FROM PACIFIST TO ANTI-FASCIST?
SYLVIA PANKHURST AND THE FIGHT AGAINST WAR AND FASCISM

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ABSTRACT

Erika Marie Huckestein: From Pacifist to Anti-Fascist? Sylvia Pankhurst and the Fight Against War and Fascism
(Under the direction of Susan Pennybacker)

Historians of women’s involvement in the interwar peace movement, and biographers of Sylvia Pankhurst have noted her seemingly contradictory positions in the face of two world wars: she vocally opposed the First World War and supported the Allies from the outbreak of the Second World War. These scholars view Pankhurst’s transition from pacifism to anti-fascism as a reversal or subordination of her earlier pacifism. This thesis argues that Pankhurst’s anti-fascist activism and support for the British war effort should not be viewed as a departure from her earlier suffrage and anti-war activism. The story of Sylvia Pankhurst’s political activism was not one of stubborn commitment to, or rejection of, a static succession of ideas, but one of an active engagement with changing politics, and confrontation with the new ideology of fascism, in a society still struggling to recover from the Great War.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Sylvia Pankhurst highlighted the continuity in her politics and reflected on her life-long commitment to political activism in 1939, twenty-one years after women won the right to vote in Great Britain. She wrote that she had “been a campaigner for international peace and justice before, during and since the Great War,” thus alluding to her opposition to the South African Boer War, her advocacy for universal suffrage, and opposition to British involvement in World War One.¹ Yet by the close of that year, Pankhurst criticized those pacifists who were “working definitively against the war” for “aiding a super-military autocracy, maintained by the sword at home and abroad.”² Pankhurst’s self-proclaimed dedication to peace activism appears to contradict her subsequent statement criticizing pacifists who opposed the British war effort during the Second World War. Though she was hesitant to apply labels to her political beliefs, only occasionally referring to herself as a socialist, communist, feminist, or pacifist throughout her writings, a question still remains.³ How can we reconcile and understand Pankhurst’s seemingly contradictory statements, in support of peace and international justice as well as war?


³ Pankhurst provided her own definition of a pacifist in an April 8, 1916 article titled “What is a Pacifist?” In the article she argued that “the true pacifist is a rebel against the present organisation of society, and only as we prefer defeat to wrong-doing and despise the gain of privilege and oppression shall our feet be guided in the way of peace.” Pankhurst, “What Is A Pacifist?” Woman’s Dreadnought, April 8, 1916. To complicate this matter further, the word pacifist has been employed to describe a variety of beliefs, particularly during the first half of the twentieth century. Martin Ceadel argues that while the division within the peace movement remained unclear until confronted with the
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Pankhurst’s transition from pacifism to anti-fascism as a reversal or subordination of her earlier
pacifism.¹ Scholars have concluded their analysis of Pankhurst’s pacifism there, however,
choosing to see Pankhurst’s support for multiple causes as either too wide-ranging to be
conceptually reconciled or focusing only on the particular aspects of Pankhurst’s activism that
can be more easily connected.² Pankhurst’s activism was indeed broad-ranging. She was an
active participant in the suffrage movement, campaigned against the Great War, supported the

⁴ Richard Pankhurst, Sylvia Pankhurst: Counsel for Ethiopia (Tsehai Publishers, 2003), 86; Patricia Romero, E.
Pacifists in Inter-War Britain,” in Challenge to Mars: Essays on Pacifism from 1918 to 1945, ed. Peter Brock and

⁵ For the first book-length study of Sylvia Pankhurst see Richard Pankhurst, Sylvia Pankhurst, Artist and Crusader:
An Intimate Portrait (New York: Paddington Press: distributed by Grosset & Dunlap, 1979). Written by her son in
order to call attention to his mother’s life as an artist, its primary focus is on Pankhurst’s artistic education and her
contributions to British art and the visual culture of the suffrage movement. Patricia Romero, E. Sylvia Pankhurst:
Portrait of a Radical (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987). Romero is highly unsympathetic to her subject and
has been criticized by subsequent biographers for her argument that Pankhurst’s wide-ranging activism can be
explained by her continual search for a father figure. For more sympathetic biographies of Pankhurst see Ian Bullock
and Richard Pankhurst, eds., Sylvia Pankhurst: From Artist to Anti-fascist (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992);
which draws connections between Pankhurst’s involvement in the suffrage campaign, the labor movement, and
Communism; Mary Davis, Sylvia Pankhurst: A Life in Radical Politics (London; Sterling, Va.: Pluto Press, 1999)
which focuses on the links between the labor and women’s movements; and Shirley Harrison, Sylvia Pankhurst: a
Crusading Life 1882-1960 (London: Aurum, 2003) which, as of its publication, was the only biography authorized
by Pankhurst's family. For a biographical study focusing exclusively on Pankhurst's Ethiopian activism see Richard
Pankhurst, Sylvia Pankhurst: Counsel for Ethiopia (Tsehai Publishers, 2003). For the most recent biography of
Pankhurst, which ties together Pankhurst's diverse activism within a broad framework of Pankhurst as a life-long
campaigner for democracy and self-determination, see Katherine Connelly, Sylvia Pankhurst Suffragette, Socialist,
Russian Revolution and Communism, advocated for maternal welfare, opposed fascism and imperialism and was a dedicated advocate of Ethiopia until her death in 1960. Patricia Romero, the first and arguably most influential biographer of Pankhurst, is very critical of Pankhurst’s dedication to such a large variety of causes. She cites Pankhurst’s support of the Russian Revolution, which occurred before women in Britain had won the right to vote, as just one “example of how quickly Sylvia could change causes” and argues that such a shift “raises the question of how committed she was to feminist issues like votes for women.” Romero also dismisses her transition between these different causes as motivated by Pankhurst’s search for a strong male father figure. This kind of explanation is not only dismissive; it fails to give legitimacy to Pankhurst’s politics and ideas.

Pankhurst’s anti-fascist activism and support for the British war effort should not, however, be viewed as a departure from her earlier suffrage and anti-war activism. Her personal conception of pacifism was derived from a core set of beliefs that she maintained throughout her life and was integral to her subsequent opposition to fascism. Furthermore, Pankhurst’s political commitments during the era of fascism continued to be influenced by her earlier experiences of war and ongoing concern with the status of women and women’s particular contribution to society. Pankhurst consistently argued that women should play a central role in politics and international governance even after women in Britain achieved the right to vote on the same terms as men in 1928. She never fully relinquished the legacy of the suffrage movement or the belief that women as a group could contribute something that would otherwise be lacking in a

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7 Ibid., 20, 34, 210.
male dominated society.\textsuperscript{8} Just as Pankhurst often recontextualized her feminism to suit her changing worldview in the midst of two World Wars and the rise of fascism, she also reframed her commitment to peace to accommodate her eventual advocacy of war. The story of Sylvia Pankhurst’s political activism was not one of stubborn commitment to or rejection of a static succession of ideas but one of an active engagement with changing politics and confrontation with the new ideology of fascism in a society still struggling to recover from the Great War.\textsuperscript{9}

As Pankhurst was involved in so many types of political activism, her life also provides a very useful frame for exploring the connections between seemingly disparate movements. Through a systematic study of her interwar journalism I will demonstrate how Pankhurst, rather than abandoning the suffrage movement, continued to invoke the legacy and goals of the


\textsuperscript{9} Historians of fascism still debate the exact definition of the term and whether or not particular movements and regimes should be considered fascist. When Pankhurst first expressed her opposition to fascism her interpretation closely aligned with the official Communist theory of fascism. Those who subscribed to this conception of fascism understood it as an agent of capitalism and the bourgeoisie. This interpretation of fascism (including German National Socialism) was formally adopted by the Third International in 1924. For an analysis of this interpretation of fascism see Stanley Payne, A History of Fascism, 1914-1945 (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), 443–444. As Pankhurst distanced herself from Communism, and fascist continued to develop, her conception of fascism became more complex. She applied the label of fascism broadly and thus would have been in agreement with scholars who advocate for a notion of a “generic fascism” or “synthetic fascism” in order to analyze the culture and ideology of the fascist movement, see Roger Eatwell, “Towards a New Model of Generic Fascism,” Journal of Theoretical Politics 4, no. 2 (April 1, 1992): 161–194, doi:10.1177/0951692892004002003; Roger Griffin, The Nature of Fascism (London; New York: Routledge, 1993). As will be described in more detail later in the paper, she identified certain characteristics of fascism that roughly correspond with most aspects of Robert Paxton’s definition of fascism as “a form of political behavior marked by obsessive preoccupation with community decline, humiliation, or victimhood and by compensatory cults of unity, energy, and purity, in which a mass-based party of committed nationalist militants, working in uneasy but effective collaboration with traditional elites, abandons democratic liberties and pursues with redemptive violence and without ethical or legal restraints goals of internal cleansing and external expansion.” Robert Paxton, The Anatomy of Fascism, 1st ed. (New York: Knopf, 2004), 218.
suffrage movement even after she was no longer a member of any suffrage organization. This study will also contribute to the growing body of scholarship that challenges the notion that women’s involvement in peace movements, or other international organizations and causes, marked a shift away from their previously held feminist beliefs. 10 A new conception of Pankhurst’s political activism is needed, one that recognizes the complex interactions between these different strands of activism in the interwar period.

