

PACIFISM

Peace Pledge Union 1 Peace Passage London N7 0BT

PPU ACTION FOR PEACE
www.ppu.org.uk

WHAT'S AT STAKE?

Over 200 million children women and men have been killed in wars and armed conflicts in the last century. Several times that number have been injured, bereaved and displaced. The start of the 21st century sees no let up in the cycle of premeditated large-scale violence. While all our moral and legal codes prohibit killing, today spending on war and the development of ever more efficient weapons, some capable of incinerating whole cities, exceeds \$1.2 trillion. Millions of men and women, many of them highly skilled scientists and engineers, are engaged in war-related activities ostensibly carried out for our security. But instead of providing security, much of this activity actually creates tensions and insecurity. It also represents a massive drain on natural, financial, intellectual and human resources - resources urgently needed to reduce and manage the very real threats confronting us as natural resources grow scarce and the changing climate begins to disrupt existing patterns of living.

IN THE BEGINNING

Are wars inevitable? How much value do we attach to the lives of others? How many people is it acceptable to kill, or maim, or chase out of their homes, so that we can live in comfort? These may not be questions that exercise the drinkers in the Queen Vic, or anywhere else for that matter, but unacknowledged they lie unanswered behind many decisions in the modern world. Since you probably don't want to kill anyone, should you be bothered by such questions? And can we do anything about them, anyway?

Violent skirmishes and wars have been a grim and fearful feature of humanity's past. By the end of the 19th century years of relative peace in Europe were being disturbed by competitive tensions and an accelerating arms race. Pacifism is a term which came into being in the opening year of the 20th century following a major international peace conference. It referred to those who opposed war and worked to create systems which could maintain peace between nations. The word's Latin root is the combination of 'make' and 'peace'. As such, a pacifist was someone who makes peace, rather than one who holds a particular view about peace.

Until it was dismantled a few years ago the US Air Force called its MX nuclear missile the 'Peacemaker': a naming that illustrates the two poles of 'peacemaking'. Pacifism is not about passivity but its mode of peacemaking, unlike that of the US Air Force or indeed of Britain's own military, is not through killing or threatening to kill.

In Britain and America the experience of the First World War led to a development of pacifism. Previously the efforts of peace societies had focused mainly on issues such as establishing forums for arbitration between hostile states, while accepting the need for occasional hostility. Now the failure to prevent war, despite considerable efforts by many, persuaded some that a personal refusal to take part in war or activities that support its execution was also important. After all, without men who were willing to fight there could be no war. For many people, refusal to participate in making war became an essential element of peacemaking. These people were the first conscientious objectors - the forerunners of today's protest movements.

The intellectual origins of Western pacifism are rooted in the beliefs of Christian sects for whom the Sermon on the Mount

was a key text and whose members refused military service. When in 312 AD Christianity became the official religion of Rome the North African theologian Augustine devised the 'just war' doctrine; this justified war, enabled Christians to be soldiers, and prevented any embarrassment for the Christian Emperor Constantine as he marched off to war. Not all Christians agreed, and for over a thousand years dissident sects across Europe were persecuted for resisting the call to arms.

The pacifism of the dissenting sects eroded over the years. Menonites in post-Napoleonic France, for example, succumbed to the rise of conscript armies and by the Second World War even the majority of military age Quakers, the most peace-oriented of the sects, participated in the war.

From the early 16th century humanitarian rather than religious objections to war began to emerge across Europe and were shared by many thinkers of the Enlightenment. They saw war as irrational and contradicting the ideal of human brotherhood. Nevertheless, it took nearly three centuries and the horrors of the Napoleonic War for an organised peace movement to finally emerge. Peace Soci-



'And now in the interests of balance...'

'War is a crime against humanity. I renounce war, and am therefore determined not to support any kind of war. I am also determined to work for the removal of all causes of war.'

eties urging arbitration as a means of resolving conflicts spread from Britain to Europe and to America; the Red Cross came into being with the aim to mitigate the worst excesses of war. Proposals for a body representing all states, which would provide a forum for discussion and hopefully settlement of disputes were widely discussed, and in the dying days of the 19th century a Permanent Court of Arbitration was established: today it is the oldest institution for international resolution of disputes.

Despite considerable efforts to prevent it, by individuals and groups across Europe, fear (caused by international rivalry for overseas possessions), an escalating arms race, blinkered judgement and sheer incompetence on the part of national and military leaders together signed the death warrant of 10 million men across Europe and beyond; worse still the 1914-18 war created the conditions in which the Second World War and the Cold War would happen.

This grim legacy did little to dent the popularity of war-making. By the end of the 20th century the belief in war as a laudable and essential institution has become deeply embedded in all modern states – liberal, theocratic or authoritarian. Today, liberals, tyrants, terrorists and common criminals are united in the belief that being tooled up to the teeth is essential to the success of their enterprises. They all share a willingness to maim and kill other people to get what they want; all have their own justifications; and many say they have God on their side.

