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Founded by Jessie Wallace Hughan, a socialist pacifist, the War Resisters League (WRL) has remained the major secular, mixed-gender, radical pacifist organization in America. This article, which explores the neglected story of the WRL’s socialist roots, examines Hughan’s socialism, the founding of the WRL, and the transatlantic socialist and pacifist origins of Hughan’s theory of war resistance. In this context, I examine the Socialist International’s pre–World War I proposal to wage a “general strike against war,” British No-Conscription Fellowship, Independent Labour party, No More War Movement, and War Resisters’ International. This article argues that the international socialist movement and European socialist pacifism shaped Hughan’s war resistance; that Hughan and the WRL advocated a general strike to prevent war and advance social—and socialist—reform/revolution, a nonviolent technique borrowed from the socialist and labor movements; and that the WRL represents a socialist pacifist ideology and organization.

Since its founding in 1923 by Jessie Wallace Hughan (1876–1955), a socialist pacifist, the War Resisters League (WRL or League) has remained the major secular, mixed-gender, radical pacifist organization in the United States.¹ I use “radical pacifism” here to mean opposition to all wars and armed social revolution, support for both peace and social justice, and, when used to describe the WRL, support for nonviolent social and socialist revolution.² Although often termed Gandhian, the WRL had socialist rather than Gandhian origins. The League later fused both traditions to create a distinct secular, socialist, radical pacifism. Hughan, whose own 1907 conversion to socialism preceded her radical pacifism by seven years, built the WRL on examples borrowed from the international socialist movement and European socialist pacifism. One such adaptation, the socialist general strike against
This article examines Hughan’s socialism, the founding of the WRL, and the transatlantic socialist and socialist pacifist origins of Hughan’s theory of war resistance. In this context I examine the Socialist International’s pre–World War I proposal to wage a “general strike against war,” British No-Conscription Fellowship, Independent Labour Party, No More War Movement, and War Resisters’ International (WRI).

Several points should be emphasized at the outset. First, although this article focuses on the socialist roots of Hughan’s radical pacifism, other factors also shaped or nourished her pacifist ideology and activism. These factors included her parents, Christianity, the peace movement, and the women’s movement. Second, like all political and ideological terms, socialist and socialism are loaded concepts that contain varied and disputed meanings. When writing of socialist pacifism, I use socialist to denote a broad, inclusive, anticapitalist ideology and movement advocating democratic social ownership of the economy, political democracy, civil liberties, and democratic egalitarianism in all spheres of life. Following common (if not universal) practice, I situate the socialist in socialist pacifism within the broad, historical socialist tradition that includes socialism, anarchism, Marxism, syndicalism, communism, and other varieties of socialism. Although socialism and anarchism often have been ideological and political rivals, both represent important strands in the historical socialist tradition.

Third, the WRL, which sought to unite all absolute pacifists “irrespective of the reasons—political, religious or humanitarian—which have led them to take this stand,” contained socialists, anarchists, independent radicals, and even capitalists. To avoid internal political factionalism, the WRL never established an official socialist platform, and prior to the Second World War it remained a single-issue organization that seldom adopted an official position on issues other than war resistance. Notwithstanding its official apolitical pluralism and diverse political membership, the WRL’s leadership has been predominantly socialist, and most League members voted for the Socialist Party of America, at least through 1948, the last time that Norman Thomas—a candidate with enormous stature and strong antiwar credentials—stood for president on the Socialist Party ticket. While after 1948 most WRL leaders remained anticapitalist, it is unclear whether they continued to vote for the Socialist Party which, in steady decline since the mid-1930s, now lacked Thomas as its popular standard bearer. In addition, led by World War II conscientious objectors, in postwar America many younger League leaders, though anticapitalist,
championed nonviolent direct action and placed less credence in electoral strategies and institutional socialism. Historians recognize that the WRL originated in both the Fellowship of Reconciliation and (though they have not provided particulars) the women’s peace societies. In addition, scholars have argued that the WRL epitomizes the “new conscientious objection” and “secularization of conscience” that emerged with World War I. However, historians have not fully appreciated how socialism shaped Hughan and the WRL. This article explores the neglected story of the WRL’s socialist roots, which is critical to understanding its leadership in the twentieth-century struggle for peace and justice. First, I argue that European socialism and European socialist pacifism shaped Hughan’s war resistance. Second, although the League has not developed a formal socialist program, I argue that in practice and through the activities of its membership, the WRL represents a socialist pacifist ideology and organization. Finally, I argue that Hughan and the WRL advocated the general strike to prevent war, repel invasion, and advance social and socialist reform and/or revolution, a nonviolent technique it borrowed from the socialist and labor movements.

