

Peace as a Transnational Theme

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Peace is normally understood as the absence of war among nations. But that definition presupposes the overarching importance of nations as the key units of human association. There are, however, many other non-national entities, such as races, ethnic communities, religions, cultures, and civilizations. These entities, too, engage in conflict from time to time, as exemplified by the interracial violence and religious antagonisms in various parts of the world today and, of course, that which took place in the past. Yet why do we preserve the terms “war” and “peace” only for interstate relations? This is a very limited perspective, inasmuch as wars are a phenomenon whose appearance long preceded the formation of nations in the modern centuries; and besides, a presumed state of peace among countries can conceal serious hostilities between races or religions within and across national boundaries. Nazi Germany was technically at peace with all countries till 1939, and yet violent acts were committed there against groups of people domestically who were not considered racially acceptable. In today’s world, there are no large-scale international wars, but domestic tensions and physical assaults occur daily within many countries. Terrorists wage war against states and their citizens alike, but they are not nations. To counter their threat, war preparedness in the traditional sense may be useful, perhaps, but it is much less effective than the coming together of individuals and groups to create a condition of interdependence and mutual trust. World peace must fundamentally be founded on a sense of shared humanity, regardless of which country people happen to live in. To consider war and peace purely in the context of international relations, therefore, is insufficient, even anachronistic. What we need is less an *international* than a *transnational* idea of peace.

That was already and clearly understood by those who came together to establish the United Nations in 1945. To be sure, the UN was founded as an

international organization dedicated to the prevention of another aggressive war. But its Charter made clear the transnational underpinnings of peace through its emphasis on the principle of human rights as the key to world peace. The idea of human rights is, of course, a transnational one, defining the right of all individuals regardless of nationality to live in dignity and freedom. The UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), which was established as an indispensable arm of the UN, asserted that peace must be founded on the “hearts and minds” of individuals everywhere. Without such a foundation, no formal agreement among states would succeed in preventing war or establishing peace. It goes without saying that Andrew Carnegie and the organizations he helped establish anticipated this perspective, emphasizing that mutual understanding among peoples was the key to world peace.

Until very recently, historians have focused on the nation-state as the key unit of analysis, whether they were describing domestic developments or international affairs. International history, in particular, has developed as a field of inquiry in which scholars examine interactions among states, focusing on their efforts to fulfill their respective national interests, including by augmenting their relative power positions in the world arena. States might enter into alliances to preserve some sort of balance of power, or they might decide to go to war when such attempts have failed. This is the well-known story of the “rise and fall of the great powers,” but it says little about not-so-great powers or about nonstate actors. Geopolitics, the framework in which international relations scholars study “war and peace” issues, is thus of rather limited utility inasmuch as peace tends to be considered a temporary condition between periods of war between nation-states.

It is true that in recent years some historians have rediscovered “internationalism” as an alternative way of thinking about international affairs. These scholars stress that governments often negotiate agreements that are codified as international law in order to define their conduct in peace and in war, and have established international organizations and otherwise strengthened mechanisms for peaceful relations among themselves. These efforts attest to a long history of internationalism, and many observers assume that internationalism and peace are virtually interchangeable. However, to the extent that the adjective “international” presupposes the prior existence of nations, it tends to restrict our discussion of war and peace to interstate and intergovernmental relations. Partly in order to broaden our understanding of war, peace, and related issues, scholars have begun stressing the need to add a transnational dimension to the study of

international relations—even to assert that transnational relations presents a more viable conceptual framework to discuss peace than international relations.

