



The Broken Rifle is War Resisters' International's main magazine. Each edition is on a different theme, with articles written by members and friends of the WRI network.

You can sign up to receive The Broken Rifle to your email inbox [here](#).

You can normally find a call for submissions for the next unpublished edition in the most recent one - we welcome submissions of articles, please read [this page](#) to find out more.

Issue number:115, December 2022

Designed by: Merve Arkun



info@wri-irg.org



<https://wri-irg.org/en>



Table of Contents

1 Editorial

2 2021: Commemorating 100 years of resistance to war and its causes

4 The strong antimilitarist links: RAMALC and WRI in Latin America and the Caribbean

8 Testimonies from previous WRI staff member

17 The Insumisión movement against military service in the Spanish State: legitimate disobedience

23 A brief history of WRI's Women Working Group

34 "Persistence!": an interview with Michael Randle

39 The birth of Pan African Nonviolence and Peacebuilding Network



Editorial

Author: Natalia García Cortés



WRI commemorated their 100th anniversary in 2021. As part of this commemoration, alongside social media actions and some public online events that were held during the year, we decided to gather some articles into The Broken Rifle, our main publication.

In this issue, you will find 6 articles that focus on WRI and its network's history, as well as a summary of the actions and events that were organised specially for WRI's centenary.

We have included a collection of testimonies from past WRI staff members, filled with anecdotes and reflections about WRI and the impact it had in their lives; an interview with Michael Randle who was chairperson of WRI from 1966 to 1973; a brief reconstruction of the history of the WRI's Women's Working Group along with reflections from some of its members (an article we published in a previous Broken Rifle issue); an essay that reflects on the links of the Antimilitarist Network of Latin America and the Caribbean and WRI during the years; an article about The Insumisión campaign that ended with compulsory military service in the Spanish State; and finally an article about the birth and history of the Pan African Nonviolence and Peacebuilding network that highlight, among many other important facts, the involvement and support of WRI before and after its conformation.

The centenary was a good opportunity to look into our history and reflect on the future of our network and the work it does and needs to do, to continue resisting war and all its causes. We hope this special edition of the Broken Rifle motivates the antimilitarism movement to bring from the past all the experiences and learnings into their present activism, to know what practices and approaches are worth continuing and what new ways it needs to create to strengthen their future campaigns and actions.

2021: Commemorating 100 years of resistance to war and its causes

Author: Natalia García Cortés



In 2021, we commemorated the 100th year since WRI's foundation. During the year we held events marking the centennial to reflect on the past, review our present resistance and learn what the coming years hold for our network.



BROKEN RIFLE ACROSS SOCIAL MEDIA

The centenary commemoration started on March 23rd, where we encouraged our supporters to share Broken Rifles across social media. The Broken Rifle is a symbol used by the antimilitarist movement and War Resisters International since its foundation in 1921. So, from March 23rd to 25th our affiliates and supporters shared on social media various versions and designs of the Broken Rifles.

These were some of the Broken Rifles we shared on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and our website.

CONFLICT TEXTILES EXHIBITION

Also, as part of the centenary, Roberta Bacic, with the support of Breege Doherty, curated an online exhibition of Arpilleras called: Nonviolence in Action: Antimilitarism in the 21st century.

The exhibition comprised 28 pieces and one of them was commissioned specially to mark the centennial. A guided tour of the exhibition pieces took place on March 25th (in English).

Later in the year, in October, we organised a talk (in Spanish) where we learned a little bit more about some of the pieces of this curated collection.

If you missed the exhibition launch from last year, you can watch it here.



TIMELINE OF WRI'S HISTORY

A timeline of WRI's history was created too. In the timeline, we highlighted a few of the key events that illustrate how our organisation has changed and grown since we were formed in 1921. You can still access this timeline [here](#).

NONVIOLENCE IN ACTION ONLINE CONFERENCE

Finally, at the end of the year, we organised the online conference Nonviolence in Action. From November 20th to November 28th, we held three plenary sessions where we had the opportunity to explore the past, present, and future of our movement, followed by a discussion space where we had the chance to reflect on the future of the antimilitarist movement and the network.

During this week, some of our affiliates and allies facilitated workshops, covering a variety of issues related to militarism, war and violence and the resistance to them. If you missed the plenary presentations or if you would like to review them,

you can go [here](#). We also recorded some of the workshops. You can find them at the link above.

LOCAL AND AUTONOMOUS EVENTS

As part of the centenary, we encouraged our network to organise their events. Here is a list of some of the events that were held during the year:

*** Colombia**

Esporas de Saberes – Conversations that change the world: Dialogues about antimilitarism, nonviolence and resistance alternatives. You can find the two conversatories (in Spanish) [here](#) and [here](#).

*** Germany**

An exhibition celebrating WRI's 100 years of resistance in Berlin. Click [here](#) to see some pictures from the exhibition.

*** Finland:**

AKL and Committee 100 [online event](#).

The strong antimilitarist links: RAMALC and WRI in Latin America and the Caribbean

Author: Pelao Carvallo



The Antimilitarist Network of Latinamerica and the Caribbean (RAMALC by its acronym in Spanish) is closely linked to War Resisters' International (WRI). This link is mutual and sustained: The history of both organizations shows this.

RAMALC is a current, living, existing organization, with the difficulties historically faced by antimilitarist organizations of nonviolent direct action that claim to be autonomous and self-managed. That is why its history is under construction and could be a good subject for historians. This history, year by year, shows how the link between RAMALC and WRI is maintained and sustained.

RAMALC was created in 2014 at a Latinamerican Antimilitarist gathering in Quito (Ecuador) organised with WRI's support, summarising the coordination, cooperation and mutual regional work that had existed since the 1990s.

The first regional group was the ROLC - Network of Conscientious Objection (CO) in Latin America and the Caribbean, focusing on the exercise and recognition of the right to CO and its tension with antimilitarism. This network, in broad coordination with WRI, was dominated by institutionalised organisations (NGOs) that aimed more at lobbying and legislative and media pressure, in contrast to the interest of conscientious objectors who aspired more to strategies of insubmission and/or nonviolent direct action.

This tension, together with the withdrawal of international cooperation from a large part of South America in the mid and late 1990s, made the continuity of the ROLC unviable, which managed to organise five Latin American meetings (ELOCs¹), being the last one in Medellín, Colombia in 1999².

¹ <http://www.derechos.org/nizkor/press/ecu2.html> , <https://wri-irg.org/es/story/1997/oc-en-america-latina#Heading11>

² https://www.antimilitaristasmadrid.org/moc-carabanchel/cain/cain_14.htm





In the early 2000s, although the ROLC no longer existed, there were still sub-regional or bilateral meetings of antimilitarist and CO groups. The desire to meet and work together led to the creation of the Coordinadora Latinoamericana Antimilitarista y de Objeción de Conciencia (CLAOC) in the mid-2000s, marking a change of focus. The CLAOC emerged and developed around events on 15 May, International Day of Conscientious Objection: one in 2004 in Santiago (Chile³) organised by WRI and the antimilitarist group Ni Casco Ni Uniforme, and another in 2010 in Asunción (Paraguay) organised together with the organisation *La Comuna de Emma, Chana* and others⁴.

In addition to these events, the Latin American and Caribbean coordination continues existing in the meetings that the people had in the regional working groups within WRI's Conferences and Assemblies, such as in

Padeborn, Germany in 2006 and in Ahmenabad, India in 2010. It was in these physical meetings and in email exchanges, and with the great support of Andreas, Javier, Howard and Dominique (who from the WRI office in those years, showed great interest in supporting Latin American initiatives) that the idea of having an autonomous meeting began to take shape and become a reality. Andreas, for example, maintained an excellent relationship with antimilitarist groups in Colombia, with visits on the ground from time to time.



³ <https://wri-irg.org/en/news/2004/icod04-en.htm>

⁴ <https://wri-irg.org/es/story/2010/asuncion-transantimili>

Thus, since 2012, the idea of relaunching The Antimilitarist Coordination in the region was possible thanks to the fact that local activity had never disappeared (although it had diminished in some places) and to WRI's support. In 2014, in Quito, there was a meeting that combined training in Nonviolent Direct Action, strategy and political coordination, creating the network that was named RAMALC. This meeting was marked by government repression of social movements opposed to extractivism, so much so that for security reasons the Nonviolent Direct Action resulting from the training had to be suspended.

