Pacifism and Peace Societies: The 19th century Context.

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Abstract: The ideas of peace and war simultaneously dominated the political domain of the European continent during the 19th century. The middle ages in Europe witnessed the climax of political and state supported acts of violence in the form of the Thirty Years War (1618 to 1648). Even the late 18th century did not witness abatement in the act of war yet the American Revolution (1776) and the French Revolution (1789) offered an alternate narrative. Such a narrative was reinforced by the emergence and organization of the Peace Societies in America and Europe. These societies reinforced the idea of Pacifism by blending it together with the ideals of peace with the Christian ethos. The present article seeks to analyse the organization of the Peace Societies and their impact on the policies of various European States leading up to the First World War.

Key Words: Peace Societies, Christianity, Revolutions, War, Militarism.

The 19th century, after the French Revolution, Napoleonic Wars and simultaneous rise of socialist ideas, saw the culmination of Pacifist ideas in the emergence and spread of the Peace Societies. These events redefied the role of individual citizens in the pursuance of peace. It was no longer the exclusive domain of kings and states to deliberate upon the issues of peace and war. These Societies, in theory and practice, opposed the rhetoric as well as the acts of aggression and war. The educated elite of Europe and elsewhere tried to create a society which would be free from the scourge of war. The efforts intended to popularize the Pacifist ideas on the ideological and mobilizational levels to the realm of organization and hence found a way to become a widespread notion. This organised peace campaign found impetus from divergent groups; from Pacifist religious sects, moral revivalism, free trade liberalism, social reform movements, democratic nationalism, internationalism, even industrial philanthropy and conservative monarchy. It culminated in the Fourteen point declaration of the American President Woodrow Wilson in 1919, who himself was a Pacifist activist and member of the American Peace Society (APS).

The moral inspiration for the peace societies advocating against war came from religious and moral revivalist ideas. Largely inspired by the Christian Pacifism, Count Leo Tolstoy emerged as

its most important exponent. The destruction and scale of violence during the Napoleonic wars which Samuel Eliot Morisondescribed as "the most unpopular war that this country has ever waged,"

[1] helped in creating an atmosphere in which war was increasingly ethically and morally denounced. America and later Europe emerged as the important centre of the dissemination of peace advocacy through the peace societies. The foremost of such organisations was the New York Peace Society led by a Connecticut born teacher David Low Dodge who was joined by some clergy members. Dodge wrote a pamphlet titled *War Inconsistent with the Religion of Jesus Christ* (1812). In the booklet, the author attempted to demonstrate that the act of war was disapproved bythe Christian faith:

> "war is inhuman and therefore wholly inconsistent with Christianity, by proving that it tends to destroy humane dispositions; that it hardens the hearts and blunts the tender feelings of men; that it involves the abuse of God's animal creation; that it oppresses the poor; that it spreads terror and distress among mankind; that it subjects soldiers to cruel privations and sufferings; that it destroys the youth and cuts off the hope of the aged; and that it multiplies widows and orphans and occasions mourning and sorrow."[2]

Similar arguments were put forward by other people too. In 1814, revolutionary war veteran Noah Worcester wrote *A Solemn Review of the Custom of War,* which blended reason and evangelical Christianity into an argument for organized social action against war, which the writer condemned as "a heathenish, savage, and barbarous custom.[3]

On the mainland Europe, similar movements were gaining foothold. The first organised effort to spread pacifist ideals on European continent appeared in 1821 when in Paris the *Société de la morale chrétienne,* and in Geneva in 1830, the *Société de la paix de Génève* came into existence. Increasingly, the pacifist movement in Europe was being inspired apart from the democratic, liberal and utopian socialism. The main proponents of this stream included Jean-Baptiste Say, Charles Fourier, and Henri de Saint-Simon. They argued against the increasing war expenditure and advocated a world without armed conflict and war. Further integration of American and European peace ideas ensured the emergence of continental peace societies. This particular phase of pacifism was dominated by the men of virtues, who through publicity, petitions, and lecture tours endeavoured to spread the gospel of peace in the society.

