

THE WOMEN'S PEACE CRUSADE: FEMINIST PACIFISM AS POLITICAL RESISTANCE (1848–1939)

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Abstract

Between 1848 and 1939, feminist pacifism emerged as a significant yet historically marginalized force in political thought on war and peace. This marginalization resulted from political opposition, where feminist pacifists were dismissed as naïve idealists or traitors, and from historiographical neglect, as mainstream pacifist narratives often centered male-dominated socialist or liberal internationalist movements. Rooted in both ideological critique and direct activism, feminist pacifists challenged the militarization of patriarchal societies, advocating for non-violent conflict resolution, disarmament, and international cooperation. This paper examines the evolution of feminist pacifism, tracing its development from the revolutions of 1848 to the interwar period, and argues that feminist pacifism was not merely a moral rejection of war but a radical resistance to militarized state power, economic imperialism, and gendered oppression. The study explores key feminist thinkers, organizations, and movements, beginning with Bertha von Suttner and Julia Ward Howe, who laid the groundwork for a gendered critique of war. Organizations such as the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) institutionalized feminist peace activism. The Hague Congress of 1915 and the Women's Peace Crusade (1917) marked feminist pacifism's transition from theory to direct resistance. The interwar period challenged feminist pacifism as fascism rose, forcing some to reconsider armed resistance. Additionally, non-Western feminist pacifists in anti-colonial movements opposed militarism as part of the fight against imperialism. Feminist pacifist critiques remain relevant today, shaping debates on conflict resolution, humanitarian intervention, and demilitarization and their intersectional approach continues to challenge dominant narratives on war and peace, offering alternative security frameworks that emphasize diplomacy over militarization.

Keywords: Feminism, Pacifism, Political Thought, Peace Movements, Anti-Militarism

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Historical Context and Relevance of Enquiry

Feminist pacifism represents a crucial yet historically under-examined component of political thought on peace - while mainstream pacifist movements have often been analyzed through the lenses of socialist internationalism or liberal institutionalism, feminist pacifism introduced an intersectional critique of war that linked gender, militarism, and structural oppression. Thus, feminist pacifists rejected war not only on moral grounds but as an instrument of patriarchal control, reinforcing gendered hierarchies and excluding women from political agency (Von Suttner, 1889, p. 214). Their activism was shaped by broader struggles for suffrage, labor rights, and social reform, making feminist pacifism an intrinsically political movement rather than merely a moral or humanitarian cause.

The interval of 1848 to 1939 provides a crucial framework for understanding the development of feminist

pacifist thought as the Revolutions of 1848 marked the emergence of organized feminist activism, with early feminists increasingly engaging in peace efforts, while the late 19th century saw the rise of women-led peace societies, culminating in the first formal feminist pacifist organizations such as the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF). The First World War (1914–1918) was a defining moment, as feminist pacifists actively resisted militarization, organizing events such as the Hague Congress of 1915 to push for diplomatic conflict resolution. In addition, the interwar years saw renewed feminist efforts within the League of Nations, but also deep fractures within the movement as the rise of fascism and totalitarianism forced feminist pacifists to reconsider the limitations of non-violent resistance.

As such, one of the defining moments of feminist pacifist activism was the Women's Peace Crusade (1917), which mobilized working-class women against conscription and militarization in Britain. Unlike many mainstream pacifist efforts, which focused on diplomatic engagement or elite-driven activism, the Women's Peace Crusade was a grassroots movement that sought to challenge war propaganda, imperialism, and state coercion and its impact on transnational feminist pacifist networks reflected the broader role of women's movements in shaping anti-war discourse.

Hence, this study examines the theoretical foundations, historical evolution, and ideological shifts within feminist pacifism, highlighting its contributions to both intellectual history and political activism. Moreover, it situates feminist pacifist thought within the broader discourses of gender, nationalism, and anti-imperialism, emphasizing how feminist pacifists articulated a radical critique of militarism that remains relevant in contemporary debates on war and security.