The daughter of Richard Pankhurst, a radical Liberal barrister, and Emmeline, the founder of the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU), Sylvia Pankhurst was well-positioned for an entry into political activism. Pankhurst followed the example set by her parents and became a member of the Independent Labour Party (ILP) as a young woman. She also joined her mother in the suffrage movement after Emmeline founded the WSPU. As a socialist feminist who remained loyal to the ILP, she gradually became disenchanted with the organization headed by her mother, which catered to middle-class women, and thus created her own suffrage organization in London’s East End. There she fulfilled her desire to advocate for both women’s and workers’ rights. After the outbreak of the First World War, Pankhurst again voiced an opinion that was unpopular among many fellow suffragists, as she declined to support the war effort and instead advocated for a negotiated settlement to end the war. At the war’s close Pankhurst became a founding member of the Communist Party in Britain, though she was

expelled a few years later. In the 1920s and 1930s she was committed to raising the alarm about the dangers of fascism. This period of Pankhurst’s life was also punctuated by the publication of her writings on India, maternal welfare, the Great War and the suffrage movement. Her engagement in anti-fascist activism was linked to her advocacy for Ethiopia, a cause she supported until her death in Addis Ababa in 1960.

In order to further her activism, as well as introduce the public and government officials to her ideas, Pankhurst relied heavily on the periodical press. She often submitted articles to newspapers such as the Manchester Guardian, the News Chronicle, and the Daily Herald, and Picture Post. She began her first periodical, The Woman’s Dreadnought, in 1914 and it served as the organ of the East London Federation of Suffragettes, a splinter organization founded by Pankhurst after her break from the WSPU. As Pankhurst turned towards socialism, and later Communism, she changed the name of this paper to the Workers’ Dreadnought and its circulation reached around 10,000. From 1917 to May 1918 the Dreadnought was published by the Workers’ Suffrage Federation, from May 1918 to June 1920 it was published by the Workers’ Socialist Federation, and after a brief period in which it served as an official organ of the Communist Party, Pankhurst edited the paper independently from 1921 to 1924, until it

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11 Shortly after her expulsion from the CPGB Pankhurst published an article in order to explain that her departure from the party was not due to “any tendency to compromise with capitalism”, but instead was a result of her commitment to “freedom of propaganda for the Left Wing Communists, who oppose all compromise and seek to hasten faster and more directly onward to Communism.” The CPGB executive asked Pankhurst turn over her newspaper, the Workers’ Dreadnought, to Party control and Pankhurst refused. Pankhurst, “Freedom of Discussion,” Workers’ Dreadnought, September 17, 1921.


ceased publication. Pankhurst served as a leader of all three organizations. As she became increasingly concerned with the looming threat of fascism, Pankhurst established a newspaper dedicated to the cause of Ethiopian independence, the *New Times & Ethiopia News*. The paper was first issued in 1936 and Pankhurst continued to publish the paper until she moved to Ethiopia in 1956. During its first year 10,000 copies were printed per week and at its peak circulation of the paper reached 40,000. Taken together, these sources allow us to trace the development of Pankhurst’s conception of peace, fascism and women’s roles in society and politics. Pankhurst’s editorials offered solutions for politicians and citizens who sought to create a better society, an ideal that was constantly in flux. In order to understand how Pankhurst’s ideas evolved from one world war to the next, we must first examine Pankhurst’s opposition to the Great War.

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CHAPTER II
OPPOSITION TO THE GREAT WAR

In reflecting upon the articles she wrote during the First World War, Sylvia Pankhurst was conscious of the fact that she was expressing an oppositional point of view, one which countered the government’s narrative of the war. In a letter written a little over a decade after the war’s end she discussed the duty she felt to convey her pacifist message to the public. “I felt sorrow in having to tell parents, whose sons were at the front,” she wrote, “that the war was wrong and its ideals fake, and that all the belligerent governments were to blame.”\(^\text{15}\) In the process of fulfilling what she saw as her duty, Pankhurst expended a great deal of energy writing and editing a newspaper that expressed her views and lost many friends who did not agree with her anti-war stance.\(^\text{16}\) Pankhurst was not alone in her opposition, however. The First World War created a deep fracture in the suffrage movement between those who worked to support the war and those who devoted themselves to protesting it.\(^\text{17}\) Pankhurst’s personal pacifism did not necessarily align with all suffragists who opposed the war. Her objections to the war were

\(^{15}\) E. Sylvia Pankhurst to unknown, 10 December 1930, ESPP.

\(^{16}\) Ibid.

influenced by her socialist politics, her dedication to working-class women’s rights, and her continued promotion of women’s political activism. This is not to say that Pankhurst’s views were representative of all feminists or socialists, but rather that her identification of the causes of war as the foreign policy of Great Powers, capitalism, and women’s exclusion from politics, were derived from her socialist feminism. In tracing the development of Pankhurst’s pacifism as well as her continued advocacy for the equality and inclusion of women in politics and governance, we can see how her opposition to the First World War led to her eventual condemnation of fascism.

In her weekly editorials and articles in the pages of her newspaper *The Woman’s Dreadnought*, Pankhurst declared that the war was caused by capitalism and Great Power rivalries. Prime Minister Herbert Asquith, in contrast, announced to Parliament that Britain had entered the war in order “to fulfill a solemn international obligation” and “to vindicate the principle that small nationalities are not to be crushed, in defiance of international good faith, by the arbitrary will of a strong and overmastering Power.”\(^\text{18}\) For Pankhurst, however, these words rang hollow. Though the government’s justification for going to war was couched in the “most altruistic and disinterested motives that can be found or invented,” she argued that wars were fought for commercial gain and this war was no different.\(^\text{19}\) Capitalists would profit from the scarcity brought on by the war and exploit the opportunity to increase their wealth and profits.\(^\text{20}\)

In addition to market competition, rivalries between Great Powers over territory also added fuel

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to the fire of war, according to Pankhurst. She claimed that competition for control of Eastern and African territories amounted to no more than “an ignoble and mercenary battle of thieves.”

Rather than a protective action to defend small nationalities, Pankhurst contended that the war was rooted in domination and exploitation, both of workers and colonial territories. Pankhurst’s opposition to the war prefigured the beliefs of the small socialist contingent, largely represented by members of the ILP, within the peace movement, which held that capitalism and imperialism were the inexorable causes of war. Pankhurst also used the war to highlight another kind of inequality that her socialist organization, the Workers’ Suffrage Federation, hoped to end.

From the onset of the Great War, Pankhurst also viewed the war as a by-product of the male-dominated political system. She articulated her continuing demands for women’s enfranchisement in these terms. In her August 8, 1914 article and editorial in the Woman’s Dreadnought Pankhurst contended that women needed the vote in order to influence international policy. She cited the current state of affairs, and the decision to go to war, as evidence for this. Basing her claim on the overwhelming support for peace at the Women’s Meeting of the Labour Party in London’s Trafalgar Square, Pankhurst argued that if women had been incorporated into the electorate at the start of the war, and thus comprised an important part of public opinion, war could have perhaps been avoided. This was a fairly optimistic view of women’s opposition to war as the large majority of the women who were politically involved in either the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies, headed by Millicent Fawcett, and

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22 Ceadel, Pacifism in Britain, 1914-1945, 5.

23 E. Sylvia Pankhurst, “For Peace,” Woman’s Dreadnought, August 8, 1914.
Emmeline Pankhurst’s Women’s Social and Political Union, supported the war effort. The members of women’s organizations affiliated with the labor and co-operative movements, on the other hand, articulated similar arguments to Sylvia Pankhurst about the benefits of including women’s perspectives in political decision making. Pankhurst commended the policies of such women’s organizations which called for peace and stood in opposition to the “men-made Governments of Europe” which rushed “heedless on to war.” Women’s enfranchisement was a vital issue for Pankhurst, not only because she supported universal suffrage regardless of class or sex, but because she believed that women’s inclusion in the political system would have resulted in the war’s end or at least lessened its impact.

