

KEITH ROBBINS

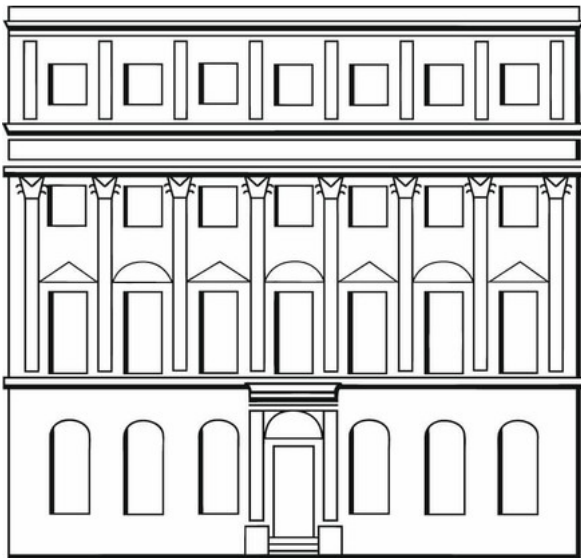
European Peace Movements and Their Influence on Policy  
after the First World War

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## European Peace Movements and Their Influence on Policy after the First World War

KEITH ROBBINS

The topic of my chapter is a desirable addition to any discussion of 'security' in Western Europe because its inclusion stresses the fact that decisions about 'war' and 'peace' were ceasing to be matters which any government could decide without some reference to public support. However, in so far as this chapter seeks to provide some general assessment of 'influence', it is necessarily less precise than essays which address specific policy issues. It is also the case that it is by no means self-evident which organizations and ideologies may be embraced by the term 'European peace movements'. Even so, there is an interesting theme to be explored, though clear-cut conclusions are difficult to reach.

### THE CONCEPT OF A PEACE MOVEMENT IN EUROPE BEFORE 1914

The notion of a 'peace movement' was not novel at the close of the First World War. Individuals have wrestled with issues of 'war' and 'peace' for centuries and their theories and activities need not be detailed here.<sup>1</sup> It was only at the beginning of the nineteenth century, however, that 'peace societies' emerged. The 'Society for Abolishing War' was founded in London in March 1816 and the better-known and more enduring London Peace Society started a few months later. The New York and the Massachusetts Peace Societies

<sup>1</sup> M. Ceadel, *Thinking about War and Peace* (Oxford, 1987); F. H. Hinsley, *Power and the Pursuit of Peace* (Cambridge, 1967).

had been formed a year earlier. It was axiomatic that the activities of these bodies should not be confined to one country. The 'friends of peace' had to be scattered over the world.<sup>2</sup> Comparable groups emerged in the Netherlands and in Switzerland, in part deriving their inspiration from the 'Anglo-Saxon' world. Missionary activity also played a large part in establishing societies in France and 'Germany'. The mid-nineteenth century saw the emergence of the international peace congresses, most notably at Brussels, Paris, and Frankfurt. A Dutch scholar has recently explored the manifold activities of individuals and organizations on a comprehensive scale.<sup>3</sup> We cannot pursue these developments in any detail here but must attempt a summary of the position on the eve of 1914.

A century of activity suggested that the abolition of war was not a straightforward task. Some early activists seem to have supposed that little more was needed to attain the goal of a world free of war than to declare that objective. They and their successors were to be disillusioned, sometimes bitterly so. Nevertheless, there continued to be a strong emphasis in peace societies upon the need to 'convert' opinion to the cause of peace: an emphasis which reflected the evangelical milieu in which the Anglo-Saxon societies emerged. Pamphlets, articles, and newspapers were the chosen instruments of propaganda.

It had been early grasped that 'peace work' could not be confined within national boundaries. Almost by definition, it entailed the creation of transnational links and connections, as epitomized in the periodic peace congresses. But it was equally, if distastefully, apparent that peace societies were the product of particular national cultures and had to be organized within the framework of particular states. In time of internal and international peace such a coexistence raised no major problems in countries where freedom of political

<sup>2</sup> J. E. Cookson, *The Friends of Peace: Anti-War Liberalism in England 1793-1815* (Cambridge, 1982).