**JESSIE WALLACE HUGHAN’S THEORY OF WAR RESISTANCE**

Jessie Wallace Hughan formulated a theory of war resistance that posited the power of citizens—led by a radical pacifist minority—to mobilize public opinion to prevent war. Although a socialist, Hughan emphasized the need for concrete action and repudiated the orthodox socialist syllogism that asserted capitalism caused war, socialism would eventually abolish capitalism, and thus peace must await socialism. Citing the abolition of dueling, child sacrifice, cannibalism, and slavery, she argued that peace could also precede socialism. A public declaration opposing war, registered during peacetime in order to pressure the government to reject war, played a central role in Hughan’s theory of war resistance. World War I, characterized by total warfare and mass mobilization, led Hughan to argue that a “revolutionary minority” of pacifists could, in addition to their own refusal, arouse public opinion and prevent governments from obtaining the near-unanimous support they needed to wage modern warfare. Utilizing the logic of the general strike, citizens could thus block governments from waging war by withholding their support.

Paradoxically, despite her own socialism and the socialist influence on her war resistance, important leaders in the socialist and anarchist pacifist movement rejected Hughan’s theory of war resistance. Morris Hillquit, the New York Socialist Party leader; Norman Thomas, a pacifist minister and
future Socialist Party standard-bearer; and Roger Baldwin, a philosophical anarchist, World War I conscientious objector (CO), and cofounder and leader of the American Civil Liberties Union—all refused to renounce armed violence or armed revolution to overthrow capitalism. “Surely if the causes of war lie in the present economic system,” Baldwin averred, “then only the abolition of that system will abolish war.”¹⁰ Hughan, who remained active in both the pacifist and socialist movements, devoted her life to challenging this assumption.

**ORIGINS OF JESSIE WALLACE HUGHAN’S PACIFISM AND WAR RESISTANCE**

Hughan entered World War I a pacifist; she exited with a mature theory of war resistance. Although she wrote her first “mildly pacifist” poem in 1909, Hughan did not consider herself an “active pacifist” until the April 1914 Vera Cruz incident.¹¹ World War I provided the key ideas and experiences that transformed her general pacifism into a specific theory of war resistance.

Socialism proved a critical element in molding Hughan’s pacifism and war resistance. Despite her parents’ radicalism, Hughan considered herself a political conservative when she started her doctoral program in Political Economy at Columbia University in 1905. Two years later, Hughan became a socialist while researching her dissertation on American socialism. Consistent with her original intention to write a dissertation that would “smash socialism,” Hughan spent one year preparing “The Case Against Socialism” for a competition sponsored by the Hart-Schaffner-Marx department store. Part of her research entailed attending socialist meetings. Believing that socialists were wild radicals who “threw bombs,” Hughan found the initial encounters “terrifying.” Within the year, however, Hughan discarded her fears and embraced socialism. Her academic adviser, the economist Edwin R. A. Seligman, a prominent proponent of capitalism and an active antisocialist, refused to endorse Hughan for a teaching position. Indeed, during her dissertation defense Hughan answered “the questions twice—first, as I believe you [Seligman] would desire them to be answered; then, what I really think.”¹² Following publication of her dissertation as *American Socialism in the Present Day* (1911), the Socialist Party appointed Hughan, now a respected socialist intellectual, to party positions, including the Executive Committee of the Intercollegiate Socialist Society, where she served with Jack London and Upton Sinclair.¹³ On several occasions the Socialist Party nominated her for public office.¹⁴
Marxian analysis and organized socialism’s response to World War I shaped Hughan’s theory of war resistance and her interpretation of international relations. Reflecting socialist principles, her analysis of the war emphasized the causative links between capitalism and imperialism, colonialism, and war. Although assigning primacy to the economic roots of war, Hughan rejected economic determinism, citing such noneconomic causes of war as nationalism, racism, secret diplomacy, and the armaments race. Hughan observed that in 1914, despite European socialists’ general opposition to war and preference for international arbitration, they had formulated no concrete plan for common action, adopted no anti-enlistment pledge, and retained the distinction between offensive and defensive war. Thus, for Hughan the critical error of the Socialist International and the national socialist parties was the absence of a specific plan to thwart war. Hughan did praise one socialist proposal—the general strike against war. Hughan, and later the WRL, repeatedly cited the general strike as an effective and realistic nonviolent alternative to military defense and armed social revolution. Hughan’s endorsement of the general strike and her reading of the Socialist International’s debate over the issue situates her war resistance within the international socialist mainstream on war and peace.