1.2 Historiographical Overview

To begin with, scholarship on pacifism, gender, and political resistance has traditionally marginalized the contributions of feminist pacifists- early histories of pacifism have largely been male-dominated narratives, focusing on socialist, anarchist, and religious peace movements while neglecting the distinct ideological contributions of feminist thinkers (Curti, 1936, p. 187) and even in feminist historiography, pacifism has often been treated as a secondary concern, overshadowed by movements for suffrage, labor rights, or social welfare reforms (Caine, 1997, p. 218). However, recent scholarship has begun to recognize the central role of feminist pacifists in shaping both peace activism and feminist political thought, with historians such as Margaret Liddington (1989), Leila Rupp (1997), and Martin Ceadel (2009) who have emphasized the intersectionality of feminist pacifism, linking anti-war activism with critiques of capitalism, imperialism, and patriarchy. These scholars argue that feminist pacifists were not merely adjuncts to mainstream peace movements, but radical theorists in their own right, advocating for non-violent political alternatives that challenged state power (Rupp, 1997, p. 112).

Nonetheless, despite these advancements, significant gaps remain in the literature. While there is growing recognition of elite feminist pacifists, such as Bertha von Suttner and Jane Addams, there has been less engagement with working-class and transnational feminist peace efforts. Similarly, the economic critiques of militarism advanced by socialist feminists have not been sufficiently integrated into mainstream histories of pacifism. As such, this paper addresses these gaps by focusing on feminist pacifist networks across different social and political contexts, tracing their evolution from 1848 to 1939 and demonstrating how feminist pacifism contributed to global anti-militarist discourses.

1.3 Methodology & Approach

This study employs a historical and theoretical analysis of feminist pacifist thought, integrating intellectual history, political theory, and gender analysis to examine how feminist activists and theorists conceptualized and engaged with anti-militarism. The methodological approach follows a structured framework that aligns historical events with ideological developments, allowing for a comprehensive examination of the interplay between feminist pacifist theory and political activism.

The paper's structure is designed to trace the historical development of feminist pacifism while engaging with key theoretical debates. It begins by establishing the conceptual foundations of feminist pacifism, differentiating between absolute pacifism, which rejects all forms of violence, and pragmatic pacifism, which seeks to integrate peace-building efforts within existing political structures. It then moves to an examination of the historical development of feminist pacifism from 1848 to 1939, highlighting key moments such as the emergence of women-led peace societies in the late 19th century, the activism of the Women's Peace Crusade during World War I, and feminist participation in the Hague Congress of 1915. This section provides both historical depth and thematic analysis, showing how feminist pacifists engaged with evolving geopolitical conditions.

Following this historical analysis, the study shifts focus to the challenges feminist pacifists faced during the

rise of fascism in the 1930s, examining the internal debates within feminist pacifist circles about whether non-violent resistance was sufficient in the face of authoritarian militarization. This discussion includes a case study of the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939), where divisions between pacifist and anti-fascist feminists became particularly pronounced. The final section evaluates the legacy of feminist pacifism, assessing both its intellectual contributions and political impact while exploring its influence on post-World War II peace organizations and contemporary feminist critiques of war and militarism.

By structuring the paper in this way, the study balances historical narrative with theoretical engagement, allowing for a comprehensive exploration of feminist pacifism as both a political movement and an intellectual tradition. The use of case studies, primary texts, and comparative analysis ensures that the discussion remains grounded in historical evidence while contributing to broader debates on gender, war, and peace. This methodological approach allows for a multifaceted understanding of feminist pacifism, demonstrating its enduring relevance in contemporary discourses on militarism, security, and resistance.

2. CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS OF FEMINIST PACIFISM

2.1 Definition & Core Principles

Feminist pacifism represents a synthesis of gender theory, non-violence, and political activism, positioning itself as both a critique of war and a radical reconfiguration of power relations within society. Unlike conventional pacifist movements, which frequently centered economic or diplomatic solutions to war, feminist pacifists introduced a gendered critique of militarism, arguing that war was not merely an external conflict between nations but an instrument of state power that upheld gendered hierarchies and actively suppressed women's political agency (Von Suttner, 1889, p. 214). In this framework, militarism was understood not as an isolated policy of states but as a systemic force intertwined with patriarchy, capitalism, and imperialism, ensuring that violence remained a structural component of governance.