<sup>3</sup> W. H. van der Linden, *The International Peace Movement 1815-1874* (Amsterdam, 1987); S. E. Cooper, 'The Origins and Development of European Peace Movements: From Vienna to Frankfurt', in G. Heiss and H. Lutz (eds.), *Friedensbewegungen: Bedingungen und Wirkungen* (Munich, 1984), 75-95.

activity and of the press was guaranteed. Where there were limitations on freedom of expression the propaganda task was inevitably difficult. In time of war, however, the frailty of 'peace movements' was ruthlessly exposed. The gap between rhetoric and reality was evident in two central respects: first, peace societies frequently lost members when their own countries were engaged in hostilities and surviving members frequently found themselves the object of public hostility. We may note in passing, by way of illustration, the dilemmas of the peace societies in the United States during the Civil War and the unpopularity of John Bright in England during the Crimean War (which he opposed).<sup>4</sup> Secondly, the peace congresses were, at best, only a first step in the direction of international co-operation. They did not lay the foundations for a coherent structural and organizational opposition to war. There was no mechanism which could effectively mobilize men and women against war in a period of international tension.

Beyond a general belief that war was undesirable and peace was preferable no single body of doctrine on the causes of war and the way in which it could be prevented had emerged in Europe or the United States.<sup>5</sup> For many adherents of the peace movement, objections to war were derived from or expressed in Christian principles. On the other hand, in France in particular, some writers were anxious to escape from what they regarded as the limitations of a Christian morality and root their objections in the firmer terrain of positivism.<sup>6</sup> Early twentieth-century followers of Norman Angell in Britain, however, stressed the economic unattractiveness of war as a means of resolving disputes.<sup>7</sup> Peace was a topic of considerable public interest, as could be seen in such varied developments as the peace conferences at The Hague in 1899 and 1907, Andrew Carnegie's 'peace

<sup>4</sup> K. G. Robbins, *John Bright* (London, 1979), 105–16.

<sup>5</sup> P. Brock, *Pacifism in Europe to 1914* (Princeton, NJ, 1972).

<sup>6</sup> R. Chickering, *Imperial Germany and a World at War* (Princeton, NJ, 1975), has a section on developments in France, pp. 327–83.

<sup>7</sup> J. D. B. Miller, *Norman Angell and the Futility of War* (London, 1986), 25–52.

endowment', and the award of a Nobel Prize for Peace.<sup>8</sup> Some writers looked to an extension of the role of international law and arbitration procedures. Others looked to changes in the ways in which states conducted their relations with each other. Yet other groups were relatively indifferent to the various 'solutions' which might be canvassed and placed emphasis on the extent to which a commitment to peace represented a personal existential decision. Peace was an expression of individual faith rather than the achievement of particular policies.

#### THE PEACE MOVEMENT AND THE FIRST WORLD WAR

The 'peace movement' of 1914 was therefore an amalgam of ideas and ideologies only loosely linked individually and organizationally.<sup>9</sup> It could not prevent the outbreak of war, though some activists tried desperately to maintain their personal links with their erstwhile associates and friends. It is unnecessary to develop in detail here the picture of the 'patriotic' response to the great crisis as it emerged in the belligerent countries. The 'peace movement' was revealed to be powerless and individual national societies suffered losses of membership and, in some cases, simply ceased to exist, at least *pro tempore*. Prominent peace activists in some cases underwent spectacular conversions to the cause of war or saw little alternative open to them but to give reluctant support to the cause of their nation.

That generalization can hold, but even so it must be said that there remained some degree of differentiation in the position of peace societies within European countries.

Since there was no conscription in Britain in 1914, peace society members could still refrain from volunteering to fight,

<sup>8</sup> L. L. Fabian, *Andrew Carnegie's Peace Endowment* (Washington, DC, 1985); M. Neumann (ed.), *Der Friedens-Nobelpreis von 1901 bis 1904* (Munich, 1987); J. Düllfer, *Regeln gegen den Krieg? Die Haager Friedenskonferenzen von 1899 und 1907 in der internationalen Politik* (Frankfurt-on-Main, 1981).