Whereas international relations normally consist of interrelationships among states—governments, armed forces, and institutions established by nations—transnational relations focus on transactions among non-national entities (such as races and classes, as well as refugees and stateless persons) and nonstate actors (such as business enterprises, religious institutions, and nongovernmental and nonprofit organizations). Nongovernmental organizations, including the Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs, the publisher of this journal, are of course nonstate actors, and their interactions with similar bodies in other countries are a transnational phenomenon. However, at the time of the Council's founding (as the Church Peace Union) in 1914, the term "transnational" was not yet widely used. A notable exception was the use of the term by the journalist Randolph Bourne, who in his essay "Transnational America" insisted that the American people must come to exemplify worldwide trends and to view their nation as a member of an emerging international community.¹ Still, the stress in 1914, and in the subsequent decades of hot war and cold war, was on the idea of peace as a state of accommodation and cooperation among nations.

And yet, already there were those who, like Bourne, believed that individuals and associations of people, not states, were the proper architects of peace. International peace, according to these thinkers, did not just involve the drafting of treaties, the settlement of disputes through arbitration, or the establishment of international institutions but would also be strengthened through cross-border connections and encounters between people across the globe. In such a framework, phenomena such as global migration, tourism, and educational exchanges would play crucial roles in the development of peace. During the first decades of the twentieth century, however, such connections and encounters were not really global. Only citizens of the rich countries of the West could indulge in the luxury of travel or education abroad. While there were large-scale migrations of people across the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, these were segregated phenomena, as countries dominated by Europeans and their descendants shut out immigrants from Asia and Africa. It is instructive that Woodrow Wilson's vision of peace on the basis of "self-determination" had no room for racial equality, which is a quintessentially transnational ideal. He was an internationalist, envisaging an international order built upon the existence of independent states, but not a transnationalist, visualizing a peaceful world where all people intermingled

without restriction. His international peace had no transnational component other than economic globalization. But globalization without the freedom of migration is not really a global phenomenon. In any event, while Wilson's name is usually associated with the vision of peace among nations, this vision was of limited value in a world of racial and ethnic diversity.

When did the idea of peace come to be seen as both international and transnational? Some significant steps were taken through the initiative of the League of Nations during the 1920s and the 1930s. To be sure, the League failed to preserve the peace and was ineffectual when wars of aggression broke out—in Asia in 1931, in Africa in 1935, and in Europe in 1939. Because of such failure, the League has been consigned to a minor footnote in most accounts of international history. But the organization did make significant contributions to peace understood as a transnational circumstance of human wellbeing. The League was actively involved in resettling refugees, representing the interests of laborers across nations, eradicating communicable diseases, and promoting exchanges among cultures. These efforts were undertaken by the League's various agencies, such as the International Labour Organization, the Nansen Committee, the Health Organization, and the Committee on Intellectual Cooperation. In addition, the new "mandate" system paved the way for the ultimate dismantling of colonial empires and the independence of the hitherto colonial peoples. To the extent that wars had been frequently fought between empires, this was an important step in the direction of international peace. But there was no guarantee that the end of empires would rush in a new peaceful order or that the new states that would make their appearance after a probationary period under the mandate system would be any more peaceable than the great powers and other established states had been. Indeed, without transnational networks of people who would develop a sense of shared humanity, which can only be achieved through human intermingling and interactions, global peace would remain illusory.

Such intermingling and interactions became extremely difficult during the 1930s and the 1940s, a period of world economic crisis, totalitarianism, and war. It was also a period of de-globalization, excessive nationalism, and interracial violence. It is not surprising, then, that when the Second World War ended many argued that the postwar peace needed to be built upon transnational foundations. Hence, the postwar stress on human rights. Unfortunately, even as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted by the United Nations in 1948, the world was once again entering a period of military confrontation, known as the

cold war. What is remarkable, however, is that the geopolitical confrontation between the two military camps equipped with nuclear weapons did not prevent, and actually fostered, new rounds of transnational efforts to preserve the fragile peace. The worldwide movement against nuclear weapons is a good example, including the coming together of U.S. and Soviet scientists to promote this cause.² Human rights again played a major role in the easing of tensions. As Sarah Snyder has shown in her well-documented study, the movement for human rights on both sides of the Iron Curtain during the 1970s had a great deal to do with the democratization of Eastern Europe, which paved the way for the end of the cold war in the late 1980s.³