TALKING AND DOING

Many people believe that violence is necessary for survival or to defend oneself; but the fruits of violence overwhelmingly consist of pain, suffering and devastation. Despite this, people go on believing in its efficacy.

Some say that human beings are naturally aggressive and that wars are therefore inevitable: it's in our genes. This is a deeply fatalistic and unsupported view of human nature. While it is clear that our genetic history plays a part in making us the people we are, the interplay between our genes and our environment is infinitely variable. Co-operation is the dominant feature in human relations, even in the construction of nuclear weapons. Construction of nuclear weapons, or indeed any other weapons, has little to do with aggression, innate or otherwise. The workers at Aldermaston – Britain's nuclear bomb factory – are not foaming at the mouth ready to tear an enemy from limb to limb; they don't even have an enemy in sight. They are there as a direct result of political decisions taken, mostly in secret, over the course of 60 years and which underpin much of Britain's international relations.

The way in which we understand violence and aggression, explain it to ourselves and come to believe we know what is going on in a violent event, comes from our culture. It is our culture that enables us to imbue violence and violent conflict with significance; it shows us what it 'means' and what it implies for us. Violence is not an irrational outburst of instinct, not something undertaken blindly under genetic orders. By and large people engaging in violence need to give themselves reasons to do so; they have to see their act of violence as worthy of them, or have the excuse of being coerced. The anxiety shown by politicians and military leaders about the growing public disenchantment with Britain's military adventures and the effect this is having on soldiers' morale and on retention and recruiting of personnel, is a small example of this need. This disenchantment, however, comes from failure to 'win', rather than from an objection to destroying lives; after all, who wants to support a losing project?

From our parents and later at school, from TV, books and games,

many children have learned that violence can be both good and bad. This ambiguous template can accompany many of us through life. We also learn about the 'others', whose key features are that they are not like us and can be troublesome. Putting it together it's easy to see ourselves as the good guys, and believe that our use of violence, however regrettable, is necessary. 'The others', on the other hand, have no such justification in our eyes, and have no business using violence against us.

PRACTICAL DIFFICULTIES

Wars and violent conflicts have long histories. Their origins have many sources – large and small, new and old. They also have many players who in turn have their own interests – which may mean preferring not to resolve the conflict. Wars are devastating to many – but they are also highly profitable to those who supply the weaponry. Today's 'merchants of death' roam the corridors of Whitehall and sell their wares at exhibitions in London's Docklands. Most of us have little awareness of the forces that make up a conflict, and when in need of a point of view we reach for those ready-made templates to give it form. Between lack of knowledge about the nature of conflict, internalised values that predispose one to accept virtually any level of violence in support of one's group, tribe, religion or country, and an almost total lack of knowledge about conflict-prevention and conflict resolution, making peace without violence continues to be a challenging project.

To be sure there are plenty of villains and murderous megalomaniacs around (some of whom are Britain's 'best friends'), but 'enemies' are in large part a social construct. This does not make them harmless, but it reminds us that they did not come into the world ready-made. Just as we nurture friends, so we, in part, nurture enemies.

THE WAY AHEAD

In the post-Cold War era, and particularly after the tragedies of Rwanda and Yugoslavia, there has been a growing consensus about the importance of prevention. The realisation of the cost effectiveness of prevention, when compared with the exorbitant cost of subsequent relief, protection and reconstruction, is a powerful incentive. Cost effectiveness may not be the best reason for doing good but it is a reason; coupled with a determination to reduce the world's arsenals this can be a powerful force for good.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Most importantly: inform yourself. In the aftermath of World War Two the French writer Albert Camus posed what he called the great political question of our time: 'Do you or do you not, directly or indirectly, want to be killed or assaulted? Do you, or do you not, directly or indirectly, want to kill or assault?' Camus said that it's necessary to understand what fear means: 'Fear implies and rejects the same fact: a world where murder is legitimate, and where human life is considered trifling.' As for his questions, he says, 'All who say No to both these questions are automatically committed to a series of consequences which must modify their way of posing problems.' And, he said, you have to know your position on this before you can deal with any other issues.

Pacifism is the belief that violent conflicts are by and large preventable without recourse to armed violence, and that major wars are entirely preventable. It is also a commitment not to partake in war or preparations for war, and to help make the world a less violent place.

Further reading

Contemporary Conflict Resolution. Mail, Ramsbotham, Woodhouse. Polity.
Twentieth Century Pacifism. Peter Brock. Syracuse University Press.
Pacifism in Europe to 1914. Peter Brock. Princeton University Press.
Saig No To Violence - children and peace. Jan Melichar. PPU.
The Lucifer Effect: How Good People Turn Evil. Philip Zimbardo. Rider&Co.
Obedience to Authority. Stanley Milgram. Pinter & Martin.
Voices for Peace. interactive CD. PPU

Details of the above and more related resources at www.ppu.org.uk/details