<sup>9</sup> K. G. Robbins, 'L'Ambiguïté du mot "Paix" au Royaume-Uni, avant 1914', in J. Vandenrath (ed.), 1914: *Les Psychoses de guerre?* (Rouen, 1985).

despite the emotional pressures to do so. When conscription was introduced it was possible to gain exemption on the grounds of 'conscientious objection', though the grounds on which such an objection could be established and the procedures introduced for verifying its authenticity were and remain contentious. The number of such conscientious objectors was very small, though their rights were vociferously supported by many who were not themselves of that persuasion.<sup>10</sup> Freedom of activity was restricted under the Defence of the Realm Act, but it was not eliminated. It was unpopular to advocate 'peace by negotiation' but it was not illegal. It was, however, illegal to seek to subvert the forces of the Crown from their loyalty, as Bertrand Russell was to find. Members of new societies like the Union of Democratic Control were often accused of being opposed to the war, but they asserted that their main concern was with the terms of a peace settlement. That was also the emphasis of bodies like the League of Nations Society and the League of Free Nations Association. How far these groups can be deemed to be part of a 'peace movement' is a matter of definition. The point was debated at the time and since. We may claim, however, that a kind of 'peace movement' continued during the war.<sup>11</sup> Its appeal was very limited and, even in the last two years of the struggle it never seriously hindered the ability of the Lloyd George government to sustain national unity in a fight to the finish.

It is reasonable to contrast the position of the British 'peace movement' with the situation of the peace societies of mainland Europe. Arguably, the British movement had a numerical appeal and status in public discussion over many decades which gave it a role unlike any of its counterparts elsewhere in Europe. It may be, as was often claimed in Germany in particular, that British pacifism was also the self-indulgent expression of insular security and a sated imperialism. Certainly, the peace movement in imperial Germany had to protect itself against the claim that it was

<sup>10</sup> T. C. Kennedy, *The Hound of Conscience: A History of the No-Conscription Fellowship 1914-1919* (Fayetteville, Ark., 1981).

<sup>11</sup> K. G. Robbins, *The Abolition of War: The 'Peace Movement' in Britain, 1914-1919* (Cardiff, 1976).

ignoring the hypocrisy of the apparent British interest in peace. Neither in France nor in Germany did the peace societies have the kind of link with a governing party of the kind possessed by the British societies with at least sections of the Liberal Party before 1914.

We must also tentatively locate the 'peace movements' within the social and political structures of the major European countries. Their paramount appeal had been in middle-class/bourgeois circles which had frequently seen themselves as contending against an atavistic aristocratic militarism. However, from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, this bourgeois 'pacifism' had been frequently denounced from within various Socialist traditions and perspectives as superficial and compromised. Political conflicts on other issues made it very difficult for 'bourgeois' and 'workers' to come to a common mind on the issue of 'peace' and co-operate organizationally. However, that had been a less potent source of division in Britain than it was on the mainland of Europe. In any event, the Socialist International had been as conspicuously unsuccessful in organizing itself internationally as any bourgeois bodies.<sup>12</sup> The implications of this combined failure for the future had still to be worked out. The advent of the Bolshevik revolution sharpened the debate on the Left about the extent to which only the abolition of capitalism could achieve the abolition of war.

#### PEACE MOVEMENTS, THE PEACE SETTLEMENT, AND THE 1920S

The return of 'peace' in 1918-19 only partially resolved the tensions with the 'peace movement' which have been outlined. On the one hand, in a general sense it could be said that the war itself contributed to a major change in the underlying public attitudes towards war and peace.<sup>13</sup> The

<sup>12</sup> D. J. Newton, *British Labour, European Socialists and the Struggle for Peace, 1889-1914* (Oxford, 1985).

<sup>13</sup> J.-J. Becker, *The Great War and the French People* (Leamington Spa, 1985), 326-33.

duration of the conflict and the scale of the casualties had both far exceeded the general expectation held in 1914. 'Never again war' now had a resonance, as a slogan, in a far wider circle than had existed prior to the conflict that had just ended. That does not mean that those who had fought and suffered necessarily believed that they had been wrong to fight. It did not necessarily mean that they would never fight again. But it did probably mean that there was a predisposition to suppose that governments and people would be prepared, in future, to go to very great lengths before they again allowed themselves to participate in any such struggle.