Not only was the war a symptom of women’s political exclusion, stressed Pankhurst, but women in particular were harmed by war. After witnessing the departure of Dublin reservists, she described the weeping women who as mothers, sisters and wives had to “bear the harder part of suffering without the excitement and adventure” that allowed male soldiers to continue fighting. In 1915 feminist activists also considered peace and war to be important concerns for women and thus convened an International Congress of Women at The Hague. It was at this

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24 Smith, *The British Women’s Suffrage Campaign, 1866-1928*, 76–78.


27 As a suffrage campaigner Pankhurst advocated for universal suffrage regardless of sex or class as there were still restrictions that prevented some men from voting. In 1918 suffrage for most men over the age of 18 and limited suffrage for women based on age and property was established. For more on electoral reform and how it affected electoral politics and notions of citizenship see Laura Mayhall, *The Militant Suffrage Movement: Citizenship and Resistance in Britain, 1860-1930* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Martin Pugh, *Electoral Reform in War and Peace, 1906-18* (London; Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978); Duncan Tanner, *Political Change and the Labour Party, 1900-1918* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

28 Ibid.
Congress that the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom was established. Though the British government refused to grant passports and permits to the proposed British delegation, Pankhurst ensured that the resolutions of the Congress reached British women through the pages of her paper. The first resolution was an echo of Pankhurst’s own views about the war. It stated that women could not be protected under the conditions of modern warfare and it protested vehemently “against the odious wrongs of which women are the victims in the time of war, and especially against the horrible violation of women which attends all war.” In subsequent articles in the Woman’s Dreadnought, Pankhurst underscored the violation of women due to war, publishing stories that described the suffering of individual British women married to military men. Women married to aliens, particularly Germans, had their houses ransacked and their families seized and placed in internment camps. The government’s lack of financial support during the war forced women to seek charity in order to feed their children. Pankhurst was outraged by this lack of support and compared enlistment in the army to slavery which bound the entire family of enlisted men. Highlighting the suffering of women as non-combatants and wartime workers, Pankhurst contended that women suffered as much if not more than the men fighting on the front lines of the conflict.


While she opposed the war because of its causes as well as its effects on women, Pankhurst’s protest of the war also embodied broader ideas about the purpose of pacifism. Recalling her anti-war stance over a decade after World War One had ended, she described her beliefs as foregone. She claimed that when the war came she was “inevitably…a pacifist,” and thus she started work almost immediately to improve the quality of women’s and children’s lives on the home front and publicly demand an end to the war.\(^{33}\) While Pankhurst labeled herself a pacifist during and after the war, she questioned the pacifist identity of others. Those who called themselves pacifists because they believed in an equal peace at end of the war, but maintained that the war must be fought until Britain won, were not pacifists according to Pankhurst. In her April 8, 1916 article “What is a Pacifist?” she identified the “true pacifist” as one who, like her, was a “rebel against the present organisation of society.”\(^{34}\) According to Pankhurst and some fellow socialists the restructuring of the international system, and the abolition of imperialism and capitalism in particular, were necessary in order to foster a peaceful future.\(^{35}\) The Russian Revolution only added to her belief in transformative change brought about through the “solidarity of the common people.” Pankhurst argued that the Revolution “demonstrated that the workers can win complete emancipation by the universal strike” while “the War has shown that modern warfare is so costly and also so slow and cumbersome and hideously dehumanising that the strike is the only revolutionary weapon which the workers can use successfully.”\(^{36}\) This kind of

\(^{33}\) E. Sylvia Pankhurst to unknown, 10 December 1930, ESPP.


\(^{36}\) E. Sylvia Pankhurst, “A Separate Peace?” *Woman’s Dreadnought*, June 23, 1917. She maintained this belief despite the violent nature of the Russian Revolution. Pankhurst was influenced by Leon Trotsky’s pamphlet “War or Revolution” in which he argued for an end to the European wide “work of mutual annihilation” in order to preserve the revolutionary energy of socialists. See E. Sylvia Pankhurst, “Empire and Nationality” *Workers’ Dreadnought*,
political pacifism gained currency more broadly during the Great War as pacifism was no longer solely expressed in the religious terms that had previously dominated the movement. Pankhurst conceived of more than an ideal world system that would facilitate peace. She also positioned women who were still fighting against a system of inequality as the ideal fighters in this battle against oppression.

Women’s duty was twofold according to Pankhurst. Women had a responsibility to protest the war as well as work toward an alternate system of settling disputes among the international community without resorting to war. A woman’s sense of maternal devotion was needed to further the pacifist mission and enable the success of the peace movement. In addressing her fellow women pacifists, Pankhurst argued that “we Pacifists must be still more constant, still more zealous in our propaganda, devoting every available moment to spreading the Peace ideal.” At the first Council meeting of the British section of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, Pankhurst was elected to the executive committee along with other influential members of the women’s suffrage movement such as Kathleen Courtney, Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence and Helena Swanwick. The manifesto written at meeting opened

June 1, 1918. Pankhurst also viewed the violence of the Revolution largely as a product of “anti-Bolshevik Russians” engaged in a “reactionary fight” to regain control of the government. See E. Sylvia Pankhurst, “League of Nations” Workers’ Dreadnought, January 1, 1919.

37 Cadeel, Pacifism in Britain, 1914-1945, 17, 34.

38 E. Sylvia Pankhurst, “We All Want Peace,” Woman’s Dreadnought, January 13, 1917.

39 Kathleen Courtney (1878-1974) was a member of the non-militant suffrage movement and was an active peace campaigner, who was, for instance, very involved in the British Women’s Peace Crusade after 1916. Courtney was awarded the United Nations Peace Medal in 1972. Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence (1867-1954) served as treasurer of the Women’s Social and Political Union, the militant suffrage organization, and was very influential in the organization until Emmeline and her husband Frederick Pethick-Lawrence were ousted from the organization in 1912. Pethick-Lawrence continued to work for feminist and international organizations through the interwar period. She served as the treasurer of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, an international feminist and anti-war organization, from 1915 to 1922 and president of the Women’s Freedom League from 1926-1935. Helena Swanwick (1864-1939) joined a suffrage society affiliated with the non-militant National Union of Women’s
with the line: “Upon women as non-combatants, lies a special responsibility at the present time for giving expression to the revolt of the modern mind of humanity against war.” Though the government and politicians called on women to take on war service, Pankhurst and the organization that she led, the Workers’ Suffrage Federation, considered it to be their wartime duty “to work for peace and to endeavor to minimize…the havoc wrought by war.” She also urged women to abandon their work producing munitions and instead become advocates for peace, calling for an end to the bombings and other wartime uses of the weapons they were working to produce.

Additionally, Pankhurst stressed that it was not enough for women simply to oppose war. Women needed to contribute to the creation of a new system of settling international disputes without military conflict. In keeping with this, the International Congress of Women at The Hague did not discuss conventions of warfare. The primary goals of the convention were to “find some means other than war of settling disputes” and ensure that women had an “equal part with men on a democratic basis in settling international affairs.”

Suffrage Societies in 1905 but split from the organization over the NUWSS’s pro-war stance after the outbreak of WWI. Throughout WWI and the interwar period Swanwick was very involved in the peace movement and served on the executive of the Union of Democratic Control and was a chairman of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom.


41 E. Sylvia Pankhurst, “The Woman’s Cause is Man’s,” Woman’s Dreadnought, July 22, 1916.


duties during and after the war – to oppose war and foster the creation of a new international system – was echoed in the aims of the Congress despite her absence.

As the war progressed, Pankhurst continued to advocate for its speedy resolution. As the revolutionary Russian government sought to negotiate a separate peace with Germany, Pankhurst demonstrated her support for the proposed Russian peace terms of no annexations and no indemnities.\(^44\) Even after Russia reached a peace agreement with the Central Powers at Brest-Litovsk on March 3, 1918, Pankhurst continued to support Russian peace terms. She voiced her support despite the fact that the Bolshevik separate peace would undermine a united Allied victory and hinder the British peace movement as it allowed Germany the opportunity to launch a western offensive which effectively put an end to hopes that an immediate peace was imminent for Britain and its allies.\(^45\) Pankhurst renewed her support for the terms of no annexations and no indemnities as the Allies began to discuss the sort of peace terms that would be imposed on Germany and the other Central Powers. Believing that the German people should have the right to determine their own government in the wake of the First World War, she argued that in addition to her previously stated peace terms the “rights of peoples to decide their own destinies,” the creation of an “international Federation of Socialist Republics,” and an international meeting of workers, should also be guaranteed.\(^46\) Pankhurst criticized the Paris Peace Conference proposals for falling short of her recommended terms and for continuing a legacy of secret diplomacy that ultimately benefitted the Great Powers. She believed that Jan