Within feminist pacifism, two primary strands emerged: absolute pacifism and pragmatic pacifism. Absolute pacifists rejected all forms of violence, viewing war as inherently unjustifiable under any circumstances. This position was championed by figures such as Bertha von Suttner, who, in *Lay Down Your Arms* (1889), emphasized the moral imperative of non-violence as a fundamental human right, linking peace to ethical responsibility and human dignity. For absolute pacifists, the rejection of war was not only a means to prevent physical destruction but a necessary precondition for social transformation.

By contrast, pragmatic pacifists sought to work within existing political structures to advocate for peace, acknowledging that resistance—whether through political reform, activism, or, in some cases, self-defense—was sometimes necessary to combat oppression (Addams, 1915, p. 143). Pragmatic pacifists recognized that peace could not be achieved solely through moral persuasion but required institutional and systemic change, particularly in contexts where totalitarian regimes and imperial expansion rendered diplomatic efforts ineffective. The debate between these two positions became particularly pronounced during the interwar period, as feminist pacifists grappled with the rise of fascism, the remilitarization of Europe, and the League of Nations' failure to enforce peace (Ceadel, 2009, p. 229).

Despite these internal distinctions, feminist pacifists shared a common goal: to dismantle the structural conditions that enabled war and militarism. Their activism extended far beyond traditional anti-war movements, engaging with issues such as suffrage, labor rights, and social welfare, which they saw as integral components of peace-building. They understood war not only as a battlefield event but as part of a continuum of systemic violence that included economic exploitation, colonial oppression, and gender-based subjugation (Rupp, 1997, p. 98). Their approach thus framed peace as more than just the absence of war—it was a demand for an equitable, just, and inclusive society in which militarized power structures were dismantled at every level.

2.2 Feminist Critique of War and Militarism

Feminist pacifists fundamentally opposed war as a mechanism of patriarchal state control, exposing how militarized economies and political structures prioritized aggression and conquest while simultaneously marginalizing women from positions of power and decision-making. Their critique was not limited to direct military engagement but extended to structural militarism, which embedded violence within economic policies, legal systems, and nationalist ideologies. The exclusion of women from governance, combined with their disproportionate suffering in wartime—through displacement, sexual violence, and economic precarity—underscored the inherently gendered nature of war (Liddington, 1989, p. 204).

One of the earliest feminist pacifist critiques of war came from Julia Ward Howe, whose Mother's Day Proclamation (1870) called upon women to unite against war as an extension of their moral and civic duty. In

her plea, Howe framed motherhood as a counterforce to militarism, arguing that women, as bearers of life, had a unique responsibility to oppose war's destructive tendencies (Howe, 1870, p. 92). This maternalist argument, which positioned women as natural peacemakers, was a recurring theme in early feminist pacifist rhetoric and was used to justify women's involvement in international diplomacy and peace negotiations.

However, this maternalist framing was later challenged by socialist feminists, who rejected biological determinism in favor of a structural critique of militarism and capitalism. Socialist feminists argued that war was not merely a moral failing or a tragic inevitability but a deliberate strategy used by capitalist elites to sustain economic hegemony and imperial dominance. Jane Addams and Rosa Luxemburg, among others, linked militarism to imperialism, demonstrating how war disproportionately benefited industrialists and financiers while extracting labor and resources from the working class (Addams, 1915, p. 97; Luxemburg, 1916, p. 67). Their critiques underscored how militarized economies prioritized arms production over social welfare, diverting public resources from education, healthcare, and women's economic participation—a process they saw as fundamental to the perpetuation of global inequalities.

Moreover, feminist pacifists emphasized that nationalism was weaponized to manufacture consent for war, exploiting gendered ideals of duty, sacrifice, and citizenship to compel both men and women into compliance with militarized policies. Women were often mobilized as symbols of national honor, their bodies and labor co-opted to serve the interests of the state and the war economy. Simultaneously, gendered war propaganda reinforced the idea that women's primary role in war was to support men at the front, work in war industries, or uphold morale at home—an ideology that feminist pacifists sought to dismantle by advocating for women's direct involvement in peace negotiations and policy-making (Rupp, 1997, p. 112).

The feminist pacifist critique of war and militarism thus operated on multiple levels: as a moral rejection of violence, as a political argument for women's inclusion in governance, and as an economic analysis of the ways in which militarization reinforced capitalist exploitation and class oppression. By integrating these perspectives, feminist pacifists developed a distinctive framework for peace that was inseparable from broader struggles for gender, economic, and social justice. Their analysis positioned peace not as a static condition but as an ongoing struggle against all forms of systemic violence, requiring active resistance, institutional transformation, and global solidarity.