In this generalized sense, the scope for 'peace movements' was at once much greater and much less. The hostility directed against pacifists by those who had fought did not disappear overnight, but in so far as there was a general consensus—in Britain at least—that the 1914–18 war had been the 'War to end War' there was no need to wrangle over the past. In such a climate the need for a specific 'peace movement' which at least in part would be set against the prevailing values in society seemed superfluous. If no war is expected and no significant body of opinion 'wants' war then there is no need for a peace movement. Individuals and groups who had seen themselves in a prophetic role now believed that they could claim not to be lonely and marginal but expressing an inter-party societal conviction. However, that was not the only stream of opinion. Some pacifists—for example those who founded the No More War Movement—took the view that British governments had not turned to peace in any fundamental sense but were merely pacific from passing expedience. The peace movement in post-war Britain was therefore both marginal and catholic, sectarian and comprehensive. It ranged from the enthusiasts for the League of Nations on the one hand, to those (a much smaller minority) who thought the League fundamentally flawed as an instrument for promoting international peace by its entanglement in ideas of 'sanctions' and 'collective security' which, to their minds, still moved in the thought-world of the 'balance of power', a thought-world made obsolete by the



events of 1914.<sup>14</sup> The Labour governments straddled these divisions and tried to reconcile their own somewhat diverse traditions with the new experience of political power. The tensions experienced in both governments by the prime minister, Ramsay MacDonald, epitomized a wider division of opinion.<sup>15</sup>

The British peace movement therefore remained somewhat distinctive. It had a public prominence which was not quite paralleled elsewhere in mainland Europe. The direct experience of war for British soldiers had been on the soil of other countries. The British Empire was still intact. Leaving aside the Irish question, the British state had not suffered loss nor desired gain of a territorial character in Europe. The British contribution to the 'peace settlement' had been at a distance and there was a pervasive unwillingness to accept responsibility for its detailed implementation and preservation—by force if need be.

We do not need to elaborate these points here nor to develop the ways in which both French and German attitudes and policies diverged from the British notion of what a peaceful Europe might be. The differences, however, necessarily made the scope of mainland peace movements also different. We might agree that both in Germany and France there was a widespread revulsion against the experience of the Great War, but it also coexisted alongside a still continuing sense of suspicion and potential conflict. The justice or injustice, the wisdom or unwisdom of the 'peace settlement' were still perceived to have direct implications for national survival or revival. Pacifists in Germany and France operated between these feelings with great difficulty. In Germany, peace societies in general welcomed the demise of the imperial regime and believed that the atmosphere of Weimar was more congenial to their beliefs and values.<sup>16</sup> Even so, it was not easy to establish a clear position politically

<sup>14</sup> M. Ceadel, *Pacifism in Britain 1914-1945: The Defining of a Faith* (Oxford, 1980).

<sup>15</sup> K. G. Robbins, 'Labour Foreign Policy and International Socialism: MacDonald and the League of Nations', in E. Collotti (ed.), *L'Internazionale Operaia e Socialista tra le due guerre* (Milan, 1985), 105-34.

<sup>16</sup> K. Holl and W. Wette (eds.), *Pazifismus in der Weimarer Republik* (Paderborn, 1981).

at a time when class and ideological tensions were still very apparent. Was there an obligation to try to uphold the Weimar system, even if there still remained suspicion of 'revisionism' in foreign policy, or was it more honourable to be critical and detached from any system? It was not easy to tread a path in these circumstances which was both 'national' and 'pacific'. Arguably, by the middle 1920s the 'peace movement' had reached its highest point of influence, but it was still scarcely a 'mass movement' with clear objectives and support from diverse sections of German society. It wanted to protest against some aspects of the peace settlement but not to allow itself to be manoeuvred into associating itself with a revived militarism in a root and branch opposition to all its elements and, indeed, to peace itself.

The position of French peace societies was not totally dissimilar *vis-à-vis* politics and society, though with pressures which sprang in this instance from 'victory' rather than 'defeat'. In Germany pacifists had to be both for revision—if they were to attain any public standing—and yet against the excesses of revisionism. In France pacifists similarly had to claim both that the peace settlement was not the final answer to Europe's problems and that it did in a certain sense represent a kind of temporary peace. Franco-German exchanges between individuals and groups were arranged in an attempt to formulate a position which was 'non-national', but agreement was not easy to accomplish.<sup>17</sup> In addition, the split on the Left between Socialists and Communists further exacerbated the difficulties of reaching a 'peace front' which might also reach out to bourgeois parties and organizations.