RAMALC's support and relationship with WRI were maintained and strengthened in the following meetings, as well as in the activity between physical events. In 2015 RAMALC held a meeting in Mexico City. The main activity of this event focused on the anniversary of the disappearance of the 43 students from Ayotzinapa, as the date of the event coincided with that first anniversary. For this reason, the training focused on fear in social activism and how to confront it, and the action resulting from the training was immersed in the march to the city's Zócalo, which demanded the return of the 43 students alive, justice and truth, as well as denouncing the responsibility of the State in this event ("It was the State"⁵).

One activity that is part of the work between meetings is the preparation of the next physical event, which is undertaken by a local team, together with the rest of RAMALC, always trying to have a direct or indirect representation from WRI. The positioning in the face of militarisation⁶ and the construction of local networks, local training, Nonviolent Direct Actions, and demilitarisation activism are part of RAMALC's daily activities.

The Caracolito Group took on the creation of a local organising team for the RAMALC meeting/training in Asunción in November 2017, which concluded with a Direct Action against extractivism disguised as urban development⁷ that mainly affects the urban and semi-urban popular sectors of Latin America and the Caribbean.

At each RAMALC meeting, strategic planning and set of objectives for the following period is carried out, which act more as a commitment and stimulus for joint work than a strict guide to be followed.

⁵<http://ramalc.org/declaracion-de-la-ramalc-en-solidaridad-con-ayotzinapa-y-todos-las-y-los-desaparecidos-de-mexico/>

⁶ As an example of this: <http://ramalc.org/no-queremos-mas-armas-para-latinoamerica/>

⁷ <http://ramalc.org/accion-directa-contra-la-militarizacion-de-los-cuerpos-y-territorios-en-asuncion/>



EL MILITARISMO ES EL VIRUS

Red Antimilitarista de América Latina y el Caribe

Since 2017, following the Venezuelan uprising, social activism has been on the rise in the region, generating the "Andean Spring"⁸ with social uprisings in Venezuela, Ecuador, Colombia, Chile, Peru and briefly in Bolivia. In all this social conflict, the people and groups that are members of RAMALC have actively participated in Direct Actions, trainings and activism of all kinds, always from antimilitarism and Nonviolent Direct Action focus. Likewise, the main part of the actions of this network is the concern for the care of those who, being part of RAMALC and/or WRI in the region, are affected in their freedom and rights⁹ by governments of any sign that repress social protest without contemplation. To this end, coordinated action with WRI is always attempted, as has been the case in Venezuela, Mexico, Cuba, Ecuador, Chile, among others.¹⁰

In the midst of this "Andean Spring", the RAMALC meeting/training was held in Bogotá (Colombia) in July and August 2019, in coordination with WRI, which at the same time held the Antimilitarism in Movement Conference, as well as its regular Assembly. RAMALC's training, designed in the context of the militarisation of borders in Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as the migration crisis, was held with difficulties in the Colombian border city of Cúcuta, on the border with Venezuela.

The pandemic has slowed down the physical meetings, but it has not stopped RAMALC's anti-militarist action, which from the outset has monitored the use of the pandemic as an excuse for governments to continue militarising the region¹¹; militarisation with an extractivist undertone that they barely conceal. In this, there has been an affinity with WRI.

RAMALC develops an anti-militarist activity based on the local action of each participating group and individual, emphasising joint action with WRI, from network to network. This is why these 100 years of WRI are important for this Network, and the fact that there are four RAMALC members on the WRI's board is a sign of this close link based on autonomy and affinity of goals and methods.

⁸ <https://www.clacso.org/la-primavera-andina-florece-en-pandemia/>

⁹ <http://ramalc.org/agresion-a-festivales-solidarios-guatemala/>

¹⁰ An example of a coordinated action between RAMALC and WRI <https://bit.ly/3A9NHID>

¹¹ <http://ramalc.org/boletin-no2-covid19-y-militarizacion-de-las-sociedades-en-america-latina-y-el-caribe/>

Testimonies from previous WRI staff member

”

During the 100 years since WRI's foundation, many activists and groups have worked together and inside WRI's network, as executive and council members, affiliates, close allies and so on. On this occasion, we wanted to highlight the experiences of some of the previous staff members, who for several years worked at the WRI office, organising events, meetings and different actions, creating friendships, alliances and good memories. These are their testimonies!





Veronica Kelly:

I wasn't just new to WRI – I was a novice in the peace movement. In 1980s Geneva, where I was studying translation, the USA and USSR were playing war games with missile numbers, and first I chose those 'peace talks' for a student project. Disenchanted with them, instead, I explored pacifism, which led to the peace camp in Comiso, where I discovered nonviolent anarchism and direct action. A women's roadblock led to deportation from Italy, then a year campaigning, mostly from home in Ireland. And then, a friend said WRI was advertising.

Preparing for the interview I was keen but nervous. This worldwide organisation had impressed me when, amazingly, its London HQ had helped a motley bunch of activists in distress. (It was similarly unfazed later when one deportee from Denmark was, inconveniently, staff. Respect, WRI!) Meanwhile, the 'Wanted' ad specified 'a projects officer'. A brand-new position... Would they expect me to come up with projects?!

I plunged into a new life. A gigantic city, a cramped office, but a network stretching across the planet. Tiny staff, never-ending tasks, long days. Correspondence, magazines, appeals, meetings, reports, visitors from all over. Dawes Street was normally hectic, sometimes hilarious, and I learned so much. About WRI's member organisations, of course: issues, campaigns, internal disputes and individuals (thanks Myrtle!). Practical skills: carefully aligning cut-out paragraphs for the Newsletter, sticking them down with disgusting Cow Gum; drafting minutes (envying Howard's adroitness); organising conferences from scratch. Overall, absorbing how a large organisation works. An insight that's handy now: working freelance for NGO clients, I can imagine their staff's working lives. And as an interpreter I've been amused to see other bodies, even companies, adopting peace movement methods for lively, egalitarian, effective meetings.

I was forced to shake off my shyness. Representing WRI at a meeting, I had to approach people. Which meant preparing! As my colleagues discovered, not only was I not political, I was naïve. But Howard – astute, encouraging, giddy – was my mentor: who would be attending, who should I talk to, with what aim? Sometimes I even had to address a meeting myself.



Or, if a participant was struggling to keep up, I'd whisper in another language (never guessing I'd end up as an actual (never guessing I'd end up as an actual interpreter). I grew to love this networking.

Perks included fortnights camping on International Marches and 'field trips' to sections in Germany and the State of Spain. Other highlights: being WRI's witness at the trial of Greek CO Michalis Marangakis, and a thrilling trip behind the Berlin Wall to meet Eastern European pacifists.

WRI and sections' meetings were always high points – exec, council, triennials, women's gatherings (Ireland, Bangkok), social defence, tax resistance, AGMs... From the mind-blowing Vedchhi Triennial, one nugget I treasure is Ellen suggesting that WRI should examine all its statements: where they said 'people', did this really include women?!

Stand-out moments in Dawes Street? The phone-call telling us Jean De Wandelaer had been kidnapped in El Salvador, leaping into action, rejoicing on his release. The winter the office was flooded: Myrtle and volunteers to the rescue, mops and buckets, cold and wet, all of us shivering and despairing and giggling. An exec meeting where knitting appeared with the arrival of two American strangers, their remarks perceptive, sound, constructive – Dorie and Joanne were needle-sharp, and warm with it.

So many wonderful, inspiring people from so many countries. I could begin, but I wouldn't know where to stop naming them. Deep gratitude goes to those I worked most closely with: endearing exec and council members, colleagues John, Will, Howard, Pajo, Oili and Chris, our stalwart volunteers (notably Martyn and Martin, Pippa and her three friends who kept me sane), and of course WRI Women and the gathering organisers, especially Ulla, Trui and Casha.