Feminist pacifists thus redefined peace activism, shifting it from a passive call for disarmament to a comprehensive critique of the structures that perpetuate war. By linking militarism to patriarchal control, economic injustice, and imperial expansion, they created a radical and enduring political framework that continues to shape modern feminist critiques of war, security, and global conflict resolution.

3. HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF FEMINIST PACIFISM (1848–1939)

3.1 Early Feminist Pacifists and Organizations

The intellectual foundations of feminist pacifism in the late nineteenth century were shaped by a convergence of political activism, moral philosophy, and early feminist critiques of militarism. One of the most influential figures in this movement was Bertha von Suttner, whose seminal work *Lay Down Your Arms* (1889) articulated a vision of pacifism rooted in moral conviction and gendered critiques of state violence. Von Suttner, a key architect of feminist anti-militarism, positioned women as natural advocates for peace, arguing that their exclusion from political power structures had enabled the unchecked militarization of European states (Von Suttner, 1889, p. 214). Her writings not only inspired later generations of feminist pacifists but also contributed to the foundation of the Nobel Peace Prize, which she tirelessly campaigned for in her lifetime.

The late nineteenth century also witnessed the emergence of women-led peace societies, which sought to institutionalize feminist pacifist ideals. Organizations such as the International Council of Women (ICW) and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) established a transnational framework for feminist activism, advocating for diplomatic conflict resolution and women's political inclusion in peace negotiations. These groups often worked in conjunction with broader pacifist movements but maintained a distinct feminist critique, arguing that war was not only a failure of diplomacy but a symptom of patriarchal governance that excluded women from decision-making (Liddington, 1989, p. 204).

Feminist pacifists also made significant contributions to the Hague Conferences, particularly in 1899 and 1907. While these early peace efforts were largely dominated by state actors, feminist organizations lobbied for the inclusion of women in international negotiations. Their presence at the Hague reflected a broader strategic shift within feminist pacifism—from moral appeals to institutional engagement. Yet, despite these efforts, feminist activists faced structural barriers that prevented their full participation in peace diplomacy, highlighting the limitations of institutional pacifism in deeply militarized political systems (Curti, 1936, p. 187).

3.2 The Women's Peace Crusade (1917) and World War I

The outbreak of World War I represented both a crisis and an opportunity for feminist pacifists. As European states mobilized their populations for war, feminist anti-militarists found themselves increasingly marginalized, accused of treasonous behavior for opposing the war effort. In Britain, wartime nationalism reached a fever pitch, leading to widespread hostility toward pacifist organizations. It was in this climate that the Women's Peace Crusade (WPC) emerged in 1917, providing one of the most radical feminist pacifist responses to the war.

The WPC, primarily composed of working-class women, sought to challenge the war narrative through grassroots mobilization and direct political engagement. Unlike elite-led pacifist movements, which often relied on diplomacy and policy advocacy, the WPC operated on the ground, organizing protests against conscription and the war economy. Their opposition to Britain's continued involvement in the war was particularly radical in a context where dissent was equated with betrayal (Liddington, 1989, p. 215).

Across the Atlantic, Jane Addams and the Women's Peace Party (WPP) in the United States played a similarly significant role in feminist pacifist activism. Addams, a Nobel laureate and a central figure in feminist peace politics, framed opposition to the war as a feminist imperative. The WPP not only lobbied against American intervention but also sought to reshape postwar diplomacy, advocating for peace settlements that prioritized economic justice and women's inclusion in decision-making (Addams, 1915, p. 97).

One of the most critical transnational feminist pacifist efforts during the war was the Hague Congress of 1915, which brought together feminist activists from both neutral and belligerent nations. The Congress, largely organized by the Women's International Congress, aimed to develop a diplomatic alternative to war, calling for an immediate ceasefire and proposing a framework for lasting peace. While their proposals were dismissed by national governments, the Congress laid the foundation for WILPF, which became a cornerstone of interwar feminist pacifism (Rupp, 1997, p. 98).