From 1891 to 1914 the Socialist International debated the general strike against war. At meetings in Stuttgart (1907) and Copenhagen (1910), the Independent Labour Party leader, Keir Hardie, and the French Socialist, Edouard Vaillant, championed the measure. At the Copenhagen Congress Hardie and Vaillant proposed the following resolution: “Among the means to be used in order to prevent and hinder war the congress considers as particularly efficacious a general strike, especially in the industries that supply war with its implements (arms, munitions, transport, etc.), as well as agitation and popular action in their most active forms.” Following spirited debate, the Copenhagen Congress tabled the Hardie-Vaillant proposal and referred it to the International Socialist Bureau for further study in preparation for renewed consideration at the 1914 Vienna Congress. In mid-July 1914, shortly before the scheduled Vienna meeting, the French Socialist Party, led by Jean Jaures, reiterated its support for the general strike to avert war and compel international arbitration. Before European socialists could meet to formulate collective antiwar action, however, Jean Jaures was assassinated, German Social Democrats voted for war credits, the European working class succumbed to nationalism, and the Guns of August erupted. Although European socialism disregarded its antiwar and internationalist principles and voted for the war credits that financed the juggernaut of death, Hughan maintained that the socialist parties, including the Socialist Party of America, were the closest
world yet had to a peace party. During the 1916 United States presidential campaign, she argued that a large vote total for the Socialist Party would register an “anti-war force” that neither major candidate could ignore and signal Europe that American citizens repudiated military intervention. Socialism remained “the one international language,” Hughan asserted.18

Like their European comrades, American socialists confronted the task of transforming general antiwar principles into a concrete strategy. Hughan urged the Socialist Party to adopt a specific plan of action that endorsed the general strike against war, and to include in its membership statement a declaration repudiating both offensive and defensive war. At the special April 1917 St. Louis Convention called to determine its position toward United States participation in the conflict, the Socialist Party condemned World War I, opposed American intervention, and vowed to support “all mass movements” against conscription. Although recognizing that the accommodationist policies of the American Federation of Labor precluded a general strike and mass action against the war, Hughan contended that the St. Louis Resolution provided succor for secular COs who predicated their war resistance on political, economic, and humanitarian rather than religious grounds.19

The historian George Haupt, who has detailed the failure of the Socialist International to transform general principles into concrete, collective antiwar action, provides evidence that supports Hughan’s theory of war resistance. “Obviously one of the factors that any government must bear in mind before accepting the risk of a war is public opinion in general, and in particular that of the sectors that have for years displayed militant pacifism,” Haupt writes. “As a key-point, social democracy and the workers’ movement had great weight in the governments’ decisions.” Confident that the Austrian-Serbian crisis would remain a local conflict and opting for caution, the International Socialist Bureau, meeting on July 29 and 30, decided not to mobilize workers for an organized antiwar campaign or a general strike against war. It chose instead to defer such decisions to the upcoming Socialist International Congress that, preempted by the outbreak of World War I, never convened. According to Haupt, European governments, aware of this hesitation, realized that the Socialist International could not quickly reverse its indecision, counter a patriotic groundswell, and mount an effective antiwar campaign. Haupt’s interpretation of prewar events supports the Hardie-Vaillant-Jaures (and Hughan) contention that the public threat of a coordinated general strike would have comprised a powerful deterrent and might have compelled European governments to reevaluate the decision to declare war. Moreover, it validates Hughan’s emphasis on public opinion and her insistence that a radical pacifist minority, publicly pledged in advance to an uncompromising
refusal to support war, could inoculate pacifists against nationalism and check the decision of governments to wage war.  

WORLD WAR I: THE CHALLENGE OF MARS AND RADICAL PACIFISM

World War I baptized Hughan’s nascent pacifism and transformed it into a specific theory of war resistance. After August 1914, Hughan contributed to the American antipreparedness and nonintervention movement. In addition to her involvement in the Socialist Party, from 1914 to 1918 Hughan either helped to establish or participated in the Emergency Peace Federation, American Union Against Militarism, Fellowship of Reconciliation, Woman’s Peace Party, and, most importantly, the Anti-Enlistment League. Both during and after World War I, Hughan served as a bridge among the pacifist, feminist, and socialist movements.