Smuts’s proposal of enforcement through commercial boycott and military action against the aggressor nation would lead to another war. 47 Pankhurst also criticized the League of Nations, which she termed “the Capitalist League of Nations,” because she contended that it was “a League of powerful Governments to control the world as they please.” She disagreed with the establishment of the mandate system as well, reasoning that the powerful nations would hinder the development of socialism in their mandatory territories. 48 Not only did the peace terms ensure a capitalist supremacy, claimed Pankhurst, they ensured that foreign policy would continue to be determined by “the self same clique” which brought Britain into the war. 49 Though a new international system was established in the form of the League of Nations, this was not enough for Pankhurst, whose pacifism was rooted in the belief that the entire system of power needed to be overthrown, preferably through a socialist revolution. 50

Pankhurst continually advocated for women’s presence in politics and often used the war to justify this inclusion. Without women, she argued, the international system would remain unchanged, and it would only be a matter of time before another war was fought over material


50 Not all of those on the Left shared the same opinion of the League, however. For an analysis of how the League of Nations was viewed by various parties and political organizations in Britain see Helen McCarthy, The British People and the League of Nations: Democracy, Citizenship and Internationalism C. 1918-45 (Manchester; New York: Distributed in the U.S. exclusively by Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 46–70.
gain and Great Power politics. Her opposition to the war and her work to draw attention to how war negatively affected members of society outside of the trenches extended to her critique of the peace settlement. The terms negotiated at the Paris Peace Conference failed to challenge the system that, according to Pankhurst, initially brought Europe into the Great War. Pankhurst was disappointed in the terms of the peace settlement and in women’s wartime peace activism. In her editorial “We Did Not Stop It” she described a profound guilt for not preventing or ending the war. Pankhurst was particularly taken by the accusations Andreas Latzko made against women in his book Men In War.\[^{51}\] Latzko recalled his experiences in the war and criticized women for not doing more to end the war. He pointed to the militancy and level of activism of women in the suffrage movement and questioned whether such activism could have been employed by women either to prevent or stop the war far sooner than it was. Responding to his assessment Pankhurst agreed that women could have done more in the campaign for peace, and commented on the unpopularity of the movement stating that, “yes, women endured torture for the franchise; but, then, votes for women were the fashion.”\[^{52}\] Pankhurst concurred with his criticism, further conceding that “women, who were to make all wars impossible; women, self-advertised as the beings who would save mankind by bringing the spirit of tender motherhood into politics” had failed to achieve any of these goals.\[^{53}\] Throughout the war, Pankhurst attached her hopes to the possibilities and power of women’s peace activism, but at the war’s end she made it clear that her high expectations remained unmet.

\[^{51}\] Andreas Latzko (1867-1943) was an Austro-Hungarian writer, playwright and journalist who served in WWI as an officer in the Austrian army. His book Men In War was reviewed in major publications such as the New York Times, the New York Sun, the Chicago Daily Tribune, shortly after it was translated into English in 1918. Andreas Latzko, Men in War, trans. Adele Szold Seltzer (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1918).

\[^{52}\] Pankhurst, “We Did Not Stop It,” Workers’ Dreadnought, December 7, 1918.

\[^{53}\] Ibid.
The modern British peace movement began with the Great War, but it was not united by a clear doctrine. Instead, pacifism remained individually conceived along religious, political, or humanitarian lines.\(^{54}\) Pankhurst’s commitment to a socialist inspired pacifism, which incorporated women as the ideal agents of peace, is one example of this. In keeping with socialist critiques of the war, Pankhurst viewed capitalism and imperialism, and the Great Power rivalries they created, as the primary causes of the war. Pankhurst also maintained that women’s exclusion from the political system contributed to the outbreak of war, and she saw women’s political participation as the logical solution not only to putting an end to the current war but as a means of preventing any future wars. Women’s activism and socialism now bore Pankhurst’s hopes for a peaceful future, and in the aftermath of the Great War, the growing threat to socialism and women’s rights was fascism.

CHAPTER III
THE MENACE OF FASCISM

In the immediate aftermath of WWI, Pankhurst focused on socialism. From 1918 until 1924 when it ceased publication, her paper the *Workers’ Dreadnought* was filled with articles supporting the Bolshevik revolution, communism, and socialism even though she was expelled from the Communist Party of Great Britain in 1921 after she refused to turn over the *Workers’ Dreadnought* to Party control. Benito Mussolini’s March on Rome in 1922 marked the beginning of the rise of fascist governments in Europe. Pankhurst’s disillusionment with organized Communism and the Communist revolution in Russia was furthered by Mussolini’s recognition of the Soviet Government. Pankhurst’s opposition to fascism first appeared in the *Workers’ Dreadnought* in the same year that witnessed Mussolini’s ascent to power and was expressed in communist terms. Her critique of fascism became broader and more severe, however, when confronted with the rise of Hitler, the Italian invasion of Abyssinia, and the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War.

While many people, including British politicians, demonstrated ambivalence in regard to fascism in the interwar period, Pankhurst’s views of fascism were consistently negative. In the first years of her opposition, Pankhurst conceptualized fascism as a product of capitalism. “Let

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56 Those who subscribed to this conception of fascism understood it as an agent of capitalism and the bourgeoisie. This interpretation of fascism (including German National Socialism) was formally adopted by the Third International in 1924. For an analysis of this interpretation of fascism see Payne, *A History of Fascism, 1914-1945*, 443–444. Pankhurst’s opposition to fascism was also influenced by Silvio Corio, her Italian partner and father to her son Richard, who routinely published articles about Italian fascism in the *New Times and Ethiopia News*. Pankhurst, *Sylvia Pankhurst, Artist and Crusader*, 185.
there be no mistake,” she declared in 1922, “Fascism is an international menace…the White Terror of modern Capitalism.” She went on to explain that fascist organizing was “based on the conditions of modern industrial society.”

Pankhurst reflected on the rise of Italian fascism in the wake of the March on Rome calling Mussolini “the renegade ex-socialist who deserted the Party to join the Jingo in the war…supplied with funds by the great industrial employers of Italy.” This idea of fascism as linked to industrialism, and more importantly capitalism, was a common feature of Pankhurst’s articles about fascism in the *Workers’ Dreadnought*.

Refusing to accept the *Daily Herald*’s stance that fascism presented no threat to the international community, Pankhurst urged people to recognize the dangers of fascism. As the Italian fascist government began enacting new laws, Pankhurst repeatedly tried to convince her readers that fascism spelled destruction for socialism and workers’ rights in Italy. She opposed the idea put forth by the *Daily Herald*’s editor Hamilton Fyfe that fascism was a mild form of socialism, arguing that the position of fascism was clear. It stood for “aggressive and oppressive industrial Capitalism.”

After the Italian government lowered wages and increased the working hours of railway workers, Pankhurst highlighted this new policy as just one more way in which fascism fostered the oppression of workers. Pankhurst also contended that the rise of fascism was linked to socialism, specifically to its failure. In a 1923 editorial she argued that “the Socialists, having failed to make good their promise to create a new society,” opened the way

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“for Fascism to rebuild the old.” As the fascist government worked to secure its power in Italy, Pankhurst became less concerned with socialists’ culpability in its rise and instead demonstrated a concern that she was the only journalist in Britain aware of the dangers of fascism.

Pankhurst had strong opinions about the ills of fascism, but was concerned that neither the government nor her old allies shared them. Pankhurst was particularly skeptical of Prime Minister Bonar Law’s willingness to continue diplomatic relations with Italy after the fascist seizure of power. She criticized Law for having “entered into cordial relations with the Fascisti Government, without any hint of refusal to recognise it as constitutional.” For Pankhurst, this represented a sharp departure from the attitude of the British government when faced with another revolution, in Russia. After posing the question why was there such a different reception in Britain to the Russian Revolution and the revolution of Mussolini in Italy, she answered that “the Russian Revolution was a menace to Capitalism,” while the fascist revolution was a “support to it and a ruthless attack upon the working class.” Once again Pankhurst emphasized British acceptance of fascism, despite its status as a foreign ideology.

Pankhurst was disappointed not only in the British government’s acceptance of fascism but also in the support of suffragists, specifically the International Women’s Suffrage Alliance, for fascist leadership. She underscored her disapproval of the decision of the IWSA to contact

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65 The IWSA was founded in Berlin in 1904, though for most of its existence it was headquartered in London. The first president of the organization was Carrie Chapman Catt, the head of the National American Woman Suffrage
Mussolini during its annual congress in Rome. Describing this decision in the *Workers’ Dreadnought* Pankhurst denounced the organization for disgracing itself “by asking the brigand Mussolini to receive a deputation of its members.”  