The intense nationalism of World War I, however, meant that feminist pacifists often faced accusations of treason and disloyalty. Many, including Addams, were vilified in their home countries for their perceived lack of patriotism. Feminist pacifist organizations had to navigate a fine line between maintaining their commitment to peace and resisting state repression. The end of the war, rather than marking a victory for feminist pacifists, exposed the continued structural exclusion of women from postwar peace negotiations, setting the stage for their renewed efforts in the League of Nations era (Ceadel, 2009, p. 229).

3.3 Interwar Feminist Pacifism and the League of Nations

The post-World War I period saw renewed feminist pacifist engagement, particularly with the League of Nations, which many feminist activists initially viewed as a promising vehicle for global peace. Women's organizations, particularly WILPF, saw the League as an opportunity to institutionalize feminist pacifist ideals within the emerging system of international governance. However, their optimism was short-lived, as the League's limited authority and reluctance to challenge militarization soon became evident.

Feminist hopes for the League centered on its potential to promote collective security and diplomatic conflict resolution, yet these ideals were undermined by the League's failure to enforce disarmament agreements. Feminist pacifists were particularly critical of the League's unwillingness to take decisive action against aggressive militarism, such as Italy's invasion of Ethiopia (1935) and the remilitarization of Germany under Hitler. As a result, many feminist pacifists became disillusioned with institutional diplomacy and sought alternative strategies for resisting war (Liddington, 1989, p. 230).

One of the key ideological divisions within interwar feminist pacifism was the split between reformist and radical pacifists. Reformist feminist pacifists, including those within WILPF, continued to work within diplomatic frameworks, advocating for legal restrictions on arms production and military expansion. Radical feminist pacifists, by contrast, argued that diplomacy alone was insufficient in the face of rising fascism and authoritarianism. This division became particularly evident as some feminist activists, while still committed to pacifism, began supporting militant anti-fascist movements, recognizing the necessity of resisting regimes that sought to dismantle democratic institutions and feminist gains (Woolf, 1938, p. 74).

By the late 1930s, feminist pacifists faced an existential crisis: Could pacifism remain a viable strategy in the face of totalitarian aggression? This question, which would come to define feminist pacifism in the lead-up to World War II, was poignantly addressed by Virginia Woolf in *Three Guineas* (1938). Woolf's work represented a radical critique of both mainstream pacifism and feminist engagement with the state, arguing that as long as patriarchal structures remained in place, peace would remain unattainable (Woolf, 1938, p. 89).

Ultimately, the interwar period highlighted both the strengths and limitations of feminist pacifism. While feminist pacifists had succeeded in embedding their critiques within international political discourse, their inability to prevent the rise of fascism underscored the challenges of relying on non-violent resistance in an era of increasing militarization. Their legacy, however, endured, shaping later feminist peace movements and reinforcing the necessity of linking gender justice with anti-militarism in global politics.

4. FEMINIST RESPONSES TO FASCISM AND MILITARIZATION

4.1 Challenges to Pacifism in the 1930s

The 1930s marked a profound crisis for feminist pacifists, as the rise of fascist regimes in Italy, Germany, and Spain forced many to reassess their ideological commitments and the efficacy of pacifism as a strategy for resisting totalitarian aggression. The expansionist policies of Mussolini, Hitler, and Franco, characterized by militarization, suppression of political dissent, and the persecution of minorities, raised urgent questions about whether non-violent resistance alone could effectively counter the increasing authoritarian threat. Compounding this crisis was the failure of international institutions, particularly the League of Nations, which proved incapable of enforcing peace or deterring aggression, as seen in the Italian invasion of Ethiopia (1935) and Germany's remilitarization of the Rhineland (1936) (Ceadel, 2009, p. 237). Feminist pacifists, many of whom had placed their hopes in diplomatic conflict resolution and collective security mechanisms, were forced to confront the limitations of institutional pacifism in the face of unchecked militarization and state-sponsored violence.

The deepening of the ideological schism within feminist pacifist circles was driven by a fundamental question: Could war ever be justified in the fight against fascism? For absolute pacifists, the answer remained a firm no—war, regardless of its cause, was an inherently destructive force, and the only path to lasting peace was through non-violent resistance, diplomatic pressure, and international solidarity. Figures such as Muriel Lester and members of WILPF (Women's International League for Peace and Freedom) continued to advocate for peaceful negotiations and economic sanctions rather than armed conflict (Liddington, 1989, p. 219). Their argument rested on the belief that militarism, even when wielded against fascism, ultimately reinforced the same structures of oppression that feminist pacifists sought to dismantle.