British war opposition, evidenced in the socialist antiwar and/or pacifist Independent Labour Party, No-Conscription Fellowship, and No More War Movement, shaped the direction of Hughan’s war resistance. Although the Independent Labour Party renounced the war in an August 1914 manifesto, many younger party members such as Fenner Brockway pursued more radical war resistance. In November 1914, Brockway established the socialist pacifist No-Conscription Fellowship, a mixed-gender, absolute pacifist organization that embraced war resisters from diverse political, economic, and religious persuasions. The No-Conscription Fellowship gained distinction as the first British group to collect pledges to resist conscription and related war work; significantly, socialists comprised 75 to 80 percent of its 50,000 members.

In 1921, two years after the Fellowship disbanded, No-Conscription Fellowship veterans founded as its direct descendent the socialist pacifist No More War Movement. Affiliated with the WRI, the No More War Movement required its members to sign an absolute antiwar pledge. In 1915 Hughan founded the Anti-Enlistment League, the precursor to the WRL. In addition to Hughan, the group’s charter members were socialist pacifists John Haynes Holmes, Frances M. Witherspoon, Tracy D. Mygatt, and Evelyn Hughan (Jessie’s sister). Headquartered in Hughan’s Brooklyn home, the Anti-Enlistment League was the first American organization devoted to collecting individual pledges of war resistance, which read: “I, being over 18 years of age, hereby pledge myself against enlistment as a volunteer for any military or naval service in international war, offensive or defensive, and against giving my approval to such enlistment on the part of others.” Hughan
distributed most Anti-Enlistment League literature and pledges at socialist meetings. After United States intervention, Hughan hoped to transform the Anti-Enlistment League into a militant organization along the lines of the No-Conscription Fellowship. Key pacifist leaders, however, rejected Hughan’s proposal, opting instead to assist COs secure exemptions under the conscription law. Before disbanding in April 1917 with America’s entrance into World War I, the Anti-Enlistment League collected 3,500 pledges and prompted attention and opposition out of proportion to its small membership.23

In her postwar campaign to establish an inclusive, absolute pacifist organization, Hughan expressly sought to create an American counterpart to the No-Conscription Fellowship. Moreover, like the Independent Labour Party, No-Conscription Fellowship, and No More War Movement, the WRL embodied a socialist antiwar/pacifist ideology and argued that capitalism and its attendant competition for markets, raw materials, and domination, remained the primary cause of war.24

FOUNDING OF THE WAR RESISTERS LEAGUE

The WRL had organizational roots in the Fellowship of Reconciliation and women’s peace societies. After World War I, Hughan led the movement to establish a radical pacifist federation that would appeal to a broader constituency than the religious Fellowship of Reconciliation and secular women’s peace societies, such as the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, Women’s Peace Society, and Women’s Peace Union. In part, the WRL emerged from this attempt to federate absolute pacifist groups. As a leader in both the Fellowship of Reconciliation and the women’s peace movement, Hughan drew on a wartime and postwar network of radical pacifist (and often socialist) women and men to found the WRL, an organization committed “to unite all men and women who have determined to give no support to any war, irrespective of the reasons—political, religious, or humanitarian—which have led them to take this stand.”25 Victimized by the wartime and postwar Red Scares because of her pacifism, socialism, and unionism, Hughan also founded the WRL to provide pacifists with a sanctuary from hostility, isolation, and persecution.26 Finally, Hughan formed the WRL to establish an American affiliate to the WRI.

Transatlantic socialist pacifist developments stimulated the federation of American pacifists. In 1921 a European pacifist federation united the British No More War Movement and several smaller pacifist groups on the continent. The federation took the name “Paco”—Esperanto for peace. The group
soon transferred Paco’s headquarters to England, elected H. Runham Brown Honorary Secretary, and renamed itself the War Resisters’ International. In December 1922, on the eve of its move to London, the WRI adopted the general strike as a “minimum basis” for the federation. Fenner Brockway, Chair of the WRI, later explained the nature of the new organization:

Those of us who founded the War Resisters’ International insisted from the first that it must be anti-capitalist as well as pacifist. We repudiated “bourgeois” pacifism, wished to extend individual resistance to a general strike against war, and stood for “revolution by non-violence.” The membership was both anarchist and socialist and, while assistance was given to religious objectors to war, the influence was always exerted to emphasize the identity of the struggle against war and the struggle against the economic system which is its cause.