Pankhurst leveled criticism at the IWSA after the conference took place. As a preface to her main critique she stated that IWSA “has long been representative of the more backward elements in the feminist movement” and was becoming obsolete because it still focused on Parliamentarism while the “most forward movements” tended to “reach out towards the Soviets.” This, however, was not the most grievous error of the IWSA. The organization appointed Mussolini president of its annual congress in Rome thereby achieving “a dishonourable notoriety” according to Pankhurst. Not surprisingly, Pankhurst added, “in addressing the Conference, the dictator showed himself…opposed to everything for which the pioneers of the women’s movement stood.”

Once again Pankhurst found herself expressing an opinion in direct opposition to her former suffrage colleagues, but just as with her opposition to the First World War, this did not alter her views or her willingness to express them.

Pankhurst’s willingness to voice dissent perhaps contributed to her severe criticism of the fascist government’s suppression of opposition in Italy. In particular, Pankhurst highlighted the government’s targeted intimidation of communists and socialists, including those who still held political office. These opposition groups were often the victims of violent crimes and arrested

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68 Ibid.
while Italian Fascisti were pardoned after committing those very crimes.  

In an editorial Pankhurst also detailed how Italian Socialist MPs were subjected to physical abuse and police raids, despite the fact that they had been democratically elected. Italian Fascisti also threatened a freedom close to Pankhurst’s heart. In an attempt to further stifle opposition, the government’s fascist squads destroyed the printing presses of their rivals and government officials were given final approval of the appointment of newspaper editors, which enabled them to censor dissenters. Pankhurst’s critique of fascism went beyond unsavory election tactics such as the intimidation of voters at the ballot box in order to ensure a fascist victory. She was emphatic that violence was integral to fascism. After witnessing Hitler’s rise to power in Germany over ten years after the Fascist party took power in Italy, Pankhurst contended that “every impartial person who has studied Fascist and Nazi history and doctrine knows that its main feature is the violent elimination of opposition and the literal extermination of opponents who refuse to be silenced.” Violent suppression of opponents was therefore not unique to Germany or Italy but would occur wherever fascism took hold, according to Pankhurst, and therefore it could not be tolerated.


Pankhurst continued to dedicate herself to exposing the truth behind male-dominated bellicose regimes and called attention to the harmful effects that war had on women by applying these same critiques to militaristic fascist regimes. Even before Italy and Germany threatened the peace of Europe, Pankhurst’s opposition to their fascist governments was linked to the pacifist beliefs that she expressed during the Great War. Once again her opposition was influenced by her political viewpoint and concern about the status of women. While the terms of her commitment to peace were modified as Pankhurst reevaluated her politics when confronted with a changing political landscape, certain core beliefs remained.

In October of 1935, after months marked by border skirmishes and Ethiopian appeals for League of Nations intervention, fascist Italy invaded Ethiopia. Pankhurst immediately opposed the Italian invasion and from the publication of the first issue of her newspaper the New Times and Ethiopia News in London in May 1936, she worked to publicize the Ethiopian cause and win over British public support. She viewed the Italian invasion as a violation of the principles the League of Nations established in order to prevent another war and allow nations to determine their own government. In the first years after the Italian invasion Pankhurst continued to pressure the British public and the British government to take steps in support of Ethiopia. In addition to seeing the League as the best hope for providing an international solution to the fascist advance in Ethiopia, through the idea of collective security and the economic sanctions enshrined within the League Covenant, Pankhurst argued that the British government also had an important role to

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play. Under no circumstances, according to Pankhurst, should the British government recognize the Italian seizure of Ethiopia. She commended those countries that first declared they would not recognize the Italian conquest writing that “these honourable Powers may spur the Great Powers to save the League from destruction and humanity from a Fascist world war.”

Pankhurst continually reminded her readers that the fight was not over, that despite lack of interest shown by the rest of the British press and the government in the years after the conquest began, Ethiopians continued to fight for the independence of their country. For Pankhurst the decision to support Ethiopians in their continued struggle against Italian fascist invaders was based on her support of the League Covenant as well as the maintenance of an international peace. She felt that such a stance should be readily adopted by the British people and the international community. In an article in the New Times and Ethiopia News she wrote that the “duty of all honest people” was clear because the “violations of Fascism—the arch-promoter of dissension, violence and civil war” occurred before the invasion of Ethiopia and would continue to mount until fascism was defeated. The injustice and violations caused by fascism would not be limited to Ethiopia as Pankhurst saw this crisis as larger than Ethiopia.


A central argument as to why governments and people should act to stop fascism, reasoned Pankhurst, was that it was an insidious and dangerous disease that threatened world democracy. Not only did she link Italian fascism to Hitler’s rise to power and the Nazi movement, but she also linked the Italian invasion of Ethiopia to the Spanish Civil War. Not only had Ethiopia and Spain been “sacrificed to the god of war,” that sacrifice was in vain. Pankhurst lamented that “the horrors which are suffered in Ethiopia and Spain to-day may at any time break upon any and every other country, for the peace of the world is broken, and none can tell how fast or how far the breach will spread.” Fascism was not just threatening because it was spreading throughout Europe and Africa, Pankhurst warned that fascism would plunge the world into another global war.

From the first issue of the New Times and Ethiopia News published May 5, 1936, the motto of the paper was “Remember: Everywhere, Always, Fascism Means War.” Pankhurst emphatically and repeatedly stated that the recognition of the conquest of Ethiopia would not lead to a lasting world peace. She called attention to statements made by Mussolini which highlighted the futility of this policy, citing a speech he made in Milan in which he “categorically denounced” what he called “the three great illusions of post-war Europe” – disarmament, collective security, and indivisible peace.” She beseeched her readers to “recognise clearly that the Fascist Dictatorships ever since they rose to power have striven ceaselessly to

79 “Fascists Versus Nazis,” ESPP.


82 Though the paper was printed with the publication day of May 9, 1936 the first issue of the paper was published on May 5, 1936. Richard Pankhurst, “Sylvia and New Times and Ethiopia News,” in Sylvia Pankhurst: From Artist to Anti-Fascist, ed. Richard Pankhurst and Ian Bullock, 1992, 155.
frustrate these ideals.” Labeling fascism “the great war menace” Pankhurst drew a sharp distinction between the contemporary international situation and the period before the First World War. This time, however, it was clear that war was on the horizon. While she herself worked to maintain peace in hopes of avoiding another war she contended that:

our desire that Europe shall be spared the horror of another great war must not blind us to the fact that forces over which we have no control are rapidly making for war. Many of those mainly responsible for the conduct of New Times and Ethiopia News already more than a long decade ago held and exposed the view that Fascism would lead to war. The contention, alas, has proved correct.

In the wake of the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, Pankhurst argued, no one could deny that fascism was putting the world on the path of war.

The memory of the Great War and its devastating effects resonated in Pankhurst’s writing. Echoing arguments that she had made about women’s suffering during the Great War, Pankhurst proclaimed that “war is the inferno of women, and under Fascism the State is perpetually at civil war!” She highlighted the role of Ethiopian women as combatants in the face of fascism arguing that the “resistance of the people is so desperate that even the women have taken up arms to repel the invaders.” It was not, however, as combatants that Ethiopian women suffered most during Italian occupation. Women were the victims of poison gas attacks, bombings, and sexual assaults. According to Pankhurst, there were widespread reports of

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84 “Fascism Today,” ca. 1935, ESPP.


Ethiopian women being forced into prostitution for the benefit of Italian troops.\textsuperscript{89} She wrote that the Italian fascist government had committed crimes against the people of Ethiopia, “above all against the women, whom, from the poorest labourers’ wives and daughters to the most sheltered ladies in the land…[were] requisitioned like cattle for the use of [Italy’s] Blackshirt troops.”\textsuperscript{90} In the November 21, 1936, issue of the \textit{New Times and Ethiopia News} Pankhurst published an account of Italian abuses of Ethiopian women as reported to the Ethiopian Legation in London by a woman who had recently fled Ethiopia. The woman recounted how Italian treatment of Ethiopian women had grown progressively worse after the Italians gained control of the capital Addis Ababa. She stated that “ten or twelve Italian soldiers would get hold of any Ethiopian woman and abuse her in turn in such a way that many maidens and young women have died as the result.”\textsuperscript{91} Pankhurst urged her readers to bring these facts to the attention of all women’s organizations in order to pressure the British government and the League to take action, demanding an end to “these atrocities, and especially the hideous maltreatment of women, through whose most cruel and grievous sufferings two races are brought to shame and sorrow.” She continued her condemnation of Italian atrocities against women, arguing that using “their very womanhood as a means of punishment and pain is the deepest indignity which can be


heaped on the mothers of men.”\textsuperscript{92} Once again Pankhurst cited the suffering and devastation experienced by women during war in order to urge the British people and government to put an end to the war, though now war was taking place in Africa.