However, for a growing number of feminist activists, particularly socialist and anti-fascist feminists, the emerging reality of fascist expansionism demanded a more radical reconsideration of pacifist ideology. Many who had previously opposed all forms of militarism now faced the undeniable fact that fascist regimes were actively dismantling feminist, socialist, and workers' movements, eliminating any possibility of internal resistance or non-violent reform. The persecution of feminists, trade unionists, and leftist intellectuals in Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and Francoist Spain made it increasingly clear that these regimes did not merely wage war externally but were constructing deeply militarized societies where dissent was violently repressed.

This debate between pacifism and armed resistance became particularly contentious within socialist feminist circles. While reformist feminist pacifists continued to advocate for diplomatic solutions, boycotts, and international cooperation, radical feminists and anti-fascist activists argued that fascism could not be negotiated with—it had to be actively opposed. The schism was reflected in growing support among some feminists for direct involvement in anti-fascist resistance movements, particularly in Spain, where the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) became a testing ground for competing strategies of opposition to fascism (Preston, 2006, p. 143).

The looming threat of global war further deepened the crisis of feminist pacifism. As Hitler's Germany expanded its military campaigns, culminating in the invasion of Czechoslovakia (1938) and the dismantling of the Munich Agreement, feminist pacifists were forced to grapple with the reality that diplomatic avenues were collapsing. Even those who had long championed non-violent resistance increasingly questioned whether pacifism could remain viable in the face of state-sponsored terror and expansionist warfare. The inability of the League of Nations to intervene in major crises, including the Japanese invasion of Manchuria (1931) and Italy's aggression in Africa, reinforced widespread disillusionment with institutional peace mechanisms and highlighted the structural failures of interwar diplomacy (Caine, 1997, p. 229).

By the end of the 1930s, the feminist pacifist movement was deeply fractured, with some maintaining their commitment to absolute non-violence, while others aligned with anti-fascist coalitions that endorsed military intervention as a necessary means of defeating dictatorship. This divide would persist into the Second World War, shaping the trajectory of feminist peace activism in the mid-20th century and influencing post-war discussions on the role of women in conflict resolution, resistance movements, and global security frameworks.

This period, therefore, stands as a defining moment in the intellectual history of feminist pacifism, revealing

the tensions between ideological purity and political pragmatism, between absolute non-violence and strategic resistance. It underscores the complexity of feminist engagements with war and peace, demonstrating that feminist pacifism was not a monolithic movement but an evolving political philosophy shaped by historical contingencies and the shifting realities of global conflict.

4.2 Case Study: The Spanish Civil War (1936–1939)

The Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) served as a crucial turning point in the history of feminist pacifism, revealing the deep ideological fractures within the movement. For many feminist activists, Spain represented a microcosm of the broader struggle between fascism and democratic resistance, and the war forced them to confront the complexities of pacifist ideology in times of crisis.

Feminists were actively involved in both humanitarian efforts and direct political activism during the conflict. Organizations such as the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) provided aid to refugees, medical support, and propaganda efforts to raise awareness of the atrocities committed by Franco's forces. Meanwhile, Spanish feminists, including Dolores Ibárruri ("La Pasionaria"), became symbols of anti-fascist resistance, challenging traditional pacifist notions that all violence was inherently unjustified (Lines, 2012, p. 78).

This war deepened the divide between pacifist and anti-fascist feminists. Some, particularly those aligned with WILPF, maintained that war could never be a solution, advocating instead for international mediation and economic sanctions against Franco's forces. Others, however, saw the Spanish Civil War as a necessary struggle against an authoritarian regime that systematically targeted women's rights and leftist activists (Preston, 2006, p. 143). The involvement of foreign volunteers, including women serving in medical brigades and as frontline correspondents, demonstrated that many feminist activists no longer saw pacifism as an adequate response to the existential threat posed by fascism.

