greatest complexity, but any one can see the facts for themselves. Money, which before the War certainly seemed to the uninitiated so solid and tangible a thing, now appears to be almost an illusion or a delusion. In Russia the rouble has become worth about fifteen million times as little as before, and seems as if it were exploring infinity. I wish that everyone here

would try to realise what it would mean if their own money played these pranks. In Germany at the time of writing it is as if about £45 pre-war were now equal to one penny. I have not space to dwell on the consequent suffering and tragedy which is daily increasing.

But whether the money of a country is highly in value or low, it suffers alike. The low exchange country cannot possibly purchase from abroad, the high one cannot sell. And these differences of money value are maintained and increased by reason of vast sums of money which are considered to be due from one country to another. But in the opinion of many experts these sums are entirely beyond the capacity of the [p.4] debtor country to pay, while on the other hand, it would do incalculable harm to the trade of the creditor country to receive them.

And all these factors are proving that civilization as at present practised won't work – that life is practically impracticable to thousands of our fellow Europeans – that they are living under conditions in which you or I could prove that to live was impossible. And yet, that extraordinary power of life, which is beyond logic and beyond mathematics, enables people to go on living – or must I say prevents their dying? – when what we call minimum necessities of life are absent. But this cannot prevent the fact that thousands – I suppose millions – of men, women and children, are suffering acutely and irreparably, are sowing the seeds of increased diseases and suffering which must inevitably very deeply injure future generations. Not only are they suffering thus in their bodies, but they are suffering mental starvation and isolation, and yet, despite it all, are struggling against superhuman odds to keep learning alive.

I am sure we do not fully realise the suffering which this inability to procure food for the mind means to cultured men and women. The price of books to most Central Europeans makes them practically unobtainable, and in far greater measure English scientific books are beyond their reach, and the internationalism of science receives a heavy blow.

Can women see these things and remain inactive? Will not their sense of economy in the widest sense, of justice and righteousness, be outraged?

Perhaps we should first of all feel the necessity of considering whether nationality has its right place given to it in our present scheme of things. Some one said the other day that if you took a lot of children of many nations and dressed them up in each other's clothes, it would be hard to tell them their origin. "Nationality", he said, "is a disease we suffer from when we are grown up." Now, should we suffer from it, or can we be inoculated to take the disease more lightly? At present we invent a son of guy and dress it with certain vices, and then call it by the name of a certain country, reading all news of that country's dangers in the light of what we think our guy would do. But we have to learn that no country can be condensed in that simple way, and if we happen to dislike the action of a Government, it is highly probable that it is disliked as intensely by many inhabitants of that very country. But there is a very interesting converse [p.5] to this practice of individualizing a country, and that is the generalizing from an individual to a country, which has a great importance for us as individuals. Let me tell you a story to illustrate this. During and after the war, when my Committee was at work in France, we were allowed the services of German prisoners to help our

workers with the reconstruction work we had undertaken. We were not allowed to pay them wages at the time, but decided that when they had returned to their own country it would be a very good plan to give them remittances in proportion to the length of their work. One of our workers undertook to make a journey through Germany for this purpose, hunting for these men in the most out-of-the-way villages. At one village the first cottage entered seemed to offer little encouragement, until it transpired that our worker was English. Then a welcome was most cordially given to her, for it appears that two soldiers in kilts – whether officers or men I know not – had been quartered there and had received parcels from home, which they had shared amongst the village children. It was at the worst time of the blockade, when tuberculosis was a constant threat to the undernourished, war-worn children, and the oil from the sardines received was credited with having saved these village children. And so those Scottish soldiers with their kindly generosity had stood to that village for England, and altered the whole conception of her. If two men can produce in a village that effect of goodwill and friendliness, what might not be done by a whole nation which should act with similar good feeling? What might not follow from a poignant act of international generosity?

Of course the results of the war has been to emphasize immensely the clash of nationalities. The cry of national self-determination, which sounds so kindly a one, has stirred up all sorts of difficulties and differences, and everyone is afraid of being left in a cage with a beast of a different species. It sometimes seems as if nothing but a geographical shuffling would solve the thing as at present envisaged, and that people must move their homes until they are safely surrounded by nobody but their own nationals; and Punch's old solution of the Irish difficulty appears an excellent one, viz., the cutting of a canal between north and south, and the building of a bridge from Belfast to Scotland. But shall we not in sober truth have to cease dividing till we return to the tribal system, and learn instead to live in co-operation with people even of different race from our own? In fact we must make a study of whether self-determination is practicable or whether some other solution is not necessary.