WRI showed me that, everywhere there is repression, there are also determined people resisting nonviolently; that everyone can do something, and even a small act can spark a change. Whatever the issue, from toys to taxes, patriarchy to Prisoners for Peace, teaching nonviolent social defence, toxic-waste incinerators, climate justice, poverty, social justice, rights, rights, rights... Nonviolent action is empowering!

These convictions, and resisters worldwide I came to know, encourage me when situations seem dire. With all I learned from WRI, I've been emboldened ever since to take initiatives, e.g. around migrants. WRI and its people made me wiser, more confident, more useful, happy. Gave me lifelong friends. Pushed me to use my voice. I'm proud to have worked for WRI, and forever grateful.

Cork, Ireland, September 202



Dominique Saillard:

The little story of a (would be) article

When Natalia wrote to me more than a month ago to ask for an article about my experience as a WRI staff for this very special Broken Rifle, I put the e-mail on hold for a while. I was tired, I was going on vacation. But when I returned, the e-mail came back to my mind, never to leave it. So, I wrote that yes, I was going to write something, that I owed it to WRI in some way.

And after a few days of fruitless thinking, when I was already warning Natalia that I was very sorry, but could not come up with anything relevant, it occurred to me to simply write the following:

Why don't I manage to write this article?

Because there are senses of responsibility that sometimes stifle, rather than liberate. So, I have to convince myself that whatever comes out now, it will make some sense for this commemorative Broken Rifle.

Because 100 years inspire respect. I start counting, and I calculate that after 5 years as and 7 years as an executive member, I have had a direct part in 12% of this history! Well, something is better than nothing. And above all, it was worth the effort, worth the pain.

Because there was pain at times. On a personal level, surely the saddest moment was the sudden death of Howard Clark, with whom I shared the London office and long days of executive meetings all those years. I still get emotional when I think of that day, that sudden sense of finitude, the interrupted stories, the pacifist history that he

could still have analyzed, written, recounted... I have a bird's memory, and it is in his elephant's memory that I used to fish from time to time: he reminded me of names, events, places, anecdotes from my own time at WRI. He was my external memory.

Because I would not know how to summarize my experience as Staff and Treasurer. There was a little bit of everything. Starting with regular bouts of frustration, for all kinds of reasons. There was a fair amount of stress. There was a lot of routines, a lot of unglamorous-but-indispensable tasks. And at the same time, there were completely surrealistic situations at almost every Council or Triennial. There were many decisions to be made. There was a lot of inventiveness – few networks know how to stretch the value of a banknote so much. There was also a lot of humour (the sinew of resistance), contagious laughter (or nervous giggles!). And there were comforting achievements, at the political, solidarity or organizational level. Whether big or small, ephemeral or more durable, they kept us going.

Because I would be unfair to a lot of people. I do have lasting memories associated with some of you, I remember atmospheres populated by the silhouettes that were familiar to me in those times. But why go into detail, if WRI is a much more collective effort than what I can describe here? Sometimes, let's be honest, at the London office, we felt a little bit too much like the (euro) centre of the world. You called us to attention from other continents. But we experienced also a real bond of solidarity, and it was a luxury as staff to be able to touch it with our fingers.

So why did I write to you in the end?

Because WRI is the reason why I live where I live now. In addition to generating surprising migration movements, pacifist love stories have pulled many militant strings and probably guided more than a few political decisions. Now, that would be interesting! Who is willing to take up the task of writing a Political-Sentimental Herstory of WRI?

Because I wanted to tell you that despite the years, and the distance that I have kept after leaving the Executive in 2015, I do not forget the community that WRI has been since its inception.

Because you are a very stubborn kind of people, infuriating at times,

insistent, persistent, demanding, exhausting. And yet, you are some of the best people I have ever met.

Because I owe a large part of who I am to my passing through WRI, to the steps I took with you through the many places we crossed all these years.

Because I still feel very proud to have been a drop of water in the sea of people that helped that polymorphous monster to move forward. Because what I keep from my WRI time is a network of caring friends and a sense of gratitude that make it impossible for me not to write you something today.



Roberta Bacic, London office, 1998 - 2004

It is significant to look back at my arrival from Chile to London at the end of January 1998.

It felt extremely cold as I had left at the height of summer in Chile. Dominique Saillard was waiting for me at Heathrow airport with a bunch of flowers and took me to a flat where I was to stay while I settled. The next day I came by tube to WRI's office at 5 Caledonian street.

*It has been even more special to remember what it felt like, and the impact of a total change of life, landscape, language, culture and human environment, as we mark 100 years of WRI this 2021. Whilst not much can be said in one page, the core gets reflected in what stays forever and I have tried to capture when curating the exhibition *Nonviolence in Action: Antimilitarism in the 21st Century* launched on the 25th March this year.*

I have very happy memories of shared conversations, lunches, struggles and discussing ways to confront wars and engage in active nonviolence. This extended beyond WRI, to "Peace News", "Housmans Bookshop", and "Conscience: Taxes for Peace, not War". We were surrounded by volunteers and supporters and often we disagreed and challenged each other. We lived and experienced a very different way of life: horizontal relationships, dedication beyond office hours, always being short of cash, always full of projects and most got done

with or without budgets. Many of the relationships established then still endure; the bonds we created transcend the time I was at the office and regenerate and express through what we continue doing. Another important element was the trans-generational and transnational dimension of the community we lived and experienced.

A very important and central work during my time in the office was to work on the archives. Important documents, photos, magazines, badges, minutes of meetings, etc., - kept in boxes over decades - were prepared for sending to the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam, where they are stored and accessible to study.

I would like to finish this succinct account by sharing the image of this sticker that embodies what WRI stands for and what my first project was; to prepare for WRI's 22nd Triennial Conference that took place in Poreč, 6 months after my arrival. My son designed the badge, Chilean activists and friends joined us in Croatia, a country just emerging from a bloody war. It also took me to my father's homeland.

12 July 2021, Benone, Northern Ireland



Will Todd

Back in 1983, when, in my mid 20s, I was offered work with WRI many friends advised me against taking a peace movement office job - long hours, low pay etc. - but I wanted to do a something that fitted with my beliefs at the time (I'd recently completed an MA in Peace Studies at Bradford University in the UK) and I don't regret it. I would still say if you get this kind of opportunity take it - you will learn a lot about yourself and the things you believe in and how such organisations work in terms of people and power structures. It will be hard and there will be struggles but you will meet some great people on the way and hopefully get to do some small things to make the world a better place.

My work consisted mostly of fairly routine office administration (someone has to do it!) but I was involved with running the prisoners of conscience annual campaign which really resonated with me. It was a very down to earth, people-centred type of project and linked very much to the reason why I became interested in pacifism - a friend's soldier brother was killed whilst fighting in the Vietnam war.

I was also full of admiration and in awe of the women's campaign at Greenham which was very active then. At that time (the mid 1980s) we were still very much in the midst of the Cold War, never dreaming that the Berlin Wall would fall in 1989. Since then with the growth of the EU (and despite Brexit) it seems that some bits of the peace movement's work might almost be done. Not that this has put an end to wars/conflicts – rather merely shifting focus geographically and to the underlying neo-colonialism, racism, economic exploitation etc. which fuels these conflicts nationally and internationally.

I mentioned meeting and working with some great people - fellow workers and WRI Council members. What struck me most about this group, the WRI 'team', was the generational and political (albeit left-wing) diversity of the people, but all somehow mostly, but not always harmoniously, united and coming together with purpose. In my opinion it's the people that make an organisation and build its success or otherwise. The WRI has had more than its fair share of talented individuals to draw on. For example, Pietro Pinna, a slender man with dark wavy but thinning hair, and who always used to wear a suit or 'smart' clothes (but not a tie) which seemed rather odd in the peace movement. He seemed very old to me back then but was probably only in his late 50s. Quiet but articulate, self-contained and serious, he stood out from other more extrovert Council members. Myrtle Solomon, the chair at the time, in her mid 60's, a tour de force, with a passion and commitment to the work which was completely infectious; and Howard Clark, in his mid 30s, running the office with such great energy and insight coupled with his lovely humour and wit. Pietro, Myrtle and Howard are, sadly, no longer with us but their legacy is huge and I hold their memory, and that of others far too numerous to mention here, dear. Without a doubt during my time with WRI I learnt much from all these people and gained skills and experience which has stood me in good stead throughout my subsequent career working for the British Council in international cultural relations.