In America this socialist pacifist vision motivated Hughan and characterized the WRL, whose members were also members of the WRI. From 1921 to 1924 the No More War Movement, which promoted the general strike against war, initiated worldwide No More War demonstrations to commemorate the outbreak of World War I. In New York City, the Women’s Peace Society, Women’s Peace Union, and Fellowship of Reconciliation organized annual demonstrations through their Federation Committee to mark the occasion. Female peace activists, including Hughan, provided the primary leadership for the No More War Parades. In 1923 the Federation Committee sought to enlist the socialist antiwar martyr, Eugene V. Debs, to deliver the demonstration’s main speech.

Meanwhile, during its February 1923 retreat, the Fellowship of Reconciliation re-endorsed a proposal by Hughan (which she first made in 1920) to sponsor an organization open to members without regard to religion, sex, or politics, and appointed a new committee to establish such a pacifist federation. Meeting in Hughan’s Manhattan apartment on March 15, 1923, this committee formed what became the War Resisters League. The meeting adopted the declaration of the No More War Movement, the British section of the WRI: “I declare it to be my intention never to take part in war, offensive or defensive, international or civil, whether by bearing arms, making or handling munitions, voluntarily subscribing to war loans or using my labor for the purpose of setting others free for war service.”

Calling itself the War Resisters Committee, the group extended a federation proposal to the Women’s Peace Society and Women’s Peace Union, which accepted. With the Fellowship of Reconciliation, the enlarged federation
temporarily reorganized itself as the American Section of the War Resisters' International. In a letter to Runham Brown several months after the formative March meeting, Hughan reported: “We have at last succeeded in forming the War Resisters’ League [sic], which we request you consider as the American section of the War Resisters’ International.” The newly constituted WRL, Hughan explained, granted membership to the members of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, Women’s Peace Society, and Women’s Peace Union, and sought to enroll individuals not connected with these pacifist groups. In addition to her leadership of the WRL, between March 1923 and the fall of 1925 Hughan participated in several attempts to establish a permanent American federation of radical pacifist groups (principally the Fellowship of Reconciliation, Women’s Peace Society, Women’s Peace Union, and WRL) affiliated with the WRI. These attempts collapsed when representatives remained preoccupied with the actions of their separate organizations. While the relationship between the separate WRL and Federation Committee (under various names) would remain confused and blurred over the next two years, the March 15, 1923, meeting marks the intellectual “birth” of the WRL as the oldest extant secular, mixed-gender, radical pacifist organization in America.32

In the mid- to late 1920s, the League modified the declaration adopted at its historic March 1923 meeting. With minor changes this later declaration remains in effect today: “War is a crime against humanity. I, therefore, am determined not to support any kind of war, international or civil, and to strive for the removal of all the causes of war.”33 The WRL declaration differed from both the Anti-Enlistment League and the No More War Movement pledges. While the Anti-Enlistment League pledged to refuse support for all international wars, the WRL declaration explicitly affirmed the intention to oppose both international and civil war. According to Abraham Kaufman, the WRL’s executive secretary from 1928 to 1948, two explanations account for this textual difference. Written during the preparedness campaign, the Anti-Enlistment League pledge focused on the international First World War, then raging in Europe, and sought to prevent American involvement in the conflict. Moreover, the pledges, which were circulated mainly at socialist meetings, would have garnered less support had they repudiated civil war, a term that encompassed class war. The WRL’s 1923 declaration was crafted after the Bolshevik revolution of 1917. Although socialists initially welcomed the Russian Revolution, by the early 1920s the Bolsheviks had resorted to repression, and socialists and communists were engaged in bitter political and ideological struggle. The WRL declaration sought to bolster social democratic forces while condemning the violence of both Soviet and other expressions of class war. By condemning all wars—international
and civil—the declaration had the unintended consequence of excluding communists, who supported class war to advance socialism and defensive war to defend the Soviet Union.

The WRL declaration also went beyond the No More War Movement pledge. In a pivotal phrase, the WRL declaration vowed “to strive for the removal of all the causes of war,” which to the League meant capitalism, imperialism, militarism, nationalism, racism, and other social and economic causes of war and violence. Since 1923, as part of an international radical pacifist movement (WRI), the WRL has provided a socialist pacifist critique of the existing order and articulated an alternative vision to an international system based on national armed power and a capitalist system that, it argued, fostered rivalry and conflict, produced poverty and inequality, and represented class rather than democratic rule.