But there were also other important transnational moments during this period, such as the new immigration laws enacted during the 1960s in the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, which opened admission to large numbers of nonwhite immigrants for the first time in these countries, thus making the re-globalization of the world economy possible; and the global movement for environmental sustainability, which gained momentum during the 1970s, and especially in the 1980s following the Chernobyl disaster. In the meantime, UNESCO, the successor to the League of Nations' Committee on Intellectual Cooperation, did all it could to bring different cultures, religions, and ways of life together to build networks of mutual understanding. Cultural internationalism, in the sense of the fostering of cultural exchanges so as to promote understanding as a foundation of peace—a founding philosophy of the Church Peace Union/Carnegie Council—was now being implemented by the United Nations, the most important international body. Cultural exchange is an internationalist vision, but it is also transnational in that mutual understanding and accommodation among people of diverse backgrounds are considered essential preconditions for world peace.

By the 1970s, the key ingredients of a transnational vision of peace had emerged, notably the growing number of international nongovernmental organizations that were dedicated to human rights and to environmentalism. It is these forces—rather than the military, strategic, or political considerations of the great powers—that ultimately brought about the end of the cold war. To be sure, questions of war and peace remain quite serious and there have continued to be numerous, though mercifully smaller-scale, conflagrations between countries in various parts of the globe since the 1970s. Moreover, the traditional mind-set—assuming that peace is a matter of balance of power—has continued to influence public officials and observers alike. The “rise and fall of the great powers” is still

taken seriously as a key framework in which to view contemporary world conditions and to consider future possibilities for the world order. Is the United States still the sole hegemonic power, as was claimed until a few years ago? What difference would China's emergence as the richest country in terms of gross domestic product make in international power equations?

Even as such conventional questions are raised, and commentators argue endlessly about them, there have also emerged transnational challenges to peace, such as the growing influence of fundamentalist religions, international terrorist groups, and traffickers of drugs, women, and children. While more traditional matters such as armament races and territorial disputes certainly enhance the possibility of conflict, if not outright war, there will be no satisfactory peace in the world until nonstate criminals are also brought under control. It is imperative therefore that, in addition to states, all people everywhere cooperate in doing so by whatever means available to them (for example, by supporting appropriate NGOs). Indeed, the power of the state and the viability of the nation have been in decline in many parts of the world, thus making it virtually mandatory that nonstate actors and non-national entities take the initiative in building a more peaceful world, as well as in solving most issues confronting humanity today. To be sure, all countries retain the capacity to go to war, and some are even enhancing that capacity. But in today's world the causes of international conflict are as much non-national as national—that is to say, it is not just “national interests,” whatever that means, that collide across boundaries; such factors as poverty, hunger, oppression, and racial conflict also drive people to violence. On these issues, nongovernmental organizations play critical roles. Organizations such as the American Friends Service Committee, Doctors Without Borders, and Amnesty International—all recipients of the Nobel Peace Prize—call the world's attention to these issues to arouse awareness of possible human tragedies. Moreover, they can act more freely than governments in pleading for global, as opposed to national, interests. Although they are nonstate actors, they frequently send their representatives to conferences sponsored by the United Nations as well as other international bodies, and their voices often lead to specific action by states. For example, the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL) waged a successful campaign to ban anti-human landmines—and was also awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for its work.

Likewise, fostering transnational connections and networks of non-national groups across religious, ethnic, and other lines in such areas as human rights,

humanitarian relief, and environmental sustainability will undoubtedly continue to contribute to the making of a more interdependent and humane world. Transnationalism, in the sense of the fostering of human consciousness—that is, a consciousness of shared humanity among all people—will certainly be nurtured through such developments, developments that might eventually produce a world of convergence, even one of hybridity. As a historian, I am particularly encouraged in this context by the emergence of “global history,” that is, the study of the past not in nationally segmented frameworks but as a record of interdependence and interconnectedness among all people. We are not there yet; the world has hesitated to embrace so overreaching an objective because it seems too abstract, idealistic, and even naive.