September 2021



Javier Garate

As I reflect on my time at WRI, I decided to go back to look at the book with photos of my time as a WRI staff and it makes me realise how lucky I was to spend all those years at Cale Road. The images show a recurring theme, which is people gathering together. For me, these were the moments that marked me the most, as these were when our network came alive. I remember my first WRI event in 2003 (before I joined the staff) in Israel for International Conscientious ObjectionDay. It really hit me to the core that as I was coming from Chile I was meeting people as far as South Korea, Turkey, Spain, etc. and that even if we came from so different places we had so much in common, in our struggle against militarism. This feeling continued throughout my time at WRI.

I remember when I joined the staff I was tasked with two “small” projects, to produce an international handbook on nonviolent campaigns and to launch a global campaign on war profiteers, under the newly set up Nonviolence Programme. I was like, oh shit, what did I get into! Luckily, quickly I realised that even if we were a very small office, there was a whole network out there extremely committed, I was not alone! I think that is the biggest power and magic of WRI. With few resources, we manage to accomplish so much. Throughout my time at WRI, my main goal was to keep that network active, promoting the development of regional networks and uniting people around common goals. Even if I was coordinating at the time the Nonviolence Programme, it was the network that made it flourish.

As WRI celebrates its 100th anniversary, I wonder what the future looks like for a network 100 years old. Is what was needed 100 years ago still needed today? What role does a global network like WRI plays in today's world? I do believe there is a need but I am also convinced that it is important to look deep into what role it plays in this extremely interconnected world we live in today.

Finally, as I recall my time at WRI, I think of so many friendships, many of them that I keep until today. But inevitably, I think of Howard. I miss you!

The Insumisión movement against military service in the Spanish State: legitimate disobedience

Author: Carlos Pérez Barranco



In December 2001, the last recruits abandoned military barracks across Spain after having completed the final nine months of obligatory military service. In many European states, the end of forced recruitment had been motivated almost exclusively by the military forces' evolution towards global intervention operations, whilst in Spain the system of forced recruitment had collapsed despite years of government efforts.

The end of military service was a social victory in Spain. Even though the political elites and military tried to wrap the end of conscription in a discourse about the 'modernisation' of the army, the facts show that the key factor that really provoked the end of compulsory military service was three decades of continuous action by a broad social movement, which used civil disobedience against conscription as one of its fundamental signs of identity. In the decade running up to the change in 2001, obligatory military service became completely socially discredited, and the majority of Spanish society saw it as a useless and harmful institution. This was impossible to imagine in the 1970s, when the movement had just begun to organise itself, and there was an increase in the number of cases of public disobedience to recruitment for pacifist and anti-militarist reasons. At that time it was also hard to imagine that by the second half of the 1990s the number of applications for substitute service would greatly exceed the number of recruits, reaching a backlog of up to a million applications that were impossible to absorb into the alternative service system. Those who resisted military service as well as alternative service, the insumisos, could be counted by the thousands.



First steps: From the Jehovah's Witnesses to anti-militarist objectors

During Franco's military dictatorship, many Jehovah's Witnesses refused to perform military service because of their religious beliefs, and suffered long prison sentences without regarding their refusal as a tool for social change. This sort of limited 'conscientious objection', which did not question or threaten military structures (which at that time were also the structures of the state itself), was later used as the model for legislation that would provide for conscientious objection, despite the fact that at the beginning of the 1970s already had a clear public, anti-militarist, conscientious and self-organised form. In the last years in the life of the dictator and the regime, the first civil objectors to military service organised support campaigns, publicly refuse recruitment, harnessed the media, always appealing to the public with pacifist and anti-militarist arguments justifying their disobedience. The first groups of conscientious objectors formed and worked in particularly impoverished neighbourhoods instead of doing military service, in order to make their social alternative easily understandable. They demanded and created a sort of alternative, self-organised civilian service outside of the state conscription mechanisms. With the refusal of these objectors to accept the first legislation regarding conscientious objection for religious reasons, the Conscientious Objectors Movement (MOC) was founded, giving a name to an existing network of groups that had been the main driver of disobedience over the last 30 years. During the 1970s more objectors were sent to military prison, but, as would be confirmed in later years, this repression would not break up the movement. On the contrary, it would make it grow and increase its public influence.

From objectors to insubordinates: los insumisos

In 1980 the Minister of Defence issued an internal order that momentarily halted the imprisonment of objectors. Whilst waiting for a new law to be written and enforced that would regulate conscientious objection, and institutionalise an alternative service, conscientious objectors were being sent directly to the 'reserves'. In practice this meant that there was a secret amnesty - a treaty that the movement used to strengthen itself and prepare new strategies for disobeying this new law. The new conscientious objection law, designed to tame the objection to conscription movement, confine it to small numbers of people, and thus save military recruitment, finally arrived in 1986 after a long, problematic legislative process (including a claim of unconstitutionality brought to the Constitutional Court). The alternative service system was not set up until 1989. At that time, the civil disobedience movement was less of an 'objectors' group' than it had been in the 1970s, as it had regenerated and evolved, and its anti-militarist discourse had become deeper and more radical. Civil disobedience and nonviolence were now tools for not only ending military service,

but also for dismantling the army and military system, and radically transforming society to confront militarism in its different social manifestations. First MOC, and then other networks like the Coordinadora Mili-KK, announced that they would refuse the alternative service that was established by the Law on Conscientious Objection. On 20 February 1989 the first fifty insumisos publicly appeared at the entrances of the various Military Governments in different Spanish cities, giving rise to a new phase of civil disobedience known as *insumisión*.



Repression's 'Boomerang Effect'

Insumisión began as a campaign developed by these networks and followed by hundreds of objectors, but with the passing of time, the intense debate that it caused, the support of ever wider and varied social groups and the 'boomerang effect' from the repressive imprisonment of the *insumisos* (the sentences were for 2 years, 4 months and a day in prison) caused the figures to continue to rise during the early 1990s. The movement was able to resist imprisonment thanks to the generation of a broad network of groups supporting the *insumisos*, and through 'training' objectors before prison. 'Self-incriminations' also played a very important role in cushioning the repression against *insumisos*, and in creating support networks and solidarity. For every *insumiso* tried, four people signed and presented declarations to the same court charging themselves for having led and aided the *insumiso* in their disobedience. According to Spanish law this crime should also be prosecuted and receive a sentence equivalent to that given to the *insumiso*. Despite this, no self-incriminated person was ever prosecuted. Given the evidence that prison was increasing the breadth and impact of solidarity with the imprisoned objectors, the socialist party government of the time decided to first assign all imprisoned *insumisos* to open prisons (something that a very disobedient part of the moment fought, refusing to return to prison and obliging the prison authorities to send them back to closed, standard regimen prisons). Later, in 1995, the government replaced prison sentences with 'disqualification' or 'civil death'. From this point on, *insumision* was so widespread that it became 'normal', and the majority of the thousands of young people who refused to be recruited did so by themselves, without any coordination with the movement.





Anti-military demonstration in front of the Military Government at the end of La Rambla, calling for the freedom of conscientious objectors and opponents held in prison; 6 March 1979.

Photo: Robert Ramos

The system collapses

At the same time, alternative service was seen by more and more young people as something 'easy' and not particularly 'radical' compared to *insumisión*. Hundreds of thousands of people requested alternative service in place of military service and this collapsed the system. Having been conceived as a minority option, it could not cope with the large number of participants. In addition, the movement was able to get many NGOs and associations to refuse to offer alternative service posts, which was in practice a boycott of the alternative service programme. This finally strangled it. The majority of young people opted for alternative service but never carried it out because of lack of posts. This caused the complete collapse of the whole military and civilian recruitment system. Thus, in 1996, the government announced that military service would come to an end in 2003 (this changed to 2001), and instead they would form an army of professional soldiers. This announcement accelerated the collapse still further, and also caused the disbandment of a large part of the disobedience movement against obligatory military service, since they felt that the principle objective had been achieved.