EPILOGUE

Reflecting its dominant socialist pacifist leadership and ideology, the WRL and its leaders have sought to transform society along socialist lines, both to eradicate the causes of war and to advance social justice. Prior to the Second World War, under Hughan’s leadership the League remained a single-issue organization devoted to peace and war resistance. However, this pacifist consensus on war (which united socialists, anarchists, radicals, and reformers on peace) did not extend to social and political issues. Believing that social issues should be addressed in multi-issue venues such as the Socialist Party, Hughan stressed that the WRL must avoid general issues of social justice that would divide the membership and destroy its primary mission. After World War II, however, the League abandoned this single-issue principle, broadened its program, and combined its socialist pacifism with Gandhian nonviolent direct action and civil disobedience to advance both peace and justice.

The Second World War also represented a generational and intellectual watershed. Although admiring Gandhi, the WRL’s founding generation developed and expressed its radical pacifism in the context of the international socialist movement. Conversely, Gandhi provided the formative influence on the League’s World War II and post-Hiroshima generations; though often socialist, these generations expressed their radical pacifism in Gandhian rather than socialist language.

Consistent with its ideological socialist roots, the WRL and its members have espoused a socialist pacifist vision and advocated the general strike for nearly eight decades. The WRL also endorsed other means of organized, disciplined, mass-based, nonviolent direct action to prevent war and advance
social (and socialist) reform and revolution—including demonstrations, boycotts, noncooperation, civil disobedience, and factory occupations. While this article has focused on the WRL’s socialist origins, several representative examples illustrate the League’s post-1923 socialist pacifist orientation.

First, between the world wars, socialists dominated the WRL Executive Committee and staff, the WRL constituted a powerful socialist pacifist current within the Socialist Party, and (through 1948) most WRL members voted for the Norman Thomas–led Socialist Party. In addition to Hughan, the League’s socialist leadership included WRL Executive Committee members John Haynes Holmes, Devere Allen, and A. J. Muste, and Executive Secretary Abraham Kaufman, among others. Moreover, each of these WRL leaders championed the nonviolent general strike as an effective substitute for armed social revolution and military defense. Allen, a prominent peace journalist and perhaps the most influential secular radical pacifist during the interwar period, held important leadership positions in the WRL and Socialist Party. Both in numerous public statements and in *The Fight For Peace* (1930), a classic study of the American peace movement that combined historical scholarship, contemporary analysis, and spirited polemic, Allen championed the “strike against war” and “general strike for peace.”

Second, during the Spanish Civil War, which provides a prime illustration of the WRL’s socialist pacifism and reliance on the mass strike, the League championed a Republican victory and nonviolent socialist revolution. WRL members also played a prominent role in the Socialist Party debate over the Spanish Civil War. Despite its opposition to fascism and desire for a workers’ revolution in Spain, the WRL condemned the Socialist Party’s decision to sponsor a 500-man Eugene V. Debs Column to fight fascism in Spain. Instead of armed force, which it considered ineffective, the WRL advocated disciplined nonviolent resistance, mass noncooperation, political and economic organization, and, above all, the general strike. Invoking recent American sit-down strikes, the WRL argued that mass strikes harnessed the power of the working class and provided the most effective alternative to outdated violence. For instance, Devere Allen argued that nonviolent general strikes might promote “aggressive class struggle” more effectively than “the traditional resort to the barricades.” Similarly, toward the end of the Spanish Civil War, in a pamphlet inspired by portentous international developments but applicable to workers in Spain, Hughan explained how Americans could use mass nonviolent resistance and noncooperation to thwart an invasion. In the event of an invasion, Hughan counseled citizens to refuse all cooperation with the occupying forces—a “general strike raised to the nth power.”
Third, after World War II the annual WRL weekend conferences provided a barometer of the socialist pacifist mood within the League. Most participants at the 1946 conference supported the idea of a socialist pacifist third party. In 1947 the conference resolved that “the WRL adapt its literature and activities to the promotion of political, economic, and social revolution by non-violent means.” Conference participants also overwhelmingly adopted an even more radical resolution:

the WRL [should] work . . . to develop organized resistance to war, including a general strike against war . . . to accomplish by non-violent, democratic means the transfer of economic and political power from small groups of business and political leaders to the people themselves. . . . Specifically we urge that power should be decentralized by the development of workers’ control of factories, mines, shops and farms and we urge that the WRL oppose all the causes of war.

Unable realistically to mount a general strike and disturbed over the civil disobedience implicit in the measure, the WRL Executive Committee rejected the resolution in a tie vote. However, opposition to the resolution, led by old-guard socialists, focused on means (direct action and civil disobedience) and not ends (socialist). Notwithstanding the Executive Committee action, the conference resolution reflected the WRL’s socialist pacifist temper.