Where shall we begin? First and foremost, it seems crucial to encourage individuals and groups of people to share history, that is, to develop a common view of the past that they can all accept as the starting point for understanding current affairs and for considering future possibilities. The European countries have taken a lead in this direction. They used to have divergent, and often conflicting, ideas about their past, in particular about their interrelationships. It was only when, after the Second World War and throughout the postwar decades, France and Germany, Germany and Poland, Austria and Italy, as well as other pairs and groups of countries agreed to develop a common understanding of the European past that the idea of a united community became a reality. That is why the European Union is sometimes referred to as “a community of shared memory.”⁴ The nations of Western Europe have not fought against each other since the establishment of the European Economic Community in the 1960s, but the economic foundation was not sufficient by itself for the emergence of a united Europe, which could only be built upon a shared past or shared memory. This suggests that most Europeans, regardless of their national identities, have a broadly shared understanding of the region’s history—not only regarding its horrendous wars but also of its glorious moments, such as its role in the Enlightenment and modern scientific development.

Can Europe’s example be followed by other groups of countries? It might be possible, but it has not happened yet. A particularly negative example is East Asia, where China, the two Koreas, Indonesia, and other Asian nations have failed to develop a shared understanding of their past interrelationships, especially with Japan—and particularly regarding Japan’s war against China, colonization of Korea, and occupation of Southeast Asia. The widely accepted view of modern

history in China is still one that sees a glorious civilization becoming assaulted and humiliated by imperialists, the worst of whom were the Japanese, who undertook aggressive wars against their country. Koreans, on their part, view Japan as having been a brutal colonialist nation that suppressed their traditional civilization and exploited their resources for its own selfish purposes. Indonesians remember the Japanese occupation as the catalyst that made them determined to get rid of all foreign rulers, Asian and European. Such ways of understanding the past have not been universally shared in Japan, where people remain either profoundly ignorant of the injustices their country inflicted upon their neighbors or view this history through other frameworks, such as Asia's rise against the West or Japan's mission to modernize Asia. No shared past is possible under such circumstances. Aware of the seriousness of the situation, an increasing number of scholars and educators from China, Korea, and Japan have been coming together to try to write history books that would be acceptable to all parties, so far with limited success. Peaceful relations in these circumstances tend to be built on other foundations, such as the three countries' growing economic interdependence, or through security arrangements—such as Japan and South Korea's respective alliances with the United States. But that is a far less reliable foundation of peace than shared memory.

Other regions of the globe appear to be in a similar stage of underdevelopment regarding the creation of shared memory. In the Middle East, in particular, Israelis and Palestinians have obviously contrasting perspectives on the past, differing not simply on the events surrounding Israel's independence but also with regard to the conditions in Palestine under the Ottoman Empire. For that matter, despite the fact that Europe and the Middle East had extensive commercial and cultural contact in the heyday of the Ottoman Empire, that relationship does not seem to have been incorporated into European history as that history is understood and taught in Europe today. (Turkish people, on their part, find special significance in the year 1071—when the forerunners to the Ottomans defeated the Byzantine Empire in a decisive battle—remembering it as a moment of glory against Christendom, and similarly ignore the shared past between the Ottoman Empire and Europe. This might change should Turkey be admitted into the European Union, which would be a welcome development in ensuring peace in the Mediterranean.) In South Asia, some historians speak of cosmopolitan regionalism, meaning that while the countries there have developed a strongly nationalistic understanding of the past, they also share an image of world history in which

their struggle for independence was a major global development.⁵ In Africa, the African Union does not seem to have developed a workable program for the study and teaching of a shared past. And if the countries of Latin America share a common perspective on their past, it seems to be mostly confined to their collective memory of their Spanish (and Portuguese, in the case of Brazil) past and their region's relationship to the United States, or what they often refer to as "California." Is there a shared "American" past, embracing the whole continent? It seems doubtful, especially since part of "American history" is closely linked to the Atlantic, in part to western Africa, and still in some other part to the Pacific.