In these circumstances it must be doubtful whether we can in any very helpful sense speak about a German 'peace movement' or a French 'peace movement' with an ideological unity and firm sense of political direction. We are dealing—and in the case of Britain too—with an inchoate set of attitudes and beliefs coalescing only uneasily. The personal and organizational base for a genuinely transnational 'European peace movement' in the 1920s simply did not exist.

<sup>17</sup> C. H. Pegg, *The Evolution of the European Idea, 1914–1932* (London, 1983).

Putting matters very bluntly, we may suggest that the events of the subsequent decade demonstrated how frail the notion of a national peace movement was, let alone the notion of a genuine transnational movement.

PEACE MOVEMENT AND THE PROSPECT OF WAR IN  
THE 1930S

The deterioration in international relations in the 1930s had the effect of defining peace movements more clearly, but only in circumstances which confirmed their ineffectiveness. Internal developments within European states also made it almost impossible to talk meaningfully about a 'European' peace movement. After 1933, an organized peace movement ceased to exist in Germany. Pacifists went into exile or were imprisoned. One should not, of course, make a contrast between a flourishing late-Weimar peace movement and a collapse under National Socialism. Peace groups had become so fragmented that Karl Holl, their historian, writes of organized pacifism at this time as a *quantité négligeable*.<sup>18</sup>

Events inside Germany, and their possible international implications, had paradoxical consequences for peace activity elsewhere. On the one hand, the prospect that there might again be a war stimulated pacifists to renewed public campaigns for peace. They were assisted, both in Britain and France, by the 'second wave' of war literature—books by Gabriel Chevalier, André Thérive, Robert Graves, Edmund Blunden, and many others. Films also presented a vivid reminder of the horrors of the Great War. On both sides of the Channel, a certain kind of anti-war sentiment seemed more potent than ever before. The generation that had fought did not want to live through that experience again and the youthful generation had no wish to be caught in the 'war trap'. This sentiment was so pervasive that governments in London and Paris could not ignore it; indeed, their members often shared this feeling, at least in part.

<sup>18</sup> K. Holl, 'The Peace Movement in German Politics 1890–1933', in A. Cosgrove and J. I. McGuire (eds.), *Parliament and Community* (Belfast, 1983).

The strength of this kind of sentiment, however, should not be confused with the strength of the peace movement itself. Indeed, it could be said that it suffered as much as it gained from the apparent popularity of peace. In the first place, the prospect that there might again be war forced miscellaneous pacifists to think hard about how it might be avoided. This discussion brought into the open differences of opinion which had not previously surfaced. It became clear that the loose 'peace movement' was divided both on strategy and tactics. On the one hand, a body of opinion placed almost its entire faith in the League of Nations and in 1935 organized a 'Peace Ballot' on its behalf. On the other hand, there was the emergence of the Peace Pledge Union whose members specifically pledged themselves never to support another war or take part in it.

It is difficult to assess the overall impact of this public campaigning for peace.<sup>19</sup> Pacifists were most at home in the Labour Party and in the shattered Liberal Party. The 'peace issue' was allegedly of great importance in certain by-elections. On the other hand, the National government comfortably retained its majority in the general election of 1935. Even so, the assumption that the country was fundamentally hostile to the prospect of war may have restricted its freedom of manoeuvre in the years that followed. The notion that the British people were not prepared to accept rearmament could be taken as testimony to the influence of the peace movement but I suggest it is too simple a conclusion. The government did have to take note of the opposition to war expressed by pacifists but equally it had good reasons of its own for not wishing to contemplate war except as a very last resort. Here we touch on the complex relationship between 'pacifism' and 'appeasement', which cannot be developed in this short summary. One other difficulty emerged. As they learnt more about the Nazi regime, some pacifists came to feel that a war against Germany could be justified and that there was something dishonourable about 'peace at any price' in the circumstances that pre-

<sup>19</sup> R. Taylor and N. Young (eds.), *Campaigns for Peace: British Peace Movements in the Twentieth Century* (Manchester, 1987).

veiled. If we analyse the feelings aroused by the Munich agreement of 1938, for example, it is not possible to say what 'the peace movement' felt about the outcome. Individuals were torn in contrary directions.<sup>20</sup>

We can see the same kind of ambiguity in France. Recent studies have thrown further light on the 'pacifism' of particular groups in French society at this time—peasants and schoolteachers, for example—and confirmed its strength and importance. Yet this sentiment had complex and diverse political linkages—on the Left, in the Centre, and on the Right. One kind of pacifism led to defeatism and ultimately, it could be argued, to national capitulation. Another kind of pacifism stressed the importance of 'fighting' Fascism.<sup>21</sup> By the time we reach 1940 we can see the spectacle of individuals who had been active in the 'peace movement' feeling under an obligation to fight and individuals who had been scornful of the 'peace movement' now declining to do so. The Nazi-Soviet Pact further complicated the response of the Left.