Fourth, WRL members proved instrumental in founding the Committee for Nonviolent Revolution (1946), a short-lived but influential group that fused pacifism, socialism, and anarcho-syndicalism. Despite divisions between socialists and anarchists within the organization, all participants advocated democratic, egalitarian, and decentralized worker ownership and control of the economy through either socialist planning councils or anarchist direct action and worker occupation of factories. In addition, the Committee for Nonviolent Revolution affirmed both individual war resistance and the general strike against war. Expressing the goal of nonviolent socialist revolution, one representative flyer proclaimed: “WE KNOW that Revolution means using the general strike, the sit-down strike, mass civil disobedience, to seize control from private owners, state bureaucrats, and fake labor czars.”

Fifth, the founding of Liberation magazine in March 1956, under WRL auspices, provided the radical pacifist movement with a publication of unusual intellectual quality and influence. Although Liberation was independent, the League conceived, established, and subsidized the journal, and it was largely staffed by WRL members. Originally co-edited by WRL members David Dellinger, Roy Finch, A. J. Muste, Bayard Rustin, and Charles
Walker, the magazine sought to catalyze revolutionary nonviolent action, liberate individuals from all forms of domination, and build a socialist pacifist movement based on the heritage and values of “libertarian, democratic, anti-war, socialist, anarchist and labor movements in Europe and the United States in the latter half of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth.” The editors mourned the “decline of independent radicalism and the gradual falling into silence of prophetic and rebellious voices” and announced their commitment to a “third camp” between “liberalism and Marxism.” In pursuit of this aim, the editors promised to publicize examples of third camp groups and projects involving nonviolent, democratic, and libertarian socialist alternatives to both communism and capitalism that retained an ethical component. Consistent with the League’s post-1955 orientation, Liberation, which reached a broad pacifist-radical-civil rights audience, provided the later 1950s with a voice of radical dissent and proved a seedbed of the future New Left.41

Finally, continuing the League’s socialist pacifist tradition, David McReynolds, the WRL’s leading spokesperson from 1960 until his 1999 retirement, was the Socialist Party candidate for President of the United States in 2000.

In summary, the WRL forms part of the democratic socialist left, represents the primary expression of the secular socialist pacifist left in America, and comprises an important alternative vision in the American socialist and radical traditions. Fashioned in large part from the socialist general strike against war, the socialist pacifism of the No-Conscription Fellowship and No More War Movement, and the War Resisters’ International and its socialist/anarchist pacifist currents, the WRL has since 1923 pioneered and promoted a distinct form of secular, socialist radical pacifism in the United States.42

NOTES


4. The War Resisters’ International uses an apostrophe; the War Resisters League does not.

5. For Hughan and the influence of both socialist and nonsocialist factors on her thought, see Bennett, “Pacifism Not Passivism,” chap. 1.


7. For the quotation, see Jessie Wallace Hughan, *What is War Resistance?* (New York: WRL, [various editions, 1930s–1940s]), copy in Jessie Wallace Hughan Papers, CDG-A, Swarthmore College Peace Collection (hereafter, Hughan Papers); all references are to the 1930s edition. For this paragraph, also see Bennett, “Pacifism Not Passivism.”


13. In addition to numerous pamphlets and articles, Hughan published several books on socialism and international relations, including *American Socialism of the Present Day* (New York: John Lane, 1911); *A Study of International Government* (New York: Thomas Y. Cromwell, 1923); and *What Is Socialism?* (New York: Vanguard

14. Hughan ran for public office in 1917, 1918, and 1940. In 1917, though she was not permitted to vote, Hughan received over 1,000 ballots as the Socialist Party candidate for the New York Assembly in an election that also saw the passage of an amendment to the state constitution that granted women the right to vote. In 1918 Hughan was the Socialist Party candidate for the New York Secretary of State. In 1940, in a special congressional election in New York held to replace the incumbent who had died in office, Hughan ran on an antiwar platform that garnered support from socialists, including Norman Thomas. Hughan chose to run after the American Labor Party, which the Socialist Party supported, withdrew its candidate and endorsed the Democratic nominee. See Bennett, “Pacifism Not Passivism,” 18, 37–38, 183–84.


