

“Science was digging its own grave”: The Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom and the campaign against Chemical and Biological Warfare

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The Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) is the oldest active women’s peace organization in the world. Although their overall aim is the abolition of all war, from the outset they voiced particular opposition to chemical warfare. Later, this became a call against both chemical and biological warfare (CBW). This article draws on archival documents to trace this history, concentrating on the early days of WILPF and then on revived interest in the topic during the late 1960s and early 1970s. While early WILPF did not define CBW as an issue with any special gendered relevance for women, the historical record shows WILPF placed emphasis on its leading role in organizing opposition. It also shows a consistency of approach, with WILPF often acting in an educational capacity as an informer of public opinion about the horrors of CBW. Over time, WILPF’s role changed in that the leaders of the key campaigns against CBW regarded their role as distinct from those of scientists.

Histories of chemical and biological warfare (CBW) rightly acknowledge that women and children, as non-combatants, have been disproportionately victims of the indiscriminate nature of these weapons.¹ Less prominent is the record of women’s roles in actively campaigning against CBW. This article aims to make a modest contribution to recovering this little known history by focusing on the activities of the world’s oldest active international women’s peace organization, the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) in relation to anti-CBW. There are several histories of WILPF that paint a rich picture of the paths taken by the organization, although its campaigns against chemical and biological weapons get either scant or no attention as part of these more general accounts.² Drawing on this secondary literature and on archival documents, this article concentrates on the early days of WILPF and then on revived interest in CBW during the late 1960s and early 1970s. The main thrust of WILPF’s anti-CBW activities, protest through education and awareness raising, was consistent across their history.³ It will be argued, however, that the

¹ For example, Volume 1 of the seminal SIPRI study of CBW, which covers their history, contains 10 specific mentions of women among the unintended victims of chemical warfare, some quoting from eyewitness testimony and most relating to the Vietnam war. SIPRI, *The Problem of Chemical and Biological Warfare . Volume 1 . The Rise of CB Weapons* (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1971) pp. 144, 168, 187, 188, 194, 206, 209, 210, 233.

² Gertrude Bussey and Margaret Tims, *Pioneers for Peace: Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom 1915-1965* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1965); Carrie A. Foster, *The Women and the Warriors: The U.S. Section of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, 1915-1946*. (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1995); Catherine Foster, *Women for All Seasons: The Story of the Women’s League for International Peace and Freedom* (Athens: Georgia University Press, 1989); Linda Schott, *Reconstructing Women’s Thoughts: The Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom Before World War II* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

³ All histories are limited by their primary sources. This article is based on sources reproduced online in Allison Sobek, *How Did the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom Campaign against Chemical Warfare, 1915-1930?* (Binghamton, NY: State University of New York at Binghamton, 2001); the rich source of mainly UK-focused WILPF records at The Womens’ Library, London School of Economics and the Harvard-Sussex information bank archive on CBW at the University of Sussex. These are rich sources but may also

particular role WILPF members envisaged for themselves did change. In the 1920s, these women primarily acted as spurs to mobilize scientists to use their expert authority in protest against CBW. By the 1960s, while still mobilizing scientific experts, the instigators of protest against CBW in WILPF saw themselves as having a distinctive, complementary role: WILPF, and associated non-scientific groups in the peace movement, were the people best positioned to shape wider public opinion.

WILPF was born in the early twentieth century from the intersection of the suffragist and pacifist movements. By no means were all suffragists pacifists, and as war broke out in Europe, many within the suffragist movement actively supported the war efforts within their respective countries.⁴ Yet some did organize for peace. The rationale for many activists involved in the nascent WILPF was to escape the predominantly male spaces of traditional peace organizations.⁵ During early World War I, pacifists from several nations within the International Women's Suffrage Alliance called for an international meeting to consider non-violent solutions to the conflict. An international meeting eventually took place as The International Congress of Women, at the Hague, in the neutral territory of the Netherlands. Some 1,200 delegates from twelve countries—both neutral and warring—many facing enormous obstacles to their travel, managed to attend the meeting, which opened on April 28, 1915.⁶ The conference established an International Committee of Women for Permanent Peace, which publicized the twenty resolutions passed at the conference and formed the hub of a growing coalition of international supporters. At the second congress, held in Zurich in 1919, the delegates named their organization the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom.

At first glance, there appears to be an obvious connection between an organization striving for peace and the abolition of chemical, and later biological, warfare. Yet, with its overall aim of achieving peace and abolishing war and, moreover, its aim to address the causes rather than alleviate the consequences of war, both goals sat awkwardly with the idea of singling out any particular weapon for condemnation. As a 1968 WILPF pamphlet argued: “The

have skewed the focus of the article to the United States and CW in the earlier history and to the United Kingdom and BW in the latter part of the article.