Examples can be multiplied, but the point is that a transnational understanding of the past is a crucial foundation of peace that is missing in large parts of the world. How can such an understanding be developed? Here the role of education is of critical importance. History education is rather notoriously nationalistic, as it commonly focuses on the opposition between domestic and foreign interests and glorifies military victories and territorial expansions. Nationalistic history education, then, may be considered a major obstacle to international peace. But even if states, committed as they are to the idea of national honor, power, and interests, may not willingly undertake the task of providing more transnationally oriented history education, private individuals and groups should be able to do so. It is particularly incumbent on historians everywhere to address, communicate with, and seek to influence people around the world so as to mould a transnational understanding of humankind's past.

Are historians equal to the task? Here, I am encouraged by the fact that during the last twenty or twenty-five years there appears to have been a profound transformation in the way historians understand, teach, and write history.⁶ The transformation amounts to something of a historiographic revolution, revealed by the fact that whereas, as noted at the outset of this essay, historians traditionally took the nation as the key unit of study, by the end of the twentieth century a large number of them were beginning to stress the need to put national histories in a global or transnational framework. This trend is less than a quarter century old, and it still continues. One can cite hundreds of interesting and important history books that are couched in the framework of global or transnational history, such as Bruce Mazlish and Ralph Buultjens, *Conceptualizing Global History* (1993); Barbara Keys, *Globalizing Sport* (2006); Joy Damousi and Mariano Ben Plotkin, *The Transnational Unconscious* (2009); and Akira Iriye and Pierre Yves Saunier,

The Palgrave Dictionary of Transnational History (2009). The new approaches found in these and other such works do not merely focus on the great powers as the lynchpin of world order or on formal interstate relations as the major definer of human affairs. Instead, these historians are eager to consider all people and all communities, regardless of whether they belong to certain countries or not, and to examine what Pierre Yves Saunier has termed “connections” and “circulations” of men and women, ideas and goods, and even animals and plants, as they sometimes succeed in living in harmony with one another, and just as frequently fail to do so.⁷ This is what the question of peace or war means today.

As the Carnegie Council celebrates its centennial, it seems particularly important to pay attention to the transnational spirit of 1914, and not just the international conflict that culminated in a European and world war. As Michael Neiberg shows in his book *Dance of the Furies*, Europeans had developed myriad transnational connections by 1914.⁸ Those connections were betrayed by the spirit of mutual suspicion and animosity once war came, but in the long run transnationalism was revived, curbing nationalism’s excesses and so paving the way to peace. We would do well to study this case history and explore how other regions of the world might follow Europe’s lead. The future of humankind depends much more on such exploration than on speculating about the military might of the great powers.

NOTES

- ¹ The best account of the use of the word “transnational” by Bourne and others is in Pierre Yves Saunier, “Transnational,” in Akira Iriye and Pierre Yves Saunier, eds., *The Palgrave Dictionary of Transnational History* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).
- ² Matthew Evangelista, *Unarmed Forces: The Transnational Movement to End the Cold War* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999).
- ³ Sarah Snyder, *Human Rights Activism and the End of the Cold War: A Transnational History of the Helsinki Network* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).
- ⁴ See Martin Conway and Kiran Klaus Patel, eds., *Europeanization in the Twentieth Century: Historical Approaches* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).
- ⁵ Sugata Bose and Kris Manjapra, eds., *Cosmopolitan Thought Zones: South Asia and the Global Circulation of Ideas* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).
- ⁶ I discuss this phenomenon in greater detail in *Global and Transnational History: The Past, Present, and Future* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).
- ⁷ Pierre Yves Saunier, *Transnational History* (London, Palgrave Macmillan: forthcoming).
- ⁸ Michael S. Neiberg, *Dance of the Furies: Europe and the Outbreak of World War I* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011).