In addition to arguing that fascist war harmed women, Pankhurst also highlighted the dangers inherent in fascism for women in Italy and Germany as well as in war-torn countries such as Spain and Ethiopia. Fascism, for Pankhurst, threatened the legacy of the women’s movement in which she had been an active participant. She was deeply concerned that the achievements of the women’s movement were “menaced on every hand” as women in Italy and Germany were being forced out of public and professional life which she viewed as “an attempt to put back the clock so far as women are concerned, and to reduce them to a position of even greater subjection than that against which Mary Wollstonecraft [sic] issued her historic ‘Vindication of the Rights of Women’ in 1792.”\textsuperscript{93} Pankhurst took the Italian Fascist Government further to task, contending that the government only valued women as reproducers of militant men who would serve and fight for the fascist cause. She also decried women’s lack of autonomy in the realm of fascist politics and women’s forcible removal from employment as teachers and other professional positions. At the end of an article Pankhurst published in the New Times and Ethiopia News, she exclaimed, “alas, poor woman; hers is a wretched position in the Fascist State!”\textsuperscript{94} Furthermore, Pankhurst criticized the Italian penal code enacted by the Fascist Government in 1929, which she viewed as placing “women in a position of extreme legal


\textsuperscript{93} “What the Suffragettes Should Do,” ESPP. Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797) was an advocate of women’s rights and an author who was considered to be one of the leading heroines of the feminist movement by Pankhurst and her contemporaries.

inferiority towards men in every relationship affected by the law.”  

For Pankhurst then, Nazism and fascism presented a threat to all of the achievements of the women’s movement and she felt that women should work against them. Under fascist regimes women were once again subjugated and therefore, urged Pankhurst, they “must again raise the cry which we heard in the Suffragette Movement: ‘It’s women for women now,’” and do everything in their power to “save these sisters of ours.” The male-dominated fascist regimes, like the bellicose Great Power governments of the First World War, were extremely detrimental to the well-being and status of women.

Pankhurst evoked women’s experiences of war, both in Ethiopia and in Britain, as well as the denial of women’s rights under fascism in order to persuade women to act. As was the case when confronted with the outbreak of the Great War, she viewed women’s absence from international politics as one of the reasons that international peace had been violated and would continue to be threatened. Pankhurst wrote, “In view of this danger, I utter the strongest appeal I can to women: ROUSE YOURSELVES AGAINST FASCISM…it certainly means war.” She also invoked the legacy of the suffrage movement to inspire women to act to prevent war.

Pankhurst argued that opposing fascism and maintaining peace was a cause “worthy of all the


96 “The Last Fifty Years,” ESPP. Not all feminists shared Pankhurst’s assessment of fascism. Some even looked to fascist organizations and their militancy as a continuation of the legacy of the suffrage movement. For more on British women, and feminists’ involvement with fascism see Gottlieb, Feminine Fascism.

97 Ibid.

98 “What the Suffragettes Should Do,” ESPP.
fire and more which the Suffragettes expended in their struggle for the vote.”

Furthermore, she felt that women were better suited to be pacifist activists than men because “the most untutored woman knows in the depths of her heart that war is war, whether the people who are massacred live in Europe or Africa.” In order to end this war in Africa, women needed to “act nationally and internationally…and take a leaf out of the book of the suffragette, by making themselves felt in a public way.” In particular Pankhurst called on international women’s organizations to take action to mobilize international opinion by calling attention to “atrocities perpetuated upon these sisters of ours in Ethiopia.” Additionally, she reasoned that women’s organizations should not be concerned about becoming involved in controversial issues, because there were long-standing precedents for this. Just as American leaders of the women’s movement such as Lucy Stone and Lucretia Mott worked to end slavery so, urged Pankhurst, “we of to-day…must recognise our clamant duty to support the women of Ethiopia against this outrage.” Fascism threatened women’s rights and the legacy of the suffrage movement. For these reasons, as well as because she saw women as particularly suited to pacifist activism, Pankhurst conceived of women as ideal agents of anti-fascism.

99 Ibid.


101 Ibid.


103 Ibid. Pankhurst was not the only one to call attention to slavery, historic or otherwise, in order to support her case. Some members of the Anti-Slavery Society supported Italian rule in Ethiopia. They reasoned that the outlawing of slavery by the Italians in order to put an end to the practice of slavery that continued under the rule of Emperor Haile Selassie was ample justification for supporting Italian colonial rule. For more on the debates about slavery in Ethiopia see, Suzanne Miers, Slavery in the Twentieth Century: The Evolution of a Global Pattern (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2003); Susan Pennybacker, From Scottsboro to Munich: Race and Political Culture in 1930s Britain (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2009).
After almost two years of Italian occupation in Ethiopia, the cause Pankhurst worked so hard to promote was fading from the headlines of British newspapers and agendas of government ministers and diplomats. Increasingly the matter was considered settled. It was during this period that Pankhurst continued to push for the enforcement of the League of Nations Covenant in order to prevent war, but also acknowledged that violent resistance was one of the only options remaining for Ethiopians. In March of 1937, she described the armed resistance of Ethiopians as “unwilling violence performed with amazing courage.” Pankhurst continued: “to us it is sorrow, deep and abiding, to write thus of war and to confess, with grief, that Ethiopia in the sad present can look for the preservation of her existence only to her own fortitude.” While she disapproved of military intervention and the use of force by the international community, Pankhurst began to realize that those living under fascist dictatorship or under fascist occupation were running out of options.

As the twin challenges of fascism and war confronted the world community, Pankhurst persisted in her advocacy for peace and women’s rights. Viewing fascism as intrinsically warlike she rearticulated her pacifist beliefs in order to incorporate her anti-fascism, allowing for violent

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104 This lack of interest was pervasive despite the impassioned speeches the Emperor of Ethiopia, Haile Selassie, delivered to the League of Nations as the representative of a member state. The most prominent speech made by Selassie was delivered to the League in June of 1936, after which he was named Time magazine’s Man of the Year. See Adejumobi, The History of Ethiopia, 53–92. The Emperor also spent his exile (1936-1941) in Bath, England. Upon his arrival in London he was met by a crowd of supporters who included Sylvia Pankhurst. However, though Pankhurst’s enthusiasm for his cause remained steadfast, his presence failed to sustain the interest and support of British politicians and their constituents. See Richard Pankhurst, “Emperor Haile Selassie’s Arrival in Britain: An Alternative Autobiographical Draft by Percy Arnold,” Northeast African Studies 9, no. 2 (2002): 1–46. There was sustained interest on the part of Pan-Africanist activists working in London who collaborated with Pankhurst. For more on Pankhurst’s activism on issues of race see Pennybacker, From Scottsboro to Munich, 81, 88, 90, 103, 152, 200–201. After the war Pankhurst continued her friendship with Emperor Selassie and in 1956 accepted his invitation to move to Ethiopia where she died in 1960.


106 Ibid.
resistance to fascist regimes. Once again, Pankhurst continued her encouragement of women’s activism by calling on women to oppose fascism, as she saw it threatening the legacy of the suffrage movement and the gains women achieved as a result of it. In doing so she continued to carve out a space in the peace movement for women activists, which paralleled the role she saw for women in the context of the First World War. Pankhurst based this prescribed role for women on the idea that women were natural advocates for peace and as such should work to secure a lasting peace through international cooperation and involvement in the political system. The early years of Pankhurst’s opposition to fascism were thus clearly linked to, and a part of, the individualized pacifism that she developed in the context of the First World War. Her anti-fascism began to challenge her commitment to mainstream pacifism, however, as Britain headed down a road that she was convinced would lead to war.

CHAPTER IV

PEACE THROUGH VICTORY

The next phase of Pankhurst’s anti-fascist activism was focused primarily on one aspect of fascism; the endless war that it would cause. Her socialist critique of fascism became muted and the pacifist component of her activism became more pronounced. It is during this period that we see the strength of Pankhurst’s pacifism before she ultimately decided to support the Allies in the Second World War. Her shift away from the peace movement stemmed from her belief that wars would continue to occur if fascism continued to exist, rather than an abandonment of her core values. This shift coincided with the pacifist movement’s loss of most of its members, and the new commitment of those who stayed to a personal-witness pacifism rather than open anti-war campaigning.  

It was Pankhurst’s desire for peace, however paradoxically, that led to her support of the war. Pankhurst argued that not only would the fascist governments lead the world into war, but that in order to create a lasting peace, fascism would have to be overthrown. While initially she felt this objective could be achieved without the use of force, through the League of Nations Covenant and the imposition of economic sanctions, when war was declared on Germany on September 3, 1939, Pankhurst supported the British government’s decision. From this point on, she conceived of war as both the problem of fascism and the solution to it.