'Insumisión in the barracks' and the end of military service

Despite this, the movement organised and carried out new forms of disobedience to recruitment, such as the so-called '*insumisión* in the barracks', in which this author participated in from 1997. Dozens of MOC antimilitarists continue this work, declaring ourselves to be objectors after being incorporated into military ranks. In this way the movement seeks to deepen the recruitment crisis and return the debate to within the ranks of the military, which recently has transformed itself into a force for global intervention.

Simultaneously, we interfere in the military's public professional recruitment campaigns. The '*insumisión* in the barracks' was a transition campaign towards this new landscape, in which the antimilitarist movement no longer had military service or conscientious objection. This campaign developed while the MOC sank into debates, without having defined the lines of action that it would pursue a few years later, focusing on criticism of the military industry and expenditure, counter-recruitment and campaigns for the closure of military bases, amongst other themes.

In any case, first the conscientious objection moment and then the wider and more varied *insumisión* movement are prime examples of civil disobedience movements, because of their widespread social impact and goals. Though you have to recognise that the military institutions had a very bad social reputation for having supported Franco's dictatorship, and that a certain anti-repressive culture was widespread in Spanish society anyway, *insumisión* demonstrated that civil disobedience has immense power for social transformation. We have attempted to record this story in a book edited in 2001, "*En legítima desobediencia*" (In Legitimate Disobedience), produced by the MOC, with texts contributed by people and groups who participated in the conscientious objectors' movement in its different phases. This had a clear purpose: to provide inspiration and experience to the disobedience campaigns of years to come, struggles which are already with us in new and surprising ways.

Author information:

This article was first published in the Broken Rifle #96 in May 2013

A brief history of WRI's Women Working Group

Author(s): Joanne Sheehan, Ellen Elster, Veronica Kelly, Trui Masschelein, Ulla Eberhard, Shelley Anderson, Dorie Wilsnack's

”

The WRI Women's Working Group was formally established in 1985 at WRI Triennial Conference in India. From that moment on, a very important work continued, to which several anti-militarist and / or feminist women from WRI's network joined. The women's working group had an impact worth remembering, highlighting and continuing.

This piece gathers the reflections of some of the women who were an active part of the working group, where they share their experiences and the impact they consider the group had on WRI, and on their activism and personal life. Also, you can find at the end of this story a timeline assembled by Joanne Sheehan with help from Ellen, Dorie, Cynthia Cockburn, her files and memory, that briefly summarises WWG trajectory.



A few participants at the Asking the Right Questions consultation relaxing.



Some reflections from Ellen Elster

I was an active part of WRI's Women's Working Group since its start until I resigned from the WRI council in 2006.

Women's situation within the movement was discussed first time during the Triennial early 1970. On the Triennial in 1975 it was decided to have a women's gathering together with IFoR (International Fellowship of Reconciliation) the summer 1976 in France. This was my first meeting with women within the international antimilitarist movement. The meeting with women from different parts of the world, thinking and meaning the same as I did, was very inspiring.

Since then there have been four other gatherings (Scotland in 1980, Ireland in 1987, Thailand in 1992 and 2004), two of them in cooperation with women in IFoR. In addition, women met at all WRI's international meetings (councils and conferences). The Women's Working Group (WWG) was formally established at the WRI Triennial Conference in India 1985/1986.

The purposes of the WWG were to draw additional light on the role of women in peace processes; to bring women's perspectives into WRI, drawing on different cultures and traditions; to bring antimilitarist perspectives into women's groups; to network among and provide emotional support to women who are isolated in their antimilitarist work; not least, creating a women-only-space at WRI-meeting.

A closer solidarity between women in WRI was established. Themes like nonviolence and feminism, feminism and antimilitarism, militarism, masculinity and patriarchy were put on the agenda. The masculinity culture within WRI, after all it was a male-dominated organisation, existed as long as I was part of it, though it became better over the years. A couple of examples, men who dominated the plenary discussions, and women taking leader-roles were met with open scepticism. To deal with this, we started all meetings by having a meeting in beforehand, going through the agenda, to prepare ourselves for the discussions.

The group was loosely organised. Most of the times we were coming together at meetings under the heading WWG, but we gave reports and minutes to WRI. Other times, we communicated through e-mails

and gave out a newsletter. The most important project was giving out the anthology on women conscientious objector.

I think that the only area we didn't have very much impact was bringing antimilitaristic perspectives into women's groups.

I have always appreciated that we had this woman-only group within a very male-dominated organisation. It was a safe place. It was a place where we could discuss certain issues, undisturbed, and go into the depth of the themes.

I am not sure how well we managed to deal with cultural differences among the women from different parts of the world. But I did have a sense that being women, we had more in common, despite cultural differences.

If it is still relevant to have a WWG inside WRI and what focus, must women within WRI to-day answer.



Veronica Kelly's reflections:

My real introduction to WRI's women was at the Vedchhi triennial, when a group met in the mornings to discuss feminism and antimilitarism. As the woman on the WRI staff at the time, I was allowed to sit in and listen (when I wasn't supposed to be doing something else somewhere else, of course – we were a staff of three!). I remember Ellen being very clear: what we had to do, within WRI, was bear women in mind constantly, and separately. If someone says something about “people”, think: does this mean the same thing for women as for men? Or not? And I think she suggested going down through all WRI statements etc. and doing the same thing: checking to make sure they were correct when applied to women as well as men. And if not...

That sounds so obvious now – but at the time, having come straight from nonviolent direct action with women activists, I was unfamiliar with how a large, venerable, gender-mixed antimilitarist organisation worked. (I found out!) And I agree with Ellen: those women-only meetings within WRI were a lifeline.



Trui Masschelein's reflections

In 1992, Ulla, Trini Leung (from Hong Kong) and I had several meetings with women in the US at the Women's Information Centre in Syracuse ('Feminist Responses to Racism and Militarism. A dialogue with women peace activists'). Also, at the Mendocino Women's Peace Forum. During this "road trip" we had interviews with local journalists.

I would like to add the participation of (branches of) WRI-Women's Working Group at the International symposium 'Women and the military system' in Helsinki. We were there with several WRI-Women: I guess Veronica knew most of the women there. I found this information about the symposium in Helsinki: "The activist work of women in response to military issues has been complemented by some academic research on women and the military system. In 1987 an international symposium was held in Helsinki, where 120 women and 10 men from 17 countries discussed women's place in the military economy, liberation struggles and the liberation of women, the militarization of women and women and the peace movement" (Prudtatorn, 1987; 'Feminist Forum', 1987; Isaksson, 1988).¹

It's important to point out that through all our meetings and activities everyone came back home full of inspiration and new contacts: we wrote articles, had meetings with other women and with our male fellow-activists in our local peace organisations. It's impossible to measure the impact but this was only possible because a woman was working at the WRI's International Office (thanks Veron!).

I still have a 'Friends of Women Newsletter' (June 1993) edited by Niramon Prudathorn (who attended the symposium in Helsinki and was the co-organiser of the WRI-Women's gathering in Thailand) with an extensive report of the WRI-women's conference. Really interesting what this meant! The newsletter started with an open letter to the prime minister in the name of the 170 women from 63 countries who attended the conference, calling for a guideline for ending violence of prostitution in Thailand (see full [here](#)).

¹ Source: Women's Movements and International Organizations by Deborah Stienstra, 1994.

WRI-Women's Working Group made me grow as a feminist, I am so grateful to have met wonderful and inspiring people from the US (on conferences and in the US), fighting for peace and justice. Remembering this helps me to look through the negative perception we get from the US nowadays. Keep on inspiring many people over there!

Ulla Eberhard's reflections

My participation in the WWG of WRI had a big influence on what women in the non-violent movement in Germany thought and did. As I was a staff person in the office of non-violent action groups in Germany from 1987 to 1992, it was among my tasks to coordinate the Foega-Womens-Group.