⁴ WILPF, *Generations of Courage: The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, From the Twentieth Century into the New Millennium* (Philadelphia: WILPF, 2015).

⁵ Schott, *Reconstructing Women's Thoughts*, p.39.

⁶ Bussey and Tims, *Pioneers for Peace*.

League has always been convinced that the abolition of individual weapons is without crucial significance as long as war still exists as a so-called legitimate international institution.”⁷ Referring specifically to chemical-weapons disarmament, as pointed out by historians of WILPF Gertrude Bussey and Margaret Tims, challenging these weapons alone could readily have been perceived as an unintended attempt to “humanize” war.⁸

A second, less evident, tension for WILPF was whether or not CBW could be considered in any way as a specifically women’s issue. Other intersections of gender and disarmament exist. Historians of nuclear protest, Jill Liddington and Lawrence Wittner, argue that during the Cold War, some sections of the women’s peace movement regarded the debate about nuclear fallout, the effects of strontium-90 on the bones and teeth of babies in particular, as a natural cause of concern for all mothers and potential mothers.⁹ As we will see, there is no evidence in the primary sources available that this was the case for CBW and it is more likely that widespread moral opprobrium against CBW, coupled with concern that science could create new means of killing, motivated WILPF when they focused their efforts on opposing these specific weapons.

After WWI: From US to European Opposition

WILPF’s hostility to chemical warfare can be traced back to World War I, with their campaign against chemical warfare originally picking up impetus in the United States in the post-war years.¹⁰ It was not a favorable time for the US women’s peace movement. Indeed, in some quarters, the rapid end to the war following the arrival of US troops in Europe appeared to vindicate armed conflict. Pacifism was tainted; as one historian of WILPF noted: “those who publicly advocated pacifism and internationalism were not particularly popular with patriotic Americans who had been persuaded that such ideas were subversive, un-American, and allied with the evils of Russian bolshevism.”¹¹ At the start of the 1920s, the fortunes of the newly re-named WILPF revived a little, as a split with the more radical pacifist wing of

⁷ LSE Special Collections, WILPF/21/10, *Danger to Mankind* (n.d. 1968).

⁸ Bussey and Tims, *Pioneers for Peace*, p.47.

⁹ Jill Liddington, *The Long Road to Greenham: Feminism & Anti-Militarism in Britain Since 1820* (London: Verso, 1989) p.175; Lawrence Wittner, “Gender Roles and Nuclear Disarmament, 1954–1965,” *Gender & History*, Vol.12, No.1 (April 2000), pp. 197–222.

¹⁰ Maria Grazia Suriano, “‘Will this terrible possibility become a fact?’ Il progresso scientifico applicato alla guerra nella riflessione di Gertrude Woker e Kathleen Lonsdale,” *DEP, Deportate, esuli, profughe*, No. 35 (2017) pp. 26-41.

¹¹ Foster, *The Women and the Warriors*, p. 36.

the movement allowed it to present a more moderate face. This change was coupled with a successful recruitment drive, which attracted new members of a younger generation.¹² At around the same time, WILPF found common focus with other women's peace groups by naming militarism as the cause of war, with a solution to be found in disarmament and ending compulsory military training.¹³

One new generation recruit, Harriet O'Connor Brown, who soon became an executive board member of WILPF, latched onto chemical warfare. She represented the organization before the House Committee on Military Affairs in 1921 and the Senate Subcommittee on Appropriations the following year, expressing particular condemnation of chemical weapons in both sessions. The condescending assumption by the committee that Brown was ignorant, and her responses which demonstrate quite the opposite, are highlighted in the following excerpt from the 1921 hearing:

Mr Hull: One of your resolutions is that we abolish the Chemical Warfare Service. I am quite interested in learning from you if you understand just what that is. Of course, the Chemical Warfare Service is simply an organization which is studying chemistry, and if they are studying chemistry, that would be very useful work; would you abolish that service under those conditions?

Mrs Brown: No; if it is doing useful work, I would put it in the civil part of the Government; under the Bureau of Mines, for instance, or the Bureau of Chemistry, but I would not put it in the hands of a military despot...

Mr Hull: You spoke of poison gas. Do you not know that they are trying to find a way to use gas that will make war more humane; that will simply put a man out of action for 24 hours and not hurt him? Would you do away with that?

Mrs Brown: Yes; I would do away with all of that...

The Chairman: Well, this is what happened in the World War - the other nations were not using poison gas - but Canadian and Belgian troops were at Vimy Ridge, and for the first time in many years this new method of killing people was brought into the battle by the Germans.

¹² Joan M. Jensen, "All Pink Sisters: The War Department and the Feminist Movement in the 1920s," in Lois Scharf and Joan M. Jensen, eds., *Decades of Discontent: The Women's Movement, 1920-1940* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1983), pp. 199-222.

¹³ Foster, *The Women and the Warriors*.