16. For evidence that in 1914 Hughan was aware of this debate over the general strike, as well as her discussion of the Hardie-Vaillent resolution, see Hughan, “Has International Socialism Collapsed?” [1915–1916], 3, Hughan Papers; Jessie Wallace Hughan, [untitled draft], [1915], Hughan Papers; Walling, *The Socialists and the War*, iii, a collection of socialist documents, including those central to the socialist debate on the general strike against war, which Hughan reviewed in draft (probably in late 1914) prior to the book’s May 1915 publication. For postwar statements by Hughan, see Hughan, *Three Decades of War Resistance*, 5; Hughan, *A Study of International Government*, 138, 140–41, 145. For an early statement by Hughan on the
general strike to promote social and economic gains, see Hughan, *American Socialism of the Present Day*, 198–200.

17. In his careful study of international socialism and World War I, George Haupt has argued that prior to war “the Socialist International was considered the most important anti-militarist political force in the world.” In 1913 the Socialist International was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. Haupt, *Socialism and the Great War*, quotation in text, page 24; quotation in this note, page 1. For the socialist debate over the general strike within the Second International, in addition to Haupt, see note 2 above.

18. Jessie Wallace Hughan, [untitled draft], October 22, 1916; Hughan, “Has International Socialism Collapsed?” [1914], 2, 8, 10, both in Hughan Papers.


22. In 1937 the No More War Movement and its former No-Conscription Fellowship members merged with the Peace Pledge Union, formed the previous year, and also affiliated with the WRI. For the link between the No-Conscription Fellowship and No More War Movement and the later merger of the No More War Movement with the Peace Pledge Union, see Kennedy, *Hound of Conscience*, 286–89;


26. For instance, see Elinor Byrns, “Federation of Passive-Resistants or Non-Resistants,” November 15, 1922; N.a., [untitled draft], [1923?], both in Fellowship of Reconciliation Papers/U.S. Section, Series A-1, Box 1, DG-13, Swarthmore College Peace Collection (hereafter, FOR Papers, Series, Box number). Hughan was a member of several other peace groups, including the American Union Against Militarism, Woman’s Peace Party–New York Branch, and Emergency Peace Federation, that took action to protect the civil liberties of pacifist COs and nonpacifist opponents of WWI such as socialists, Wobblies, and anarchists. For Hughan and the wartime and postwar Red Scares, see Bennett, “Pacifism Not Passivism,” 34–40. For pacifist support of civil liberties during WWI and the pacifist origins of the postwar civil liberties movement, see Frances H. Early, *A World Without War: How U.S. Feminists and Pacifists Resisted World War I* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1997); Frances H. Early, “Feminism, Peace, and Civil Liberties: Women’s Role in the


28. Brockway, Inside the Left, 133–35. For the No More War Movement’s support of and attention to the general strike, see its No More War (London), March 10, 1922, 7; April 1922, 1; September 1922, 8; May 1924, 1.


31. “Memorandum,” [1923]; “[Draft Minutes] Meeting of Peace Organizations of the United States at the Home of Mr. and Mrs. Sayre,” March 5, 1925, both in WRL Papers, A/1.

32. Jessie Wallace Hughan to H. Runham Brown, July [?], 1923, Hughan Papers; “Memorandum,” [1923], WRL Papers, A/1; Hughan, *Three Decades of War Resistance*, 15; Minutes, FOR Executive Committee, February 27, 1923, FOR Papers, A-2/1; “[Draft Minutes] Meeting of Peace Organizations of the United States at the Home of Mr. and Mrs. Sayre,” March 5, 1925, WRL Papers, A/1; Finch, “Resister for Peace,” 28; Bennett, “Pacifism Not Passivism,” 44–47. For examples of both WRL autonomy and the confusion and ambiguity between the WRL as an independent, autonomous organization and the WRL as a federation of existing absolute pacifist groups, see *No More War* (WPU), Christmas 1923, [3]; Minutes, FOR Executive Council, February 27, 1923, FOR Papers, A-2/1; [Jessie Wallace Hughan] to Miss Black, July 10, 1924, WPU Papers, Reel 88.12; *No More War* (London), February 1924, 2; H. Runham Brown to E[linor] Byrns, July 28, 1924, WPU Papers, Reel 88.22. Although the WRL dates its birth from 1923, for the debate over the date of its founding, see Bennett, “Pacifism Not Passivism,” 43–45.


42. Although this article emphasizes the WRL’s socialist origins, Mohandas Gandhi also influenced the League. While WRL leader John Haynes Holmes and others popularized Gandhi in America during the interwar period, Gandhi had a formative impact on the militant World War II conscientious objectors who controlled and transformed the WRL after 1945. For this theme, see Bennett, “Pacifism Not Passivism,” chap. 2, 4–8.