Women of the Foega-Womens-Group

- *published a lot of articles about feminism-nonviolence-antimilitarism in the Graswurzel-Newspaper*
- *made a lot of nonviolent direct actions, mostly as a women's group in a bigger mixed activity, for example the blocking of the doors at the Hunsrück military base*
- *participated in women's only activities, for example in the Hunsrück women camp*
- *gave workshops about women and antimilitarist during conferences of the peace movement*

The Foega-Womens-Group was the only anarchist-non-violent-action group in Germany. This point of view did not become mainstream in the German peace movement, but most activists got to know that position. Women's working group participated in big actions where WRI was part of, for example, at Marches in Brussels, Grebenhain/Germany and Scotland.

I would describe the political impact of the women's action group in Germany (that was influenced by the WWG of WRI) as:

- *putting feminist analysis on the table of the peace movement in Germany*

- *taking action as women: this made women in the peace movement very visible*
- *bringing the connection between militarism and violence against women in the public awareness.*

My involvement in some of the activities carried out by Women's Working Group meant a lot and influenced my personal and professional life as well:

- *It formed my identity as a feminist and non-violent activist*
- *We managed to organize such a big international conference in Thailand (and before a little bit smaller in Ireland). This trust in women's power led me through many occasions later in my life. It was an amazing experience.*
- *After our gatherings I learnt how important it is international networking and successful fundraising. These were keystones in my professional life.*



“You Can't Miss This”: Shelley Anderson Reflections on the WRI Women's Working Group²

The WRI Women's Working Group had a major impact on me and on my work. I was first introduced to the group in 1987 by my partner (now wife) Francoise Pottier, who was then working for the International Fellowship of Reconciliations (IFOR). She had missed the joint WRI-IFOR Women in the Nonviolent Movement in France (July 13-16, 1976), but did attend the second gathering in Scotland (1980).

The Third WRI Women's Gathering was held in Glencree, Ireland, in July 1987. “You can't miss this,” she told me. She was right. To find a group of like-minded women activists with their feet planted strongly in both nonviolent movements and feminist movements felt like coming home. There was no need to explain or defend my concerns, unlike at ‘normal’, male-dominated peace conferences. Ultimately some 60 women from 18 different countries participated in this third gathering. I still count as friends many of the women I met at Glencree.

What I remember most about the Glencree gathering, aside from the

² Shelley Anderson was Program Officer for the IFOR Women Peacemakers Program from 1997 to 2007, and editor of WRI Women from 1988 to 2005.

rainy beauty of the Irish countryside, was the sense of excitement and possibility. The sense of shared victory when, after writing a letter to the South African government protesting the jailing of two End Conscription Campaign activists, Janet Cherry and Sue Lund, Cherry was released near the end of the gathering (Lund's release followed several months later). The sense of hope when Yugoslav activists explained how an alliance of women's, peace and environment groups successfully forced a public debate on government plans to conscript women, which halted such plans. The shared frustration when the only Polish woman able to attend, Ulla Nowakowska (four other Polish women were denied visas), spoke about the resistance within independent dissident groups to women-only organizing. The camaraderie and laughter when, during a night of sharing folk songs, a shared theme was discovered: a young girl falls in love, and her male lover abandons or is forced to leave her.

I was energized by that gathering for months afterwards. I think of this energy to continue the work whenever anyone asks if a women's group is relevant today. For me, the women's group wasn't necessary—it was essential. The sense of being part of a world-wide community kept me going. I think that sense of enthusiasm and shared values is especially important for grassroots women activists who face hostility and isolation, and who continue to struggle despite decreasing resources and increased authoritarianism.

The networking was important. Working as an editor for IFOR's peace magazine, I knew where to go when I needed an article on the peace movement, whether in Ireland or Indonesia. As an organizer for IFOR's Women Peacemakers Program, the WRI women's group network was also important when I needed a panel speaker or a nonviolence trainer who understood women's issues or suggestions about possible participants. Working on the 4th WRI Women's conference "Women Overcoming Violence" in Bangkok, Thailand (November 25-1 December, 1992), which drew some 150 women, the majority from the Asia-Pacific region, deepened my understanding of and my commitment to opposing war. My fundraising and organizing skills were honed, as were others: the Thai lesbian group Anjaree made its first public workshop at that conference.

I also learned a lot from the way the WRI Women's working group tried to influence WRI policies and structure. The WRI's 22nd Triennial

in Porec, Croatia (September 1998) was especially instructive with its Gender Day, when all discussions, from peace teams to the war in Kosovo, were to address gender implications. This was an important model when women inside IFOR presented a plan to engender IFOR and its branches at its quadrennial council (Japan 2006).

Most of all the WRI Women's Working Group's discussions and moral support was an inspiration for women's programming within its sister pacifist organization, the International Fellowship of Reconciliation (IFOR). In 1997, IFOR's Women Peacemakers Program (WPP) was established. In its later years the WPP (which ended in 2017) became a separate organization, not least because of the resistance to tackling women's issues and promoting women's leadership within IFOR. Still, by 2005 the IFOR-WPP had trained some 60 women as gender-sensitive active nonviolence trainers, who in turn conducted over 100 nonviolence trainings in 25 countries. This did not include a number of regional gender trainings for peace activists in Africa, Asia, Europe and the USA. In October 2004 the IFOR-WPP and the WRI Women's Working Group co-organised an international gathering of women trainers, the "Asking the Right Questions: Gender and Nonviolence" consultation, in Thailand.

It is ironic that IFOR, whose women members had never organized into a working group, developed a women's program. The IFOR Women Peacemakers Program came about because of several factors, not least of which was sympathetic leadership and a dedicated staff person whose sole job was to fundraise for and develop the program. While the networking and information sharing of the WRI Women's Working Group was successful, more could have been accomplished if it had had a sharper focus.

An awareness of the interconnectedness of issues such as militarism, gender, poverty and environmental degradation has never been so vital. So, too, is the empowerment of grassroots women activists. I'm proud of the contributions the WRI Women's Working Group has made in both these areas, and keenly aware that the work must continue.



Dorie Wilsnack's reflections

I hope I have my facts correct but my first memory of hearing the collective voice of WRI women was at the 1978 triennial in Denmark when women made a request to the WRI Council for support for another women's gathering and one esteemed (male) Council member replied with loud frustration " I don't understand what you women want!" That lack of understanding never quite went away. Nevertheless, WRI women members became more articulate and stronger.

I did not attend the 1980 Scotland gathering but I organized in the US for other War Resisters League women to attend. I attended the Glen Cree, Ireland Gathering in 1987 and helped to organize the 1992 Thailand Gathering and the 2004 Thailand conference of women nonviolence trainers. In the early 1990's, after the WRI Council met in New York, I helped to set up the tour for some WRI women to meet war resisters women in the US. Throughout my time on the WRI Executive and WRI Council, I took an active part in the women's meetings before each Council meeting and various other WWG activities.

I gained two major gifts from the Women's Working Group. One was the circle of support and common understanding, knowing that we were not alone in our ideas. But a more meaningful gift to me was the diversity of contexts and experiences. One might say now that WRI had a limited diversity at the time, but I met women who were living in very different cultures than my own, facing very different challenges than I did. Hearing their stories expanded my universe in deep ways. I would return from Women's Working Group gatherings with a sobering awareness of the risks that women from Eastern Europe, or later from Turkey, were taking just for being feminists and anti-war activists.

There have been a number of references to the difficulties we faced in raising feminist issues within the WRI. I would like to be a bit more concrete about that. WRI was filled with members who believed that war resistance meant resistance-to-conscription and that other forms of resistance were minor add-ons. So for women to claim our own reasons for resistance to war was difficult for many male WRI members (and leaders, I'm sorry to say) to understand.

And as the feminist analysis deepened for some of us, as we saw more clearly the heavy links between misogyny and war-making, our commitments grew stronger, but the gap grew wider between us and some male members of the WRI.

Those gaps and conflicts brought various skirmishes. They look petty on the surface but I'm not sure they really were petty. At one Triennial or more, there were men who insisted on attending the meetings identified as for women-only. At one Council meeting, a lengthy time on the agenda had been set up for the Women's Working Group to make a major presentation. Our time was minimized because the Council decided that hearing stories from a visiting World War 2 conscientious objector was more valuable. For some women, the closing of ears and doors was too much and pulled back or dropped out.