By 1939, as Franco secured victory, the feminist pacifist movement was left fractured. The failure to prevent Franco's rise and the League of Nations' inaction convinced many feminists that institutional peace mechanisms were ineffective in the face of unchecked militarization, pushing them toward more radical critiques of state power.

4.3 Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas* (1938) and the Radicalization of Feminist Pacifism

By the late 1930s, feminist pacifism had undergone a profound transformation, marked by a growing skepticism toward traditional liberal pacifism and a more critical engagement with the structural causes of war. One of the most influential feminist critiques of militarization came from Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas* (1938), which argued that war was not merely a geopolitical phenomenon but a direct product of patriarchal institutions that reinforced violence, hierarchy, and exclusion (Woolf, 1938, p. 88).

Woolf's work represented a radical departure from earlier maternalist pacifist arguments that framed women as inherently peaceful due to their biological and social roles. Instead, she asserted that the structures of education, economy, and state power were fundamentally designed to sustain war, and that true peace could only be achieved through a dismantling of these patriarchal systems (Woolf, 1938, p. 92). Her scathing critique of nationalism and the militarization of European societies resonated with many feminist pacifists who had become increasingly disillusioned with both the League of Nations and traditional diplomatic approaches to peace (Caine, 1997, p. 204).

Feminists influenced by Woolf's arguments began to adopt a more structural critique of militarism, recognizing that resistance to war required more than protest—it required the transformation of political and economic institutions. While absolute pacifists continued to reject all forms of violence, Woolf's radical perspective helped bridge the gap between feminist pacifists and those who believed that opposing fascism necessitated direct action.

By 1939, as the world stood on the brink of another global conflict, feminist pacifism had evolved into a more complex and multifaceted movement, deeply engaged with questions of state power, nationalism, and resistance. The legacy of this period would shape post-war feminist activism, influencing later debates on nuclear disarmament, civil rights, and intersectional approaches to peace-building.

5. CONCLUSION: THE LEGACY OF FEMINIST PACIFISM

Feminist pacifism between 1848 and 1939 represents a profound yet historically underappreciated contribution to both political thought and peace activism. Far from being a peripheral movement within either feminist or pacifist traditions, feminist pacifists developed a distinctive critique of war, arguing that militarism

was not merely a geopolitical strategy or a consequence of economic competition, but rather a deeply embedded tool of patriarchal domination (Von Suttner, 1889, p. 217; Woolf, 1938, p. 94). They challenged the prevailing war-centric model of governance by offering alternative frameworks rooted in diplomacy, social justice, and gender equity, asserting that true peace could not be achieved through diplomatic settlements alone but required the dismantling of militarized power structures at every level of society.

Through organizations such as the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) and grassroots movements like the Women's Peace Crusade, feminist pacifists developed a transnational approach to peace activism, forging networks that transcended national borders and resisted imperialist narratives that framed war as a necessity for state expansion and economic development. Their activism was not limited to opposition to specific wars; rather, they confronted the ideological underpinnings of militarism itself, recognizing its intersections with capitalist exploitation, colonial subjugation, and state repression. By engaging in congresses, petitions, direct action, and public advocacy, feminist pacifists laid the groundwork for subsequent peace movements, particularly those that emerged in response to World War II and the Cold War, influencing later disarmament campaigns, human rights activism, and feminist critiques of security policies (Rupp, 1997, p. 112).

However, despite their contributions, feminist pacifists faced systemic marginalization. Within broader feminist movements, pacifists were often dismissed by suffragists and labor activists who prioritized legal and economic equality over anti-war efforts, viewing pacifism as an idealistic or secondary concern. Similarly, within mainstream pacifist organizations, feminist perspectives were frequently sidelined in favor of class-based, nationalist, or religious arguments against war. The male-dominated leadership of international peace negotiations further reinforced these tensions, as women were systematically excluded from high-level diplomatic efforts, despite their extensive grassroots mobilization and intellectual contributions to peace theory (Ceadel, 2009, p. 233). These structural barriers, both within feminism and within pacifist movements, illustrate the broader resistance to incorporating gendered critiques into international political discourse—a struggle that continues in contemporary global peace efforts.