In Britain the sequence of events between 1938 and 1940 conspired to render irrelevant many of the positions adopted by the peace movement over the previous decade. By 1939 most of those who conceived themselves to be in general sympathy with its objectives had nevertheless come to the conclusion that the issues at stake were of a different order from those allegedly at stake in 1914. A pacifist tradition survived into the war and the provision for conscientious objection was again available. However, such pacifists were frequently more humble in the expression of their beliefs in prevailing circumstances than their predecessors had been in the First World War.

#### CONCLUSION

We can assert, on the one hand, that in the first decade after 1919 national peace movements did to a limited extent

<sup>20</sup> K. G. Robbins, *Appeasement* (Oxford, 1988).

<sup>21</sup> M. Vaïsse, 'Le Pacifisme Français dans les années trente', *Relations internationales*, 53 (1988), 37-52; R. Gombin, *Les Socialistes et la guerre* (Paris, 1970); R. Rémond and J. Bourdin (eds.), *La France et les Français en 1938-1939* (Paris, 1978).

succeed in articulating a public concern for peace that was novel in character and extent. On the other hand, the ideological and organizational frailty of the peace movements made them quite unable to prevent another war. It scarcely needs to be said that there was no fundamental consensus either about what 'peace' was or how it was best created or maintained, nationally or internationally. The cleavage between 'pragmatists' and 'absolutists', to put the matter very simply, was clearly apparent.

Post-1945 European peace movements had to try to cope with this cleavage in circumstances in which they appeared to be somewhat discredited. Their pre-1939 'failure' was only too evident, not least to themselves, and it was not clear how the ideological and organizational defects could be remedied. Once again, a world war had been concluded with expressions of optimism that it would be the last such global struggle. There was now a United Nations Organization about which it was possible to be enthusiastic. The use of the atomic bombs against Japan had revealed the potentially disastrous nature of a future conflict. Once again, it might be said that a peace movement as such was redundant. On the other hand, the cold war was a reality and some pacifists conceived it to be their duty to seek to bridge the gap between East and West—as, for example, in the Stockholm peace conferences. Yet their path was not clear. A powerful 'lesson' had been drawn, in its Churchillian form, from the experience of the 1930s. War could have been avoided if only the British people had been willing to contemplate war earlier and take the necessary measures to prepare themselves for it. The influence of the peace movement had in fact been malign, though from the highest motives. It was vital not to make the same mistake again after 1945. Sadly, it was necessary, after all, to preserve peace by preparing for war. On the other hand, with the defeat of Fascism, it seemed clear that there was virtual unanimity amongst the publics of Western European countries that peace was infinitely to be preferred to war.<sup>22</sup> It was only after 1957 that major peace

<sup>22</sup> P. van den Dungen (ed.), *West European Pacifism and the Strategy for Peace* (London, 1985).

movements began to emerge in Western European countries, many of them focusing specifically upon opposition to nuclear weapons.<sup>23</sup> In turn, old questions about the relationship between peace and security, and between popular movements and elected governments, again came to be asked.<sup>24</sup> It was unfortunate, however, that those who asked the questions and those who attempted to answer them frequently showed little awareness of the fact that peace movements had a history which could fruitfully be studied.

<sup>23</sup> W. Kaltefleiter and R. Pfaltzgraff (eds.), *The Peace Movements in Europe and the United States* (London, 1985); R. Taylor, *Against the Bomb; The British Peace Movement 1958-1965* (Oxford, 1988).

<sup>24</sup> L. S. Wittner, 'Peace Movements and Foreign Policy: The Challenge to Diplomatic Historians', *Diplomatic History*, 11 (1987), 355-70; S. Wank (ed.), *Doves and Diplomats: Foreign Offices and Peace Movements in Europe and America in the Twentieth Century* (Westport, Conn., 1978).