But for me, as the others have shared, I left each WRI theme group and conference and meeting and Women's Gathering feeling empowered to keep raising questions and organizing. And I felt - still feel - so fortunate to have worked together with such amazing women during the years I was involved with WRI.

1975

First Women's Gathering proposed by women who met during the Triennial. Sisters Kate and Joanne Sheehan made the proposal.

1980

- Women's gathering in Scotland

1985

The Women's Working Group (WWG) was formally established at the WRI Triennial Conference in India.

1988

Theme group at Triennial Mariehamn, Åland Islands

1994-1998

- Strategic Planning Process coordinated by Ellen and Joanne. Accepted in 1998 it included an "overarching objective" that "gender perspectives (be) integrated into WRI's antimilitarism work, drawn from different cultures and traditions."

2001

Peace News, when it was a joint project of WRI and Peace News Trustees, increasingly included articles on gender, feminism and militarism, including a "gender and militarism" issue in June - August

1972

WRI adopted a resolution on "sex roles" in Triennial in Sheffield- Described by Cynthia Cockburn

1976

- Women's gathering in France
- The Feminism and Nonviolence Study Group began in 1976 by women who met at WRI's first International Conference on Women in the Nonviolent Movement in 1975.

1983

Nonviolence study group in cooperation with WRI, published Piecing it Together: Feminism and Nonviolence

1987

- Women's gathering in Ireland
- WRI Women began publication.

1992

- Women's gathering in Thailand.
- Tour through the US, organized by Doris Wilsnack, and several meetings to discuss about the subjects of the Thailand gathering.

1998

- Joanne Sheehan became the first feminist to become Chair of WRI, serving from 1998-2006.
- Gender Day at Triennial in Croatia

2004

- "Asking the Right Question: Gender and Nonviolence, An International Consultation of Women Trainers", in Thailand. Co-organized by WRI's Women's Working Group and the International Fellowship of Reconciliation Women Peacemakers Program.

A brief history of WWG

Assembled by Joanne with help from Ellen, Dorie, Cynthia Cockburn, her files and memory. To reach the whole document click here

“Persistence!”: an interview with Michael Randle

Author: Andrew Metheven



Last year WRI staff member Andrew Metheven interviewed Michael Randle, who was Chairperson of WRI from 1966 to 1973. The interview explored WRI's resistance to the Vietnam War, the organisational culture, and the longer term impact of the organisation.



A few participants at the Asking the Right Questions consult Bertrand Russell & his wife Edith Russell lead anti-nuclear march by the Committee of 100 in London on Sat 18 Feb 1961 along with Michael Randle (2nd left), Rev Michael Scott (next right), Ralph Schoenman (next to Edith Russell), Ian Dixon (holding banner, right) and Terry Chandler (far right). A rally in Trafalgar Square was followed by peaceful sit-down Committee of 100 protest at Defence Ministry against Polaris missiles being delivered to River

Clyde.ation relaxing.

Andrew Metheven: Could you start by describing your role in War Resisters' International before and when you were Chairperson?

Michael Randle: I got involved in War Resisters' International when I became a conscientious objector, I think in 1951. I got in touch with the Peace Pledge Union, and through that War Resisters' International. Later on I was on the Council, and eventually became Chair. Having decided I was a pacifist, resisting conscription became quite a central thing for me. I was campaigning for alternative service, and I wanted to find out more about the whole history of war resistance. Through that I got involved in the PPU and then attended a WRI conference, I think in Rome in the 1960s.

I felt there had to be an organised opposition to war if we were going to get anywhere, and the PPU and WRI were the obvious options from a pacifist point of view. Then there was the excitement of meeting people from various countries who were resisting. Going to international conferences and meeting some of these people - some of whom I had admired from afar, like AJ Muste and Bayard Rustin. Rustin had a big influence on me, both resisting apartheid and anti-racism. I then got actively involved, and with April Carter and others, formed the Direct Action Committee Against Nuclear War. Not everyone in that group was a pacifist, but we appealed to American servicemen. One of the campaigns that the Direct Action Committee organised was an international campaign against French nuclear testing in the Sahara. We had good international connections through WRI, and I went out to Ghana for a year and helped to organise an international conference against the war in Vietnam.

What was that like?

Well it was very interesting for me! It was the time of maximum resistance to the Vietnam War. One of the things we did was appeal to people, to think about refusing to fight in Vietnam, and remind service people that the option of conscientious objection existed. So we ran a campaign, with a leaflet printed that appealed to American service men, outlining the option of conscientious objection, and that you could still resist. WRI was issuing leaflets like this at the time. On one occasion, Pat Arrowsmith and I distributed leaflets at an American base - perhaps Menwith Hill - and we actually walked onto the base without challenge!

The actual servicemen were very sympathetic, invited us in, and we were talking to them when someone higher up the chain of command came in and was absolutely scandalised! They must have called the police, and the officer was shaking his head and saying we took a great risk by walking onto the base. It was a good time for action, and it was needed.

We're interested in how the culture was - what were meetings like, how was your relationship with staff, how did you settle political differences?

Culturally, it was the time of the peace movement - Bob Dylan... Joan Baez attended the Rome meeting - so that whole alternative culture, a certain hippy element! Not all of us were hippies, but that whole movement had an influence, and affected what we saw as up and coming. I think for people involved in that whole hippy culture, nuclear weapons were the big issue, and that affected the whole feel of the movement.

So what was it like being in WRI at the time?

There probably was also an older guard, that didn't see quite eye-to-eye with the new hippy culture, but I think people - like Bayard Rustin, who were more sensitive to new campaigns like around gay rights [helped to bridge the gap]. I think people like Howard Bing would have represented some of the older generation. They were very open-minded but not quite fully understanding what was happening, at that cultural level. When we wrote the leaflet directed to servicemen, Howard Bing was a bit uneasy about some of the draft content - and he was probably right! So in some ways, Howard Bing was more on the ball than we were.

Sure, Howard Bing played a big role in building that movement and it can be hard to see it change sometime. And Bayard Rustin, who was so involved in the civil rights movement, will have seen the interconnections, and war as a much more structural thing. That's something we're still working on. Could you describe one of the key successes, and one of the key challenges, WRI faced while you were Chair?

I think what came out of it - and it wasn't just War Resisters' - was the anti-nuclear movement.

That was the thing that really galvanized people, including people who wouldn't consider themselves a pacifist. They brought some energy and some defiance, and the younger generation at the time identified with that spirit of defiance and challenging things, and alternative music, and all that.

It sounds like you're describing a sort of melting pot - and that's still what WRI is - so many different types of people who sit around a table together. On one level they have a big shared understanding, but also have a lot of different perspectives. Sustaining that isn't necessarily easy, could you say something about how WRI managed to hold those tensions?

A sound bureaucracy! However negative the term may seem, the bureaucracy was maintained and the continuity was there through having an organisation, with systems. Some of us mavericks wanted to kick it all over, and sometimes that came up in the conferences - we can do it all anarchistically and spontaneously! - but actually it does need organisation, and rules. And this may be me as an old man talking now, but I think that was important. So people like Harold Bing did play an important role, and so did the whole secretariat. They were and are important, as is the spontaneous and rebellious aspects.



Michael Randle, then chair of War Resisters' International, points at leaflets in support of Czechoslovakia, September 1968 | Keystone Press / Alamy Stock Photo

So that was the successes - what were the challenges?

Probably, when conscription ended in Britain... conscription was, as in my case, a trigger for people looking for alternatives and alternative organisations. As conscription disappeared in various countries - I suppose it needed a rebellious, alternative culture to feed into organisations like WRI. I think when there was conscription it was clear how war impacted people directly and they would go and look for an organisation that would support them. I think the anti-nuclear campaign and the resistance to the Vietnam war were very important for bringing young people into the movement. I think the emphasis on nonviolent direct action appealed to a younger generation as well. As conscription disappeared the campaign against the Vietnam war remained important. Here the whole Gandhian movement was very important. The whole idea of nonviolent forms of resistance. For me, the opposition to weapons of mass destruction was key. I was brought up a Catholic, and the idea of a "Just War" was important. It wasn't just the cause that had to be just, but the way war was waged had to be discriminate, so weapons of mass destruction were completely against this. This brought people who weren't 100% pacifist into the movement.