[p. 6] I have spoken of our false individualizing of foreign countries, and I do trust that women will feel the immense importance of cultivating truth in regard to international problems. Truth is one of the thing we have lost through the war – not that we ever had too much of it. But when we remember the splendidly organised service of lying which was instituted in this country in the war, can we wonder at what has happened? You will remember that it was admitted that force was not succeeding in reducing our enemies, and so millions of leaflets putting the Allies' case and promising, magnanimously and extravagantly, things which were never meant to be performed, were distributed from the air amongst all our so-called enemies. I wish that some one would take the trouble to compare those promises with post-war performances. Perhaps you remember the story of the girl who told in Confession of her grief at having told many untruths about her friends which she feared had done some harm. Her confessor told her she must do two penances, and the first was to take a pillow of feathers to a high tower and, cutting it open, let them free. She came back relieved that the first part, at all events, was so easy, to

be told that for the second part she must gather up those feathers from all the corners whither the wind had blown them. I fear that for many a long day and from many a far corner we shall have to be gathering our feathered lies.

And I hope, too, that women will realize what a large part the language difficulty plays in making for international complications, and how essential it is that it should be diminished as far as possible. They can, at all events, see that their children are better equipped than their own generation by more study of foreign languages. I am afraid I am heretic enough to think that the classical languages must wait until we have less crucial and momentary questions which a freely diffused knowledge of at least French and German may help to solve. I would even plead for Esperanto, for the reason I believe we need a neutral language where there is no give and take. Undoubtedly the colour of one's conversation is different when talking to a Frenchman in French and to the same man in English and I think it is very important that this colour should be in some cases a neutral one not belonging to either party.

In speaking with the language training for children may I emphasize, too, the great importance of their making links with foreigners while their minds are forming. [p.7] For a child's world to include those of another nationality must surely help to break down the insularity to which we are prone in England.

And next let me emphasize the need for study - study not only of languages, but of economics and conditions of the different foreign countries. How far more interesting international questions would be if we were all equipped to take an intelligent interest in them. Why cannot people with some leisure get together and make a study of the conditions, geography, people, music, art, religion of a given country, and try to imagine themselves as its citizens? How much more real it would become, and how important it is that we should make friends with a nation's ideas through a knowledge of its literature. And then if possible the crown of the thing would be personal intercourse with some of the nationals, or better still, a sojourn in the country itself. In this connection we have to remember that each one of us in this way have an influence, even if a small one, in encouraging goodwill or the opposite between the different countries. Travel is indeed a joy, and also a responsibility in the light of what I have already said of the power of an individual to represent a nation for good or ill. It might be worth while to send agents - a sort of spies turned the other way round - to make people know how nice English people could be! All I can say is that my own experience of very many long travels alone on the Continent since the Armistice has revealed to me the exceeding kindness of the "man in the railway carriage" who is a good deal like the "man in the street". I have been locked often in the most friendly and unexpected ways, and have found real sympathy and understanding from very diverse nationalities.

Women must learn to think internationally - i.e., in other words, try to be fair to the claims and aspirations of other countries as they wish other countries to be to our own. Selfishness must be as bad form among nations as among people. And it is one of the great difficulties of international conferences that so few people are big enough to rise to the consideration of the good of the whole. Blindness to the failings of one's country and belief in the wickedness of all others are no virtues.

We all have a real duty to the League of Nations. At presents it stands as an attempt at realizing a better international way, but it is easy to see its glaring defects, [p. 8] and many are tempted thereby to decry it. I cannot think that is the right course. I believe we should do our best to be well-informed as to its actual accomplishments, of which the greatest are perhaps in connection with matters of secondary but still of considerable importance. We should also try to keep steadily before us the improvements which we believe to be most necessary and try to form public opinion in favour of them. Do not let us allow it either to get crystallized before these improvements are effected or so decried by the reformers that it fails perforce into the hands of reactionaries. I myself was greatly interested when I was in Geneva last September in realizing the atmosphere of hopefulness which surrounded the Meeting of the Assembly, and of the great importance of the existence of the Secretariat alone. There you have a body of earnest, well informed men and women of many nationalities, working together continuously on important international questions. In miniature they can represent the feelings of the different nations, and it should prove far easier to come to a reasonable settlement of any acute difficulty than with the usual hastily gathered together secretariat of the *ad hoc* conference. All the same the League of Nations has, in my opinion, to increase very speedily in wisdom and power if it is to prove the saviour of Europe.