Despite these challenges, feminist pacifists fundamentally reshaped the discourse on war and peace, creating a theoretical and activist framework that remains essential to contemporary debates on militarization, global conflict, and gendered violence. Their insistence on linking militarism with patriarchy, capitalism, and social injustice ensured that feminist critiques of war endured beyond the interwar period, shaping subsequent generations of activists, scholars, and policymakers. Today, their legacy is evident in feminist critiques of military interventions, human security policies, and anti-war activism, demonstrating that their contributions were not only historically significant but remain vital to understanding and resisting the militarization of contemporary political life.

Furthermore, the impact of feminist pacifism extended far beyond the interwar years, shaping both post-war peace organizations and contemporary feminist critiques of war. Following World War II, the arguments advanced by feminist pacifists found resonance in movements advocating for nuclear disarmament, civil rights, and intersectional feminism. Organizations such as Women Strike for Peace (1961) and the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp (1981–2000) explicitly drew upon the ideological foundations established by early feminist pacifists, emphasizing grassroots activism, transnational solidarity, and the rejection of patriarchal militarism (Caine, 1997, p. 218).

Moreover, feminist pacifism influenced the development of international peace institutions, particularly in the realms of conflict resolution, human rights, and gender justice. The principles of feminist pacifism were later reflected in United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000), which recognized the essential role of women in peace negotiations and post-conflict reconstruction (Shepherd, 2011, p. 76). This institutional recognition, while limited, was a direct outcome of decades of feminist advocacy for the inclusion of women in peace processes and the acknowledgment of gendered dimensions of war.

In contemporary feminist scholarship, critiques of militarism continue to draw upon the arguments articulated by feminist pacifists in the early 20th century. Issues such as military sexual violence, war economies, and the disproportionate impact of conflict on women and marginalized communities remain central concerns of feminist peace studies. The historical contributions of figures such as Jane Addams, Bertha von Suttner, and Virginia Woolf continue to inspire modern feminist theorists who interrogate the intersections of gender, war, and power (Enloe, 2000, p. 49).

The continued relevance of feminist pacifist arguments in contemporary geopolitical debates emphasizes the enduring significance of their critique. In a world increasingly defined by protracted military conflicts, the entrenchment of defense industries within national economies, and the normalization of war rhetoric in political discourse, the feminist pacifist insistence on challenging the structural conditions that sustain

violence remains not only a moral imperative but a radical and necessary political intervention (Cockburn, 2010, p. 121). Today, as governments expand military budgets under the guise of national security and counterterrorism, feminist pacifists continue to expose how militarization operates as a mechanism of social control, reinforcing hierarchies of gender, race, and class while diverting resources away from social welfare, education, and healthcare. Their critiques emphasize that war is not merely an isolated event between nation-states but an ongoing system of structural oppression that perpetuates economic and political inequalities at all levels of society.

Modern feminist peace activists build upon the foundational critiques established by their predecessors, adapting them to new global security challenges, including the rise of authoritarian regimes, nuclear proliferation, and the weaponization of digital warfare. They advocate for demilitarization, gender-sensitive foreign policies, and alternative security models that prioritize human rights, conflict prevention, and community-led peace-building over state-centric military strategies. Scholars and activists alike highlight how military interventions under the guise of "humanitarian warfare" or "peacekeeping operations" often reinforce imperialist power structures, perpetuating cycles of violence and dependency rather than fostering sustainable peace (Tickner, 1992, p. 84). In response, feminist pacifists argue for a reconceptualization of security that moves away from nation-state militarization and toward human-centered approaches, emphasizing economic justice, political inclusivity, and non-violent resistance as essential pillars of lasting peace.

Ultimately, the legacy of feminist pacifism transcends historical analysis and remains a living intellectual and activist tradition, continuously informing contemporary struggles for global justice. The critical questions posed by early feminist pacifists—How do we challenge the normalization of war? Can peace exist within patriarchal and capitalist structures? Is resistance always non-violent?—continue to shape debates on international conflict, security policy, and feminist resistance movements. Revisiting these historical perspectives is not merely an academic exercise but a political necessity, ensuring that feminist critiques of militarism remain central to ongoing struggles against state violence, economic exploitation, and systemic inequality. In an era of climate crises, border militarization, and the increasing surveillance of dissent, feminist pacifists provide not only a critique of the present but a vision for an alternative future—one in which peace is not simply the absence of war, but the presence of justice, equality, and collective liberation.

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