I'm interested in what you said as how conscription brought people into the movement. It's really interesting, and something we "lack" now - but I don't want it back! But it does make sense that that was drawing people into the movement.

Once conscription ended in the UK there had to be other things. Fortunately - or unfortunately - there was the Vietnam war, and there was nuclear weapons, which all helped us gather strength and drew people into looking for alternatives. The Gandhian alternative, of nonviolent action, was one path.

Maybe a difference between now and then is that conscription immediately brings war and militarism into your life, but now for us in the UK, we have the privilege of not being exposed to war so explicitly. So to get involved in our movements now your motivation has to be a political or moral choice. Whereas when facing conscription your initial motivation can be personal.

I think there are still the moral and political questions, but one is forced to face them in a personal way because you are going to get

drawn into this militarist organisation. So you couldn't avoid it!

So that became a challenge for WRI?

Britain got rid of conscription before all of the other countries in Europe, so our movements in Britain faced that challenge - of making war personal - a bit earlier. But I think the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, that was such a moral and political question, that drew people in.

How much interaction in that period, when you were Chair, did you have with antimilitarists and pacifists outside Europe? What was WRI like in these terms?

The Council met once a year and the exec met three times a year. So I met people at these meetings and conferences, and I got to know a lot of people from European countries, and people from America would come to the triennial conferences. I would have said that WRI had a strong basis in Europe and the United States, and to some extent in India because of the Gandhian campaign. But we had less of a relationship with Africa and parts of Asia.

It's hard for younger activists to imagine running an organisation like WRI without the internet! How did communication work? How did WRI work?

Meetings and letters! And telephone of course..! I think when I was around WRI, Harold Bing was Chair, and the secretariat, for many years was Devi Prasad. They were involved in the day to day running of the organisation. Devi had a big role, and then the people who were on the Council and executive certainly contributed.

If you had one piece of advice for our movements now, what would it be?

First of all - persistence! Because its easy to drift. And the other is to be open-minded to new ideas, and new methods of struggle and consciousness raising. The whole issue of racism and sexism - when the word "sexism" first entered our vocabulary, some people didn't understand the term! So to be open-minded and aware of new developments and ideas is very important.

The birth of Pan African Nonviolence and Peacebuilding Network

Author: Moses Monday



The Pan African Nonviolence and Peacebuilding Network (PANPEN) was born on 30th July 2012 and reorganized in June 2014. The PANPEN connects and empowers African civil society and grassroots peace movements and activists to take nonviolent actions to transform conflicts, promote peace and democracy reforms. The network comprises over sixty five organizations representing over 38 countries in the region. The network enjoys rich diversity of members from civil society, academia and professional institutions, faith based groups working on nonviolent actions and peacebuilding. The network is being managed voluntarily by a 20-member Steering Committee representing West, East, Central Africa, Southern Africa and the region's Islands. Some of the members are also from the Middle East, Asia, Europe, and the Americas, with strong African connections. Nozizwe Madlala-Routledge and Moses Monday John the Executive Directors of Organization for Nonviolence and Development (ONAD), South Sudan and Embrace Dignity, South Africa respectively are the co-chairs of the network. The PANPEN is being run entirely on non financial assistance and supported from the member organizations and network's sub committees of secretariat, fundraising and utilization policy, communication and advocacy. The steering committee was developed at the side event of War Resister's International (WRI) conference held in Cape Town, South Africa in 2014.

Over the last couple of years, PANPEN has through its individual members and member organizations has contributed to peace and political reforms in the region. The network members have contributed book chapters in the book Satyagraha-Ujamma: Contemporary Africa-Asian Peace-making, co-edited by Matt Meyer

and Vidya G and published by Cambridge Scholars Publishers in 2019. Strengthened peace-building, education, and coalition work in Burundi and the Great Lakes region of Africa as well as increased sub regional engagements with academic networks such as African Peace Education and Research Association (AFPREA) and International Peace Research Association (IPRA). In 2019, PANPEN established direct connection with the SERPAJ a likeminded network in Latin America and held global South-South dialogue and exchanged experiences in Bogota, Colombia.

The genesis and contemporary history of PANPEN dates back to the meeting of the African Nonviolence Trainers' exchange programme held in 2021 in Johannesburg, South Africa. The idea emerged after a series of discussions held between July 26 and 30 in which more than a dozen of civil society representatives from various African countries shared their experiences of how nonviolent methods and strategies helped them in reshaping their socio-economic and political contexts as well as in building peace and fostering democratic reforms in their countries. Central to the conversation was a vivid example of nonviolent action practised in Tunisia and Egypt in North Africa as narrated by an activist Sherif Joseph Rizk, a participant in the 2011 Tahrir Square protests in Egypt. In 2011 there was a 'surprising' wave of popular protest in the Tunisia and Egypt commonly referred to as "the Arab Spring". The protests led to the downfall of dictatorial regimes of Zine Al-Abidine Ben Ali and Mohamed Hosni Mubarak of Tunisia and Egypt respectively.



Small Actions, Big Movements International Conference in Cape Town, July 2014. The PAN African Nonviolence and Peacebuilding network.

Credit: Christine Schweitzer

The people's collective nonviolent protests exercised during the Arab Spring revolutions undoubtedly contributed to changing the narratives of bringing about political change people's nonviolent revolution as opposed to the bloody conflicts. The meeting decried and opposed internal conflicts and civil wars for taking a heavier toll on civilians including women and children. Societies living in conflict zones not only in the region but globally have paid a massive toll in the loss of human life and economic, political and social benefits.

The nonviolence trainers' exchange meeting underscored the potential of nonviolent action and importance of regional coordination, solidarity and sharing of information particularly among and between African civic, faith based and grassroots peace movements in the region. Thus, PANPEN was founded as a mechanism to facilitate this purpose. The exchange programme was organized and hosted by the CeaseFire Campaign an anti-war South African civil society organization with support from the WRI based in London, UK.

It must be noted that the PANPEN was founded based on the African philosophy and spirit of Ubuntu and Pan Africanism as they are important foundation for our understanding of Africans' response to African problems, wars and various challenges in the society. The spirit of Ubuntuism has largely contributed in shaping the behaviour of people in their surroundings. It means that a person is only a person because of the way s/he treats the others "in a humanely and peaceful way". During the colonial period Africans were quick to realised that colonisation had come to destroy the African civilisation as much as reinforce slavery. Consequently, ordinary citizens and chiefs in Africa employed variety of nonviolent methods and strategies such as strikes, boycotts, sabotage and other forms of economic and political non-cooperation to resist colonisation which led to victory in many countries though in other instances it was a combination of violence and nonviolent responses which forced oppressive colonial regimes to quit.

Furthermore, its important to note that the WRI engagement with the African civil society organizations, academia and grassroots peace movements did not commence in 2012 but in early 1990s.



Small Actions, Big Movements International Conference in Cape Town, July 2014. DreamWolf perform on the opening night. Credit: Yazeed Kmaldeen.

The Bangkok Women's Conference of 1992, the formation of the Africa Working Group (AWG) in 1994, and the subsequent WRI's partners' Meeting in Chad in December 1995 are landmark events which laid foundation to the establishment of PANPEN in 2021. The African Working Group (AWG) has contributed in connecting European-based Africans and African solidarity groups, and several syndicate members, academics and activists from America and beyond (Meyer 2012 in WRI Broken Rifts Issue)¹.

Like any social and peacebuilding network, the PANPEN also has challenges which include; lack of full or part time communication officer to connect with the members, limited financial, technical (in nonviolent campaigning) and poor communication infrastructure in the region often hinder it's work.

However, the PANPEN is planning to regroup in Juba, South Sudan in 2022 at the side events of the International Fellowship of Reconciliation (IFOR) international conference and council to be hosted by ONAD. This meeting among others will evaluate the success and challenges of the network, revisit the governance structure and adopt plans for the network.

¹ <https://wri-irg.org/en/story/2013/african-groundings-war-resisters-internationals-african-engagement> accessed 20 Sep 2021.



The Broken Rifle
Issue number:115, December 2022



info@wri-irg.org



<https://wri-irg.org/en>



