People Power: Fighting for Peace

Review Number: 2112

Publish date: Thursday, 25 May, 2017

Author: Imperial War Museum

Date of Publication: 2017

Publisher: Imperial War Museum

Publisher url: <http://www.iwm.org.uk/exhibitions/iwm-london/fighting-for-peace>

Place of Publication: London

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This is a wide ranging, specialist exhibition on peace activity and war resistance in Britain which is laid out in defined, chronological sections that run from the First World War to the 2003 Stop The War Coalition march in London. The experience is enhanced by the use of music, art, voices, and excerpts from sound archives of the protests, all of which accompany the visitor on their journey through the exhibition.

The focus of the exhibition is on personal experience, so opportunities to listen to eyewitness accounts on a personal 'Peoples Voices' device are available throughout a journey that reflects on a variety of peace activities, such as opposition to war against fascism in the 1930s, participation in anti-nuclear marches, the political activity of CND and the Greenham Common protests. These oral accounts sit alongside personal effects, written testimony, art, and other artefacts that assist in understanding the motivations of participants. In the spirit of balance and objectivity, the voices include those who did not agree with the protestors; particularly engaging were the memories of the base commander at Greenham Common and his wife. This theme of personal testimony is continued all the way to the end of the exhibition where there is powerful film of three former service men rejecting their identities as soldiers by discarding, outside 10 Downing Street, their service medals, the items that signified to them their role in militarism. The piece is compelling because the filming was carried out as a witness to the actions of the former soldiers rather than as piece of directed filming. Visitors are then pointed to a video of individuals reflecting on their motivations for becoming involved in peace and anti-war activity with particular focus on the 2003 march against war in Iraq, which was organised by the Stop the War Coalition. Amongst the people who feature in the film are Mark Rylance and Vanessa Redgrave, both of whom have been involved in war resistance for some years. Others who offer memories and musings on the value of civil protest are the organisers and some attendees of the march, including Ed Hall, many of whose iconic banners were displayed in Trafalgar Square on the day of that protest. Visitors are then offered an opportunity to comment on the relevance and usefulness of anti-war and peace activity via a message board. It might have been useful for this question to have been posed at the start, enabling visitors to adopt a critical view of the utility of protest before being introduced to the various peace campaigns of the exhibition. This might have been accompanied by a suggestion that visitors might consider the value, difference and impact of collective and individual protest against war and militarism.

The anti-war activity that occurred during the First World War is a good starting point for this exhibition, as it offers a balance to the considerable volume of media and public attention that has been allocated to the military events of the First World War, particularly during the period of its centenary. The 1914–18 conflict

was also, through the introduction of military conscription, the first time that peace advocates who chose to become conscience objectors (CO) or 'conchies' became public figures, and were subsequently vilified by the press and public as cowards, shirkers and unpatriotic. This section portrays very well the personal experiences and difficulties of the COs who were imprisoned, with some acknowledgment of the group set up to support their stance, the No- Conscription Fellowship. The difficulties and physical dangers that war resisters and their supporters faced are shown by the rare film footage of the violent breakup of two pacifist meetings in North London by large groups of people, none of whom were restrained by the police, who attended both events.

The Friends Ambulance Unit is recognised for its important work, showing that some pacifists were active in their humanitarian efforts to ameliorate the effects of war. Kathleen Courtney has been chosen to represent pacifist women of the period, which is an interesting choice as she spent most of the war out of Britain, working in humanitarian relief projects in Serbia. There were many women in Britain who were actively involved in war resistance, such as Catherine Marshall, who was involved in the No-Conscription Fellowship and international peace activity, and whose work could have been recognised alongside that of her good friend, Kathleen Courtney.