[1] Cortright., David(2008) *Peace, A History of Ideas and Movements*, Cambridge University Press, p. 26.

[2] Dodge, David Low.,*War Inconsistent with the Religion of Jesus,* The Project Gutenberg EBook Release Date: April 16, 2011 [EBook #35883], pp27-28.

[3] Ibid, p.27.

The next stage of pacifism culminated in an era dominated by the Peace Congresses, thus, widening the panorama of peace advocacy. Between 1848 and 1853 a series of major peace congresses was held in Brussels (1848), Paris (1849), Frankfurt (1850), London (1851), Manchester (1853), and Edinburgh (1853).[4] The foremost advocate of these Congress was Richard Cobden who supported arbitration, non-intervention, disarmament and abolition of war loans as some of the practical measures to curtail the possibilities of war. The London Peace Congress was especially successful, the high point of which was the inaugural address by Victor Hugo[5], an idea way ahead of its time:

> "A day will come when bullets and bomb-shells will be replaced by votes, by the universal suffrage of nations, by the venerable arbitration of a great Sovereign Senate, which will be to Europe what the Parliament is to England, what the Diet is to Germany, what the Legislative Assembly is to France."[6]

The optimism of the mid-nineteenth century was dimmed by the American Civil War (1860-65) and Crimean War (1855). Despite this, the idea itself did not fade as the late nineteenth century witnessed the revival of peace advocacy. With the growing influence of Darwinism, Positivism and socialist movements, Pacifism increasingly concerned itself with ideas of social justice and national self-determination. Towards the end of the 19th century, the high water mark for pacifism came from an unusual source: Tsar Nicholas II of Russia, who played a key role in organising an International conference on peace and disarmament in 1898. He was enthusiastically supported by peace advocates, who conducted signature campaigns to impress upon their respective governments to participate in the event. Though the conference has been analysed from the perspective of Russia's desire to ward-off the threat of a heavily armed Austria-Hungary on her western border, the conference was a rightful culmination of American and British peace movements. The Tzar Nicholas's Rescript was issued on 24 August 1898, highlighting the need to restrict war and ill-effects of science on peace:

> "The ever increasing financial burdens strike at the root of public prosperity. The physical and intellectual forces of the people, labour and capital, are diverted for the greater part from their natural application and wasted unproductively. Hundreds of millions are spent in acquiring terrible engines of destruction which are regarded today as the latest invention of science but are destined tomorrow to be rendered obsolete by

[4] Nicholls, David. "Richard Cobden and the International Peace Congress Movement, 1848-1853." Journal of British Studies 30, no. 4 (1991): 356.

[5] Victor Marie Hugo (1802-1885) was a noted French poet, novelist, and dramatist of the Romantic Movement.

[6] *Peace, A History of Ideas*…. pp.34-35.

some new discovery. National cultural, economic progress and the production of wealth are either paralysed or developed in a wrong direction."[7]

Still, the forces of imperialism and militarism were strong enough to overwhelm the advocacy of peace. The surge of nationalism in the late 19th century also weakened the peace movements as militarism became the defining strategy for the European empires. Subsequently, the two World Wars (1914-1919, 1939-45) swallowed old European empires and paved the way for a new world order. The pacifists remained a minority amongst the voices which vociferously advocated war in order to save *national honour*(emphasis added). As Charles Richet observed:

> "The madness of the mob is nearly universal and we are only a tiny minority, we who hope for peace. . . . What weapon do we have to counter the impenetrable ignorance of personages on all social levels who refuse to entertain any suggestion of international justice? . . . All those acolytes of militarism only grasp hard facts— actual carnage, real rivers of human blood. . . . A general disaster will have more impact than rational argument."[8]

With the advent of the atomic age after the end of the Second World War, the pacifist ideals and strategies were redefined. New dimensions emerged in the realm of Pacifism with the commencement of the United Nations Organization (1945) and the impending Cold War.

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