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In the years following Neville Chamberlain’s appointment as Prime Minister, the League of Nations and the governments of Europe continued to be confronted with the growing territorial ambitions of Italy, Germany, and Japan. While Chamberlain and his government attempted to avoid another world war by relying on the policy of appeasement, or granting of concessions to the would-be belligerent nations, Pankhurst condemned this approach.\(^{109}\) She argued that the policy would never succeed because it failed to recognize fundamental aspects of the nature of fascism. For instance, Pankhurst advised that appeasement would not work because fascist governments could not be trusted. She went so far as to say that “no agreement with Fascism is worth the paper it is written upon.”\(^{110}\) Pankhurst also contended that an alliance with one fascist power would not secure peace. After Chamberlain reached an agreement with Mussolini to recognize the Italian conquest of Ethiopia, Pankhurst wrote scathingly that the agreement was “a gross betrayal of International Justice and our national honour.” Furthermore, she announced that it was “a cruel and utterly unjustified blow at Ethiopia who trusted the word of England.”\(^{111}\) After highlighting the lack of popular support in Britain for such an agreement, she returned to the idea that fascist governments could not be trusted, insisting that British diplomats failed to “realise that Fascism neither keeps engagements nor believes in them.”\(^{112}\)


\(^{112}\) Ibid.
Pankhurst was also critical of appeasement because she argued that no agreements or recognition of fascist aggression would prevent fascism from further military action in the future. According to Pankhurst, the fascist governments were just exploiting Britain’s opposition to war by “blackmailing us with the threat to make a war in which we ourselves will be involved, unless we permit them to strangle without interference victim after victim.”  

Furthermore, the idea that “peace can repose on injustice” was “wholly false” and thus the sacrifice of vulnerable nations in an attempt to secure a lasting peace would never succeed, counseled Pankhurst.  

Finally, Pankhurst pointed out the fallacy behind the policy of appeasement, arguing that it would never prevent war. She argued that there was a fundamental misunderstanding of the term “peace” in this context, particularly in the wake of the Czechoslovakia crisis. Pankhurst urged the government to recognize that what was being discussed was “‘our British peace,’ for the peace of the world is not being preserved. It was broken long ago, and now to the three victim nations, Ethiopia, Spain and China, must be added a fourth—Czechoslovakia.”  

Appeasement, in other words, had never led, and would never lead to peace.

Pankhurst continually challenged the notion that appeasement was the only means to avoid war and secure peace, and she offered a range of alternatives to this policy. She maintained that the question to be debated was not whether Britain should go to war, but rather “whether we

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115 In 1938 Hitler’s territorial ambitions turned to Czechoslovakia. Amid growing demonstrations and pressures from Germans living in the Sudetenland region of Czechoslovakia the threat of a German military attack grew and became a major concern of the governments of Great Britain, France and Czechoslovakia. Under Chamberlain’s policy of appeasement, Great Britain decided to negotiate with Hitler. The subsequent Munich Agreement was reached on September 30, 1938 and gave Germany the right to annex certain territories in Czechoslovakia. See Steiner, *The Triumph of the Dark*, 552–670.

shall give our moral and financial support” to those countries threatened by fascism.  

Furthermore, Pankhurst maintained that inaction on Britain’s part had the same result as intervention on the side of the fascists. She contended that “the abandonment of Ethiopia to the aggressor [was] as disastrous to Europe as to her.” If not for the policy of appeasement she continued, “the aggression of Italian Fascism could have been curbed, in the first day of invasion, by a strong diplomatic ‘No’, even without the firing of a single gun.” Fascism had to be brought down by both internal and external pressure, according to Pankhurst. She asserted that external pressure in the form of economic and political boycotts of the aggressor nations of Italy and Germany was the true policy of pacifists. If democratic nations refused to engage the fascist governments diplomatically, Pankhurst reasoned, the fascist powers would be subject to such severe pressure from its citizens that “in a tremendous crisis Fascism will go crashing to its doom.” Pankhurst returned to this idea repeatedly, arguing that “revolt against the immoral cruelty of Fascism is inevitable.” She also called on women to participate in this revolt against fascism, urging “the leaders of our women’s organisations to broadcast to the mothers of those countries one message: Pull your war-making Dictators down, so that we women may reach out our hand of friendship to the world around.” Adhering to her pacifist principles, Pankhurst advocated policies which would cause the demise of fascism rather than appease its leaders.


Pankhurst also criticized those who supported the policy of appeasement by arguing that the policy was true to the pacifist viewpoint. Ethiopia and Spain in particular, she argued, were victims of this policy of non-intervention legitimized by an inauthentic pacifism. In regard to the lack of formal response or aid on the part of the British government in the Spanish Civil War, Pankhurst warned that “misguided Pacifism, almost equally distant on this occasion from Humanity and Charity as war-mongers are, abets this policy.”123 Additionally, this appeasement policy had necessitated military action, or the preparation for it, in countries such as Ethiopia which were on the path to progress socially and politically. Pankhurst took issue with those who supported the build-up of armaments, contending that “from progressive disarmament we have passed to the armaments drive, urged on by even people who have been life-long pacifists and who staunchly maintained their plea for peace by negotiation, even throughout the terrible Great War, 1914-1918, when the pacifist convictions of many suffered eclipse.”124 While she still supported a peaceful resolution to the growing rise and aggression of fascism, she questioned those who blindly maintained their pacifist beliefs without taking into consideration the current international situation. Highlighting the particularities of the British context she counseled that

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“we are pacifists in Britain; we are peace lovers, but let us not be slavish; let us not consort with thieves and murderers to our own undoing, and to the sacrifice of our children’s birthright of honor and freedom.” In other words, though appeasement might appear to be in line with pacifist goals, in reality it was costing pacifists the ideals they sought to protect.

Once again, Pankhurst called on women to become involved in international governance as a way of opposing fascism and maintaining international peace. She highlighted the pacifist activism of women during and after the First World War and argued that the international community was beginning to recognize the important contributions made by women’s peace activism. Pankhurst attributed the League’s decision to establish a commission for the study of the status of women to “the strenuous work of women for peace.” Additionally, women were valued in the international organization because in every country women’s organizations provided “the most faithful support, the most constant work, for the League of Nations and for peace itself.”

As was the case in the context of the First World War, Pankhurst maintained that women were the important force behind the movement for peace. Additionally, Pankhurst challenged mothers who were “long excluded from public affairs,” but were now full citizens in Britain and many other countries, to continue to work for the continuation of the peace that was threatened by fascism. She declared that the challenge to “lawless violence…must come from women as well as men.” Without women’s support lasting peace could not be attained.

125 Ibid.


127 Ibid.

Pankhurst, however, valued women for more than their role as advocates for peace. She also highlighted women’s participation in military endeavors, though in this case she judged them by the cause they were fighting for. She used the fact that women were taking up arms against fascism to demonstrate the severity of the situation. Pankhurst described how Spanish and Ethiopian women were “going as volunteers to the front to defend their country from invasion – killed by Fascism.”\(^{129}\) In addition to demonstrating the loss of life due to fascism, Pankhurst used women’s participation in armed conflict to show how the violations of fascism were so severe that women were forced to this extreme out of courage and a desire for justice.\(^{130}\) Pankhurst also argued that these women took up arms to “to avenge the death and torture of their men and the outrages cruelly perpetuated on their sex.” Ethiopian women did not take this task lightly, Pankhurst stressed that it was “no more affair of parades and uniforms, but of war at the sternest and most ruthless in which…brave women are bearing a man’s part.”\(^{131}\) This exaltation of Ethiopian and Spanish women who fought for their countries is a stark contrast to Pankhurst’s discussion of women fighting for fascist Italy.

Unlike the women in countries fighting against fascism, Pankhurst claimed, Italian women were being conscripted into military service despite the fact that they lacked full citizenship rights.\(^{132}\) Firmly opposing the supposed military service of these women, Pankhurst

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\(^{132}\) Despite Pankhurst’s claim, Italian women were not enlisted into the Italian armed forces until Allied victory appeared imminent. On April 14, 1944 women were called by the fascist government to enlist in the Auxiliary
contended that “now these Italian women, who have lost under Fascism every right and protection afforded them by the vanquished democracy, are denied their very womanhood; they are the first women in history to be mobilised as soldiers to fight in foreign lands.” She went on to exclaim that “the thing is inhuman, an outrage!” Pankhurst argued that women could never prosper under fascism because “where the sword rules woman in inevitably the loser.” She warned, furthermore, that women’s “influence necessarily dwindles when force becomes the arbiter of all things.”

While in principle Pankhurst rejected the use of force, she understood the decision of women to take up arms in countries whose independence was threatened. Women who fought for fascism were not glorified as courageous fighters, but portrayed as martyrs of a system of male domination.