The exhibition moves into the 1930s, which was a challenging and complex era for pacifists, as the threat of fascism and Nazism made the choice to adopt an anti-war position difficult and, in some ways, more controversial than at the time of the Great War. Both sides of the picture are relayed, the section on the British Union of Fascists being particularly illuminating. Pacifists responded to these threats to peace from fascism, by forming the Peace Pledge Union, led by Dick Sheppard, an organisation that still thrives today.

From the 1950s until the 1980s the emphasis for peace activism, as envisioned here, was opposition to 'The Bomb', from the first March on Aldermaston in 1958, through Committee 100 demonstrations in London, to Greenham Common in the mid-1980s, with the overarching presence and campaigning of CND highlighted throughout the period. The section on the Greenham Common protests is particularly vivid with a reconstructed wire fence from the base, adorned with ephemera that would have been deliberately attached to the fence by the women involved. The display includes scrapbooks that record and memorialise the protests, and information about secret methods of campaigning, such as the plan of a telephone web designed by Fran Whittle. This diagram represented a group of sympathisers in the Lewes area, each of whom would contact two or three people in the network to relay news. This was an attempt to stop the authorities finding out plans for future actions and prevent discovery of all of the names of people involved in covert activity. This discretion was considered necessary by the Greenham Women, as they believed that the police were monitoring their telephone calls.

The history of peace protest is complex and it would be difficult for any exhibition to include every campaign that occurred within the hundred years covered by this particular exposition. However, there are some perplexing omissions and inclusions within the exhibits. One era excluded is that of the 1920s, the years of optimism for those involved with the promotion of international peace. It was during the 1920s that the Women's International League of Peace and Friendship had a fruitful time, promoting peace on the international stage. This organisation is still in existence, but its presence has not been acknowledged in this exposition. This decade witnessed the promotion and success of the peaceful resolution of disagreements between states and the sponsorship of international co-operation, led by the League of Nations. The failure of the League of Nations in the early 1930s to confront the threat of Fascism and then Nazism, needed to be recognised so that a better understanding of the difficulties of that decade could be reached. The other gap is that of anti-Vietnam protest in Britain. There is acknowledgement of opposition in America, but no account of how this was supported in Britain by peace and anti-war protestors.

One puzzling inclusion is that of the elder Pankhursts in the First World War section of the exhibition. Unlike the younger members of the family, Sylvia and Adele, neither Emmeline nor Christabel were pacifists, but were determinedly patriotic to the point of promoting military recruitment and condemning pacifists. The inclusion of a film clip of the women's march for work is equally puzzling. The Pankhurst's

demand for women's right to work in the war was linked with the suffrage campaign, Lloyd George's need to recruit war workers and thereby increase productivity, and so to release men for the trenches. It would have been unlikely that any woman who associated herself with war resistance would have been associated with such activity. Pacifist women were involved in mass protests, particularly those organised by the Womens Peace Crusade, an idea which was started in Glasgow in June 1916 and spread throughout the country.

A further area that could have been explored is that of continuity between different anti-war campaigns. Bertrand Russell, for example, is featured prominently in the section on C100 and other anti-nuclear campaigns, yet his Chairmanship of the No-Conscription Fellowship in the First World War is not acknowledged. Neither is the relevance of Fenner Brockway, the founder of the No-Conscription Fellowship and seen in film footage attending an anti-nuclear rally in his wheelchair in the 1960s, understood as a demonstration of links within the history of war resistance. In the final video of the exhibition, Lindsey German, the convenor of the new Stop The War Coalition, does recognise that anti-war protest has a long past, but there is no concession that an organisation with a similar name was founded to oppose the Boer War.

Nevertheless, this uplifting, enlightening and informative exhibition is an important counterbalance to the other areas of the museum which focus on the military aspects of warfare and hopefully it will become a permanent part of the IWM's displays. The personal testimonies enhance its impact and should encourage visitors to reflect on their own position and thoughts on militarism, and the utility of nuclear weapons in Britain's defence and security, now, and in the future.

The exhibition is open until 28 August 2017.

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Telegraph

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Socialist Worker

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