Mrs Brown: Well, the dastardly thing about that is that you affect people who are not of the fighting forces.¹⁴

Brown was clearly knowledgeable and readily countered some already familiar arguments in favor of chemical warfare: that the science was neutral; that poison gas was more humane than conventional weapons; and that novelty implied progress by making the weapons more specific to battlefield requirements.

Brown's articulate stance on the abolition of chemical warfare, and WILPF's more general attacks against the Chemical Warfare Service, drew the ire of its newly appointed head, Major General Amos Fries. At this time, with the WILPF office located opposite the War Department in Washington, the staff would often return from the weekend to find that their offices had been broken into and files tampered with or stolen.¹⁵ Matters escalated when, in public lectures starting in late 1922, Fries accused Brown of writing a treasonous oath for WILPF members and others to sign, pledging they would refrain from any form of support whatsoever for future wars.¹⁶ WILPF strenuously denied these accusations, going so far as to protest to Secretary of War John Weeks, who remained defensive of Fries and other military officers who had been criticized. Not long after this exchange, a "spider-web chart" claiming connections between peace groups, women's groups, and communist organizations, began to circulate in public. This propaganda was eventually traced back to the work of Lucia Maxwell, a librarian at the Chemical Warfare Service.¹⁷ Although eventually retracted, the chart, together with Fries's accusations, set off a short but harsh wave of public condemnation of WILPF that caused friction between its radical and conservative members.

During the interwar period, the US section of WILPF began to shift its focus to the broader themes of challenging imperialism and trying to outlaw all war.¹⁸ Chemical disarmament,

¹⁴ Excerpts from "Statement of Mrs. Harriet Connor Brown, Representing the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom," in *World Disarmament: Extract from Hearings before the Committee on Military Affairs, House of Representatives, January 11, 1921* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1921). The Records of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, U.S. Section, 1919-1959, Swarthmore College Peace Collection (Microfilm, reel 33, frames 649-57), by Harriet Connor Brown. In Allison Sobek, *How Did the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom Campaign against Chemical Warfare, 1915-1930?* (Binghamton, NY: State University of New York at Binghamton, 2001) . <<https://documents.alexanderstreet.com/d/1000671881> > (visited 29 May 2019)

¹⁵ Foster, *Women for All Seasons*, p.127.

¹⁶ Jensen, "All Pink Sisters", pp. 199-222.

¹⁷ Foster, *The Women and the Warriors*, pp. 47-49.

¹⁸ Foster, *The Women and the Warriors*, p.78.

however, had gained wider political attention. At the 1921 Washington Naval Conference, organized by the US government primarily to limit a naval arms race, the United Kingdom, France, Italy, and Japan supported a US resolution to outlaw poison gas.¹⁹ This ban became Article V of the ill-fated Treaty Relating to the Use of Submarines and Noxious Gases in Warfare, which floundered when France failed to ratify because of the treaty's clauses about submarines. Shortly after, the WILPF campaign against chemical weapons shifted to the European arena, and was eventually articulated in formal terms at their 1924 triennial congress in Washington DC. Here, the delegates passed a resolution on chemical warfare, calling for ongoing work to research and action to prevent chemical warfare as a component of WILPF's more general aim of ending all war:

Since the methods of warfare by armies and navies and aeroplanes are becoming obsolete, and their abolition would afford no real protection against the horrors of war unless new methods - chemical and electrical - are also abolished, and since our opposition to war includes opposition to all methods of waging war, we urge our Sections to appoint committees to investigate the development of chemical warfare and its special dangers and to organize opposition thereto, both for the sake of ending it and as a means of educating the masses as to the real character of war in general.²⁰

The outcome was the establishment of several national committees and an International Committee Against Scientific Warfare, the latter formed by Gertrud Woker, Naima Sahlbom, and Ester Akesson-Beskow.²¹ Dr. Woker, who had been present at the 1915 Hague Conference, held the position of docent (a rank below professor) and head of the laboratory for biological chemistry at the University of Bern, Switzerland.²² She had been the first German woman to be offered an adjunct professorship; then, at Bern, she was narrowly

¹⁹ Edward M. Spiers, "Gas disarmament in the 1920s: Hopes confounded", *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 29 No.2, (2006) pp. 281-300.

²⁰ WILPF Resolutions, 4th Triennial Congress, Washington USA, May 1-7 1924 . <https://wilpf.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/WILPF_triennial_congress_1924.pdf> (visited 29 May 2019).

²¹ *Introduction*. In Sobek *How Did the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom Campaign against Chemical Warfare* <<https://documents.alexanderstreet.com/d/1000682890>> (visited 29 May 2019).

²² Maria Grazia Suriano, " 'Will this terrible possibility become a fact?'" pp.26-41; "Woker, Gertrud Jan" in Marilyn Ogilvie and Joy Harvey, eds., *The Biographical Dictionary of Women in Science: Pioneering Lives from Ancient Times to the Mid-20th Century*. Vol.2 L-Z. (New York and London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 1391-1393.

denied a full professorship in 1916.²³ Two years later, at the Women's International Congress at Bern, she was participated in the discussions on the potential of chemical weapons to cause hereditary damage.²⁴ Dr. Sahlbom became the chair of the International Committee. As a scientist, she was professor of minerology at Stockholm University, Sweden, and had been part of the Scandinavian delegation to the Zurich Congress at which WILPF was named.

The heart of Woker and Sahlbom's objection to chemical warfare stemmed from their professional identity as scientists. Woker and Sahlbom, attending an American Chemical Society conference in 1924, had been granted access to the massive chemical warfare research facility at Edgewood Arsenal. Later, Woker described the visit, including various demonstrations of chemical weapons, in a WILPF pamphlet, *The Next War, a War of Poison Gas*, aimed at raising international awareness about the new weapons.²⁵ Alongside chemical weapons, Woker expressed her fears over the rapidly increasing technological sophistication for automating their delivery:

The death-bearers of the future will work more accurately than any human agency could. I myself saw in the 'Bureau of Standards' at Washington, that splendid technical achievement of American science and money, a little instrument, which, as the inscription showed, can be used for this sort of destructive work. I could not but shudder and think that here science was digging its own grave.²⁶

By May 1925, Woker's pamphlet had been translated in English, French, and German, while Sahlbom had written a Swedish pamphlet for distribution in Scandinavian countries.²⁷ The

²³ Ogilvie and Harvey, eds., "Woker, Gertrud Jan", pp. 1391-1393.

²⁴ Ogilvie and Harvey, eds., "Woker, Gertrud Jan", pp. 1391-1393..

²⁵ Woker published a book alongside the pamphlet, *The Coming Poison Gas War or The Coming War of Poison and Fire*, which went through six editions but was banned in Germany and copies were burnt by the National Socialist Student Association . Ogilvie and Harvey, eds., "Woker, Gertrud Jan", pp. 1391-1393; The Library of the Religious Society of Friends, London, Anna Vreland, 'In Memory of Gertrud Woker, 1878-1968' in WILPF, *New Perversions of Science*, WILPF Australian Section, 1969.

²⁶ *Gertrud Woker, The Next War, A War of Poison Gas* (Washington, D.C.: Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, [before 1927]). Women's International League for Peace and Freedom Collection, IV-7-14, Archives, University of Colorado at Boulder Libraries, WILPF Papers, 1915-1978 (Microfilm, Reel 112, frames 1133-1136), by Gertrud Woker. In Sobek, *How Did the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom Campaign against Chemical Warfare* <<https://documents.alexanderstreet.com/d/1000690572>> (visited 29 May 2019).

²⁷ "Report on the Work of the Committee Against Scientific Warfare of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom," 4 May 1925. Women's International League for Peace and Freedom Collection, IV-7-13, Archives, University of Colorado at Boulder Libraries, WILPF Papers, 1915-1978 (Microfilm, Reel 103, frames

committee had also drafted an appeal to scientists and sent it to various national sections to revise in light of their local contexts. Tellingly, the minutes of the committee echoed sporadic, but growing, concerns about another new type of weapon. Their report noted that: “the German group of the Czechoslovakian Section used a special appeal drafted by Dr Wiechovsky, emphasising also the possibility of bacteriological warfare.”²⁸ The different national sections responded in various ways to the appeal. At one end of the spectrum, the French section held public meetings, had the appeal signed by various scientists and technicians, and persuaded physicist Paul Langevin to draft a separate appeal. At the other end of the spectrum, the tension between ending all war and focusing on specific weapons surfaced. The British section found it “especially difficult” to make use of the appeal; when they approached chemist Frederick Soddy with it, his response was that he “was willing to fight against war,” but “not fight against a special branch of war.”²⁹ Likewise, in Norway, zoologist and Nobel Peace Prize winner Fridtjof Jansen refused to sign on similar grounds.³⁰ In June, a month after the International Committee Against Scientific Warfare reported on these various activities, progress was made at the level of international relations. Supported by the League of Nations, several states drew up and signed up to an international ban on the wartime use of CBW, the Protocol for the Prohibition of the Use in War of Asphyxiating, Poisonous or Other Gases, and of Bacteriological Methods of Warfare (the 1925 Geneva Protocol).³¹

1741-44), by Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, 1915-. In Sobek, *How Did the Women's*. <<https://documents.alexanderstreet.com/d/1000672755>> (Visited 29 May 2019).

²⁸ "Report on the Work of the Committee Against Scientific Warfare of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom," 4 May 1925. Women's International League for Peace and Freedom Collection, IV-7-13, Archives, University of Colorado at Boulder Libraries, WILPF Papers, 1915-1978 (Microfilm, Reel 103, frames 1741-44), by Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, 1915-. In Sobek, *How Did the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom Campaign against Chemical Warfare* <<https://documents.alexanderstreet.com/d/1000672755>> (Visited 29 May 2019).

²⁹ "Report on the Work of the Committee Against Scientific Warfare of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom," 4 May 1925. Women's International League for Peace and Freedom Collection, IV-7-13, Archives, University of Colorado at Boulder Libraries, WILPF Papers, 1915-1978 (Microfilm, Reel 103, frames 1741-44), by Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, 1915-. In Sobek, *How Did the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom Campaign against Chemical Warfare* <<https://documents.alexanderstreet.com/d/1000672755>> (Visited 29 May 2019).

³⁰ Bussey, Gertrude and Tims, Margaret, *Pioneers for Peace: Women's International League for Peace and Freedom 1915-1965* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1965) p.66.

³¹ For the wider context of slight, but significant, wider concern about bacteriological warfare at this time see: John Walker, “The 1925 Geneva Protocol: Export Controls, Britain, Poland and why the Protocol came to include ‘Bacteriological’ Warfare”, *Harvard Sussex Program Occasional Paper No.5* (Brighton: University of Sussex, 2016) <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/Units/spru/hsp/occasional%20papers/HSPOP_5.pdf> (Visited 29 May 2019).

In 1929, WILPF circulated Langevin's appeal to its national sections, urging them to obtain scientists' signatures in support of it. Sahlbom described it as: "a strong appeal to the scientists and technicians whose inventions and discoveries are often against their own intentions misused and exploited by the war industries."³² The appeal was not limited to chemical warfare, and instead noted: "The recent war witnessed the birth of new methods of destruction and we are promised in case of a new catastrophe, unprecedented horrors in the way of chemical war and bacteriological war."³³ Langevin identified what he recognized as the ineluctable march of science and the opposite situation with regards to war:

The undersigned consider it their urgent duty to denounce with all their might the frightful danger threatening the whole of humanity and especially the most civilised nations through the preparations for new scientific wars. As there can be no idea of limiting the development of science, it is absolutely essential to put a stop to war.³⁴

The results of these efforts remains unclear. However, the specific topic of CBW disappeared from WILPF congress resolutions until after World War II and the opening years of the Cold War.

Weapons of Mass Destruction

A few years before her retirement from university work, Woker delivered a speech at the 1949 WILPF Triennial Congress in Copenhagen, Denmark, simply titled *Der biologische Krieg* (The biological war). The speech drew heavily on a 1945 report on biological warfare, written for the secretary of war by George Merck, head of Merck & Co pharmaceuticals, and

³² *Letter from Naima Sahlbom to National Sections, 25 November 1929*. Women's International League for Peace and Freedom Collection, II-7-29, Archives, University of Colorado at Boulder Libraries, WILPF Papers, 1915-1978 (Microfilm, Reel 45, frame 875), by Naima Sahlbom. In Sobek, *How Did the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom Campaign against Chemical Warfare* <<https://documents.alexanderstreet.com/d/1000675029>> (Visited 29 May 2019).

³³ *Paul Langevin, "Declaration: For Signature by Scientific Men and Women," 1929*. Women's International League for Peace and Freedom Collection, IV-7-21, Archives, University of Colorado at Boulder Libraries, WILPF Papers, 1915-1978 (Microfilm, Reel 104, frame 222), by Paul Langevin. In Sobek, *How Did the Women's*. <<https://documents.alexanderstreet.com/d/1000683618>> (Visited 29 May 2019).

³⁴ *Paul Langevin, "Declaration: For Signature by Scientific Men and Women," 1929*. Women's International League for Peace and Freedom Collection, IV-7-21, Archives, University of Colorado at Boulder Libraries, WILPF Papers, 1915-1978 (Microfilm, Reel 104, frame 222), by Paul Langevin. In Sobek, *How Did the Women's*. <<https://documents.alexanderstreet.com/d/1000683618>> (Visited 29 May 2019),

published in redacted form in the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* a year later.³⁵ “Mobilising such weapons,” Woker claimed, “is akin to declaring war upon humanity itself.”³⁶ She then described in some detail different types of potential biological weapons, naming a gamut of pathogenic micro-organisms as well as plant growth regulators and human carcinogens. She warned that targets would not necessarily be humans but other animals and crops. Declaring her skepticism that offensive and defensive research could be separated, she added that, “in order to fight the ‘plague sower’, one becomes a ‘plague sower’ oneself, an entirely unsuitable means of punishing the crime.” Woker’s speech finished with a call to act and an appeal to WILPF’s over-riding mission: “The only thing that can permanently free humanity from the nightmare of biological warfare is the eradication of war and war mentality in every form.”³⁷

Woker’s speech had an impact.³⁸ Marking a shift of focus away from chemical weapons, which had not been used on the battlefield in World War II, the congress passed a general resolution on disarmament. While mentioning biological and nuclear war, it again emphasized that the WILPF position remained the total abolition of war, but urged nations to take heed of new scientific and technological developments:

“To make persistent efforts to achieve the necessary minimum of agreement for control of the use of atomic energy, and the secure the prohibition of the preparation of all means of mass devastation, including atomic and biological weapons, together with the destruction of all existing stocks.”³⁹

The following triennial congress, in Paris 1953, returned to the topic with a resolution calling for all nations who had yet to do so, to ratify the 1925 Geneva Protocol. Then, in 1959, at their Stockholm congress, WILPF drew attention to weapons of mass destruction, but again underlined the organization’s broader stance on ending all war: “Recent developments in this

³⁵ George W. Merck, “Official Report on Biological Warfare,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol.2 Nos. 7-8, (1946), pp.16-18.

³⁶ LSE Special Collections, WILPF/18/9, Woker, Gertrud, ‘Der Biologische Krieg’ in *XIth International Congress of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom*, Copenhagen, August 15-19th, 1949, pp.198-208 . English translation by Tizzy Mann, UCL Translation and Media Accessibility Services (TraMAS).

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Woker continued to campaign on science and disarmament issues until her death in 1968 . See: The Library of the Religious Society of Friends, London, Anna Vreland, ‘In Memory of Gertrud Woker, 1878-1968’ in WILPF, *New Perversions of Science*, WILPF Australian Section, 1969.

³⁹ WILPF Resolutions, 11th Triennial Congress, Copenhagen, August 15-19th 1949 . <https://wilpf.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/WILPF_triennial_congress_1949.pdf> (Visited 29 May 2019).

field of nuclear, bacteriological and chemical warfare confirm the conviction held by the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom ever since its inception in 1915 that only total and universal disarmament can free the world from war.”⁴⁰

The advent of thermonuclear weapons in the 1950s and the prospect that humanity might be engineering its own extinction re-invigorated the peace movement, including WILPF.

Various national sections of WILPF became active on antinuclear issues as they:

“championed disarmament and the halting of nuclear tests during the late 1950s, issued protests against the resumption of nuclear testing in 1961, and pressed for restraint during the Cuban missile crisis of 1962.”⁴¹ After the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis was resolved without a thermonuclear apocalypse, and arms-limitation progress was made through the 1963 Limited Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty, activist attention to nuclear weapons dissipated.⁴²

At their Hague Congress in 1965, attention swung back to biological weapons, and WILPF passed a substantive resolution that supported a call by the Pugwash organization of scientists who were extremely concerned about nuclear weapons and world peace. At the Pugwash conference earlier that year, the scientists involved had recommended “that pilot activities be instituted in several European countries aimed at minimizing secrecy in biological research, building mutual trust and confidence and (at) the conclusion of an agreement not to do research and development of biological weapons”⁴³

Pugwash had already proposed the idea of experimental inspections of biological research laboratories that might pave the way for an international disarmament treaty, as well as signalling the value of transparency in building trust between nations on these issues.⁴⁴ The WILPF resolution echoed this hope for disarmament by adding to its support for the Pugwash recommendation its own call for a United Nations treaty banning all preparations for chemical, biological, and radiological warfare.

⁴⁰ WILPF Resolutions, 14th Triennial Congress, Stockholm, July 30-31st 1959 . <https://wilpf.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/WILPF_triennial_congress_1959.pdf> (Visited 29 May 2019).

⁴¹ Wittner, “Gender Roles and Nuclear Disarmament, 1954–1965”, pp. 197–222.

⁴² Nehring, Holger, *Politics of Security: British and West German Protest Movements and the Early Cold War, 1945-1970* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Wittner, Lawrence, *Confronting the Bomb: A Short History of the World Disarmament Movement* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

⁴³ WILPF Resolutions, 16th Triennial Congress, the Hague, 26-31st July 1965 <https://wilpf.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/WILPF_triennial_congress_1965.pdf> (Visited 29 May 2019).

⁴⁴ Julian Perry-Robinson, “The Impact of Pugwash on the Debates over Chemical and Biological Weapons”, *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, Vol. 866 (December 1998), pp224-252.

The Conference on Chemical and Biological Warfare

WILPF's next phase of campaigning against chemical and biological warfare was as much a continuation of its historical stance opposing these weapons as it was a reaction to geopolitical events. As the Vietnam War was televised in living rooms across the West, America's use of tear gas and defoliant herbicides started to come under public scrutiny.⁴⁵ Criticism of American action surfaced at the United Nations General Assembly in 1966, with Hungary introducing a draft resolution that condemned all use of chemical and biological warfare and called for strict observance of the 1925 Geneva Protocol by all nations.⁴⁶ Although the United States defended its actions, claiming riot control agents and defoliants were beyond the scope of the Geneva Protocol, amendments to the Hungarian draft resulted in a resolution calling on all states to observe the principles and objectives of the Protocol. A/RES/2162(XXI) also noted that it was the role of the UN-sponsored Eighteen Nation Disarmament Committee (ENDC) to seek an agreement that would prevent the development and production of chemical and bacteriological weapons, as well as other weapons of mass destruction, leading to their eventual abolition.⁴⁷

Throughout 1967, calls to update the Geneva Protocol continued at the United Nations. Taking note of these calls, the ENDC called in August 1968 for the secretary-general to establish an expert group to study the potential effects of biological (bacteriological) warfare. That same month, UK Disarmament Minister Fred Mulley tabled a working paper at the ENDC on the prohibition of microbiological warfare.⁴⁸

WILPF had been granted consultative status with the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) in 1948, providing them with recognition and a formal advocacy channel, not only to ECOSOC, but to the General Assembly. This channel would most likely have kept WILPF informed of the growing momentum for biological disarmament. The WILPF

⁴⁵ Michael Mandelbaum, "Vietnam: the Television War", *Daedalus* Vol. 111 (1982) pp. 157-169; Sarah Bridger, *Scientists at War: The Ethics of Cold War Weapons Research* (Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press, 2015) pp. 115-154.

⁴⁶ Marie Chevrier, "The Politics of Biological Disarmament," in Mark Wheelis, Lajos Rózsa, Malcolm Dando, eds., *Deadly Cultures: Biological Weapons since 1945* (Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press, 2006) pp.304-328; Susan Wright, "The Geopolitical Origins of the Biological Weapons Convention." in Susan Wright, ed., *Biological Warfare and Disarmament: New Problems/New Perspectives* (Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002) pp. 313-342.

⁴⁷ See [https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/2162\(XXI\)](https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/2162(XXI))

⁴⁸ TNA CAB 130/389 Working Group on Chemical and Biological Warfare: Meetings 1-2; Papers 1-2. ENDC UK Working Paper on BWC (ENDC/231), August 6, 1968.

Seventeenth International Congress, held at Nyborg Strand, Denmark, from August 18–24, 1968, featured chemical and biological weapons at several points, largely at the behest of the British Section. Against the geo-political backdrop of Vietnam, British concern about CBW had become nationally focused, with various protests outside the secret chemical and biological defense research establishments at Porton Down in Wiltshire and subsequent newspaper coverage, as well as several television and radio documentaries.⁴⁹

The WILPF British Section, representing 885 members and sixteen branches, had already been energetic with respect to campaigning around CBW.⁵⁰ Action included proposing a resolution to the government and requesting parliamentarians raise the issue in the House of Commons. They also undertook awareness-raising activities, such as publishing a leaflet on CBW, contacting universities undertaking chemical and biological research, and recommending relevant literature to WILPF members. The British Section also inquired with the World Health Organization about any actions it was taking to address the threat of chemical and biological weapons.

WILPF interest in CBW was not entirely a British phenomenon. Herbicide use in Vietnam and US involvement in chemical and biological weapons were the topics of a 1967 public talk by Dr. E.W. Pfeiffer, a zoologist from Montana University. A year earlier, Pfeiffer had been instrumental in getting the American Association for the Advancement of Science to address the issue of chemical-weapons use in Vietnam.⁵¹ A member of the audience for Pfeiffer's 1967 talk, Evelyn Sheen Murray, was so "shocked and outraged" by what she heard that she joined her local branch of WILPF in Portland, Oregon.⁵² Murray, a school teacher, immediately began to research CBW under the auspices of WILPF and remained an ardent campaigner, with WILPF and church organizations, against CBW for decades. In 1968, possibly as a result of Murray's efforts, the US Section produced a pamphlet, *Danger to Mankind*, containing short pieces on CBW by a number of scientists. The introduction to *Danger to Mankind* explained that WILPF, while reiterating its overall aim to abolish all war,

⁴⁹ Brian Balmer, *Secrecy and Science: A Historical Sociology of Chemical and Biological Warfare* (London: Routledge, 2012) pp. 91-114; William King, "The British Nerve Agent Debate: Acquisition, Deterrence and Disarmament, 1945-1976," PhD diss., London School of Economics, 2019, pp.180-191. In addition, the Bernal Peace Library educational trust had organized a conference on CBW in early 1968.

⁵⁰ LSE Special Collections, WILPF/18/15, 17th WILPF International Congress. British Section Report to Congress.

⁵¹ Bridger, *Scientists at War*, p.94.

⁵² University of Sussex, Harvard Sussex Program, Sussex Harvard Information Bank (hereafter HSP SHIB) F2.2.1.7. WILPF. Biographical Information Evelyn S. Murray (n.d. possibly 1988).

had decided to focus on CBW to mark International Human Rights Year “because it considers these weapons a particularly poignant symbol of the barbarism and cruelty of modern warfare” that had been obscured by the previous focus on nuclear weapons.⁵³

The Nyborg Congress also included parallel open committee meetings focused on discussions of chemical and bacteriological warfare, with Judith Nottingham acting as a “special resource for this committee.”⁵⁴ Nottingham, who had studied political science at Newcastle University, was about to publish a substantial analysis of CBW coauthored with biologist John Cookson.⁵⁵ As well as being a “special resource,” Nottingham announced in Nyborg her aim to publicize facts about CBW “and to disillusion those who were persuaded that it was the most ‘humane form of warfare’.”⁵⁶ In a background briefing paper she had prepared for the conference, Nottingham emphasized the need for informing public opinion, and was highly skeptical of the recent British moves in the United Nations to strengthen the 1925 Geneva Protocol, declaring them “nothing more than a glorified publicity stunt to pacify public dissatisfaction.”⁵⁷

Delegates from the British Section had come to the Nyborg conference seeking endorsement of a formal resolution on CBW. It declared that they were “deeply concerned” with the money and personnel involved in CBW research, calling it a “brain drain from constructive research.”⁵⁸ The proposed resolution also welcomed “the sense of responsibility being shown by many scientists, but realises their move towards a protest can only be successful if supported by a well informed and active public opinion.” This division of labor between technical expertise and awareness raising would be a recurrent feature of the subsequent WILPF response to the CBW threat. After much discussion and revision, the final statement issued by WILPF echoed some of the original sentiment but reads quite differently:

⁵³ LSE Special Collections, WILPF/21/10, *Danger to Mankind* (n.d. 1968).

⁵⁴ LSE Special Collections, WILPF/18/15, 17th WILPF International Congress. Congress Programme.

⁵⁵ John Cookson and Judith Nottingham, *A Survey of Chemical and Biological Weapons* (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1969). An earlier version of the book existed as a report from the authors and published by a group of students. It is not clear if Nottingham was a guest or part of the British section delegation, she is not listed on a list of British delegates dated 6 June 1968 (LSE Special Collections, WILPF/18/15, 17th WILPF International Congress. List of Delegates to Conference from British Section).

⁵⁶ LSE Special Collections, WILPF/18/15, 17th WILPF International Congress. Session X. New Ways of Working in the International WILPF.

⁵⁷ LSE Special Collections, WILPF/21/8 Folder 2 . Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom . 17th International congress, Nyborg Strand, 8-24 August, 1968 . Background paper on Chemical and Biological Warfare for Committee on Chemical and Bacteriological Warfare, by Judith Nottingham.

⁵⁸ LSE Special Collections, WILPF/18/15, 17th WILPF International Congress. Proposed Resolution from the British Section.

“Congress is appalled by the immorality and inhumanity involved in the diversion of world resources, to the production and use of chemical and biological weapons of war and calls upon governments of all nations to cease these activities and to abide by the provisions of the Geneva Protocol of 1925.”⁵⁹

The congress also decided that WILPF should spearhead the organization of an international conference to address the topic.⁶⁰ By November, impatient with the lack of progress on this initiative by WILPF headquarters in Geneva, the chair of the British Section, Sybil Cookson, sounded out the idea of a conference with contacts at the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) and Pugwash. Both greeted the idea with enthusiasm. Shortly beforehand, Cookson’s visit to the Microbiological Research Establishment at Porton Down during one of its “open days” strengthened her opposition to the research undertaken there. She reported that officials had spoken much talk about protecting “the people,” which Cookson interpreted as applying only to the military and governmental officials.⁶¹

Cookson and the Honorary Secretary of the British Section, Margaret Curwen, reported the SIPRI and Pugwash stamp of approval to the International Executive of WILPF, which subsequently tasked the British Section with organizing the promised conference. Cookson and Curwen continued to work closely together to maintain the momentum. It was clear that the conference would require the involvement of other organizations besides WILPF, even if WILPF was to retain its position as the driver of the event. To this end, they called together a steering committee meeting in April 1969, which agreed unanimously to hold the conference and to establish an organizing committee.⁶² Eighteen people from fifteen different organizations comprised the committee, with Cookson as chair and Curwen as secretary.⁶³ Their rationale was stated plainly in a background note written shortly after the organizing

⁵⁹ LSE Special Collections, WILPF/18/15, 17th WILPF International Congress . Statement issued by WILPF.

⁶⁰ LSE Special Collections, WILPF/21/8 Folder 1 . International Conference on Chemical and Biological Warfare . A Report by Sybil Cookson and Margaret Curwen . 17 Jan 