Pankhurst maintained her commitment to peace until Britain declared war on Germany in September of 1939. Even at this moment, however, she still had the makings of a pacifist. Describing the editorial stance of the paper she wrote, “every fibre of our being is against war.” In invoking her past advocacy for peace, she indicated her support for that position and described her pacifism as forged through her direct confrontation with the effects of war among the working class during the time she had spent working in the East End during the First World War, rather than conceived of in “the bookish abstract.”

Nevertheless, despite her first-hand knowledge of the destructiveness of war, she reluctantly admitted that because she knew the

Women’s Service, or SAF, though it is likely that only a couple thousand women served. De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women*, 282.

133 Ibid.


135 Ibid.
facts about fascism and understood that fascist victory in Britain would strip British people of their liberties, she stood “without reserve, for a fight to a finish against the forces of reaction and violence."\textsuperscript{136} In subsequent issues of the \textit{New Times and Ethiopia News}, she elaborated further on this complicated and reluctant pro-war stance. She framed the war in the ideological terms of democracy opposing fascist aggression and dictatorship, and claiming that the war was justified and that the only way to secure a lasting peace was through the military defeat of fascism; she had confidence that it would be destroyed and “repulsed by the awakened conscience of mankind.”\textsuperscript{137}

Pankhurst did not maintain any sympathy for those pacifists who failed to shift their understanding of what was necessary to achieve a lasting peace. She regarded the Peace Pledge Union’s work to plan peace terms as admirable, but posed the question: who will be enacting these terms? “So far as pacifists are concerned, Hitler and his Japanese allies will be masters of the world, since their consciences admit no opposition to them.”\textsuperscript{138} From this point forward Pankhurst viewed those who expressed opposition to the war or worked against it as “aiding a super-military autocracy, maintained by the sword at home and abroad against a democracy which has taken up arms very reluctantly with the object only of restoring peace.”\textsuperscript{139} In this position, Pankhurst allowed no room for debate or opposition.

\textsuperscript{136} Ibid.


While she re-conceptualized both the goals and methods of pacifism in response to fascism, Pankhurst continued to locate women in the struggle for justice and equality as she did during the suffrage movement and the First World War. She spearheaded the founding of the Women’s War Emergency Council which worked to alleviate the burdens of war on the home front. The minutes of the opening meeting detailed Pankhurst’s motivation for starting this organization. Appearing in the *New Times and Ethiopia News*, the minutes stated that the “preliminary meeting had been called because it was believed that during the war many questions of great importance to women would crop up rapidly and immediate action would be required.”\(^{140}\) The subsequent meetings and topics of the meetings were described in the pages of Pankhurst’s paper and demonstrate the organization’s focus on the welfare of women and children in wartime, when their means of support was in jeopardy while their husbands and sons fought fascism abroad.\(^{141}\) Once again Pankhurst was dedicated to calling attention to the hardships that women suffered during war and to organizing women to combat these ills.

Pankhurst also regarded fellow British feminists as duty-bound to fight against fascism. In a June 1, 1940 article she sharply criticized women’s position under the fascist government of Nazi Germany, particularly in regard to the newly established “Three-Class Marriage” system, which favored German women with “untainted” bloodlines.\(^{142}\) Pankhurst attempted to persuade former suffragettes to join her in righting these fascist wrongs, arguing “we Suffragettes, who led the world struggle for women’s citizenship, have a mission in the present crisis.” Suffragettes had a duty, Pankhurst continued, to aid their “sisters in other lands to regain their lost freedom”


and defend their own.\textsuperscript{143} While throughout the First World War Pankhurst had attempted through her publications, speeches and demonstrations to convince British women to refuse to work in munitions factories, she pressured women to do the opposite during the Second World War. She urged the government to speed up women’s training so that Britain would “not be short of men and munitions because the women have not been allowed to help.”\textsuperscript{144} In both wars women were the solution to problems created by war, though the terms of the problem had changed.

While Pankhurst’s opposition to war, and its horrible consequences, appears to conflict with her support of the Second World War, Pankhurst’s ideas were more complex and connected. It was not that she abandoned her efforts to achieve lasting peace in the world, but instead she believed that in order for a final peace to be realized the bellicose fascist dictatorships had to be met with force. Her political commitment to pacifism was unable to survive the threat that fascism presented to a democratic system in which women won the right to vote. This was not uncommon, as those who remained pacifists during WWII often viewed their absolute dedication to non-violence and opposition to the use of force as a faith rather than a political commitment.\textsuperscript{145} For Pankhurst, who retained her concern for the status of women, and marked out a space for their active participation in society and politics, her support of the war was a reconfiguration of her commitment to peace and a logical continuation of her earlier activism.

\textsuperscript{143} “Suffragette’s Point of View, Women Must Fight Hitler,” \textit{New Times and Ethiopia News}, June 1, 1940.


Sylvia Pankhurst’s activism from the beginning of the First World War until the end of the Second was marked by a consistent dedication to an international system ruled by advocates of peace instead of war. Her commitment to women’s rights and socialism was highly influential in shaping her opposition to the Great War. Similarly, Pankhurst’s participation in the suffrage and socialist movements also colored her critique of fascism in the 1920s. As fascist regimes gained power in Europe, Pankhurst continued to protest against these governments. Central to her objection to fascism was the fascist dictators’ conceptualization of the role of women in society as subservient to men. But her concerns were broader than this. Not only was fascism explicitly harmful to women, as she saw it, but it threatened the democratic system that had enabled the suffragettes to express their opposition to the status quo. Pankhurst’s anti-fascism was not in any way a departure from her feminist activism, but represented a continuing commitment to her belief in women’s equality. Furthermore, because fascist states remained in a continuing state of war, she believed that women living within them would continue to suffer without a means of redress. The belligerent nature of fascism was the aspect that Pankhurst objected to the most frequently and most strongly, and this emphasis was clearly connected to her feminist and pacifist beliefs. Though she eventually saw war as the only way to defeat fascism, she thought the sacrifice of pacifism was worth it. Without the downfall of fascist regimes, she reasoned, a permanent international peace could never be established. Thus, even her advocacy of war should be seen as rooted in her long-standing pacifism.
Though Pankhurst’s personal conception of pacifism does not cleanly fit into historians’ categorizations of conventional pacifist activism, understanding her opposition to war and fascism in her own terms can enhance our understanding of the complex British peace movement in the first half of the twentieth century.\(^{146}\) Historians of the interwar peace movement in Britain have argued that those who identified as pacifists actually held beliefs that ranged from anti-militarism and pacifism to absolute pacifism.\(^{147}\) Pankhurst’s life and advocacy for peace further illustrates that there were co-existing and competing definitions of pacifism in the interwar period as people struggled politically and ethically over which international policies to promote when confronted with the growing threat of fascism. In tracing Pankhurst’s changing relationship to pacifism one discovers that while the peace movement included people with a wide range of beliefs, the context of those beliefs changed over time. An individual could move between absolute pacifism and anti-militarism without internal conflict. Furthermore, an analysis of Pankhurst’s peace and anti-fascist activism demonstrates that these different conceptions of pacifism were influenced not only by ethics and morality but by political realities such as the growing support for appeasement and British women’s desire to further increase their participation in politics in a post-suffrage era.

Finally, a consideration of Pankhurst’s interwar anti-fascist activism provides a glimpse into the influential nature of the suffrage movement for those who participated in it, years after

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\(^{146}\) Connelly, *Sylvia Pankhurst Suffragette, Socialist, and Scourge of Empire*, 130; Ceadel, “A Legitimate Peace Movement,” 135; Eglin, “Women Pacifists in Inter-War Britain,” 150. Connelly does acknowledge that Pankhurst has her own conception of ‘peace’ and ‘war’ but does not analyze them.

\(^{147}\) Martin Ceadel distinguishes between different anti-war viewpoints, identifying pacifism as “the belief that war is *always wrong* and should never be resorted to, whatever the consequences of abstaining from fighting” while pacifism was the “assumption that war, though *sometimes necessary*, is always an irrational and inhumane way to solve disputes, and that its prevention should always be an over-riding political priority.” Ceadel, *Pacifism in Britain, 1914-1945*, 3; Ceadel, *Semi-Detached Idealists*, 7.
women won the right to vote. Pankhurst continually embraced and exploited the themes, legacy and network of the suffrage movement in order to garner support for her cause. As a propagandist Pankhurst would have used an appeal to women that she felt would be the most effective, and it is significant that she drew on the memory of the suffrage movement. This highlights the continued prominence that the movement, and those who participated in it, continued to have, at least among the newly enfranchised female population. The symbolic suffrage legacy was claimed by parties and activists across the political spectrum, highlighting how important the suffrage legacy had become. In the interwar era the legacy of the suffrage movement helped to enable British women to continue to position themselves as important global political actors in the face of new fascist ideologies that threatened the gains of that very movement.

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