I want to refer of what it is, I believe, a real force in international reconciliation, and that is the work of relief. Although I have given the last eight years to working for it, I realize as fully as any one that it is only a palliative, and not a cure. It is a confession of disease in the body politics, but where disease is, a palliative may be necessary till a cure can be effected, and it may also call attention to the need for a cure. I have no time to dwell on the work done in the past or present. Since 1914 my Committee have worked in France, Holland, Belgium, Germany, Austria, Serbia, Poland and Russia, and everywhere we have tried to show that we come for the simple reason of bringing help and friendship to our fellow-men, quite irrespective of race, creed or politics. The help given has been in food, in clothing, in housing, and by medical or agricultural aid, and always with the endeavour to help people to become again self-supporting. But behind all the material aid we have tried to bring a message of the membership in a common brotherhood, and of our desire for a real reconciliation and understanding between all nations. The response has been often quite wonderful – that is to say, the appreciation of the small help given has been out of proportion to its amount, and the understanding of its significance and the meaning which lies behind it, most encouraging.

[p.9] But far greater than all these, I believe that women have the immense responsibility of deciding upon the absolutely vital question of destruction or construction, of War or Peace, of Chaos or Christianity. I have tried to give the barest outline of the state of Europe four years after the Great War. I believe we are living in a time of transition, big with possibility of good and evil. In the last century science made amazingly progress, progress which has been for the good of mankind in many ways; but, on the other hand, has been harnessed to the work of destruction with appalling success. It is conceded that since the Armistice such further strides have been made that destruction of armies and civilians could now take place with immensely great ease. Another war would, I believe, result without

exaggeration in the destruction of European civilization. Can women be deceived by the old cry "Si vis pacem para bellum" (if you wish peace prepare for war)? Can they possibly believe that competitive armaments ever achieve peace? Can they believe that men can prepare all their lives for something they are to wish never to happen? And can they sincerely believe that force can move for righteousness? Believe me, the failure of force is written large across the face of Europe. Are we going to cure it by more force? No, we have come to the parting of the ways, and the world must choose. And I believe that we must realize that it is a real choice; there is no middle course, no half-way house, no safe fence. We cannot say to the burglar, "I know you mean to be my friend, and repent for your desire to steal", when we cover him with our revolver. Moral force is atrophied by the use of physical force. One would think that the failure of the force itself would have driven the practical thinker to seek some other way, for surely a system which can show such an absolute breakdown as the present must be discredited in the eyes of any sane women. But those of us who believe that Christ was a practical teacher, believe that Love never fails. And what would it teach us if we followed it too? I think it would show us primarily that we are all members one of another, that the good of one nation is the good of all, and that in trying to injure our neighbour we do truly injure ourselves. It would show us that wrongdoing hurts ourselves, not the person we think to injure, because it hurts our souls in the doing, and it is injury to the soul which is real injury.

[p.10] I think we have to learn that the belief in force is a creed outworn. As I have said we see Europe in broken pieces in consequence of it, and yet the so-called practical man is believed to desire more of it. I believe, on the contrary, that there is a vast and ever-increasing army of people in every country who are absolutely weary of it and are only waiting for a lead in a new direction. What is wanted is a new vision of the practicability of deciding differences by the only mean which does decide them – reason. In the days of duels, revolvers were believed in as a way of settling. Until the idea grew that there was a better way. May it not be the splendid opportunity for women – and I trust British women will lead the way – to see this vision of an armless world? And believe me, if even British women only were to see that vision and act upon it, the force of their belief could accomplish the change. Never was there such an opportunity. The German army, long the excuse for increase of armaments, is crushed and dissipated; everywhere is a world thoroughly war-weary and crushed too, by war payments. It is calculated that in the last completed financial year, if the cost of maintenance of war services in this country were divided equally amongst every man, woman and child, it would amount to £4 7s. 3d. per head. That is enough, by the way, to answer the objection that international affairs do not concern women. For at the same time it is said that the proposed burden for the replacement or improvement of poor homes in this country is 1 ½ d. per head. Now I am greatly mistaken if the women of this country really believe that the destruction of other people's lives and homes is a better thing to spend on than construction and improvements. And I am greatly mistaken if they think that there is any connection between the application of force and the matter under dispute. But to women may fall the wonderful opportunity of showing that is not only science that progresses, but that morals,

too, may take a leap forward. And they may show, too, that the same wonderful devotion and self-sacrifice that was put into the prosecution of the war can be put into the ensuing of peace. If women can use their intuition to see what a possibility is theirs, their crusade could be irresistible. They cannot lead in physical force. Did they so will it, they could lead in spiritual force.

Each one of us who shares this aspiration brings nearer its achievement, and I beg each one of you earnestly to consider whether you have not a duty to join in the splendid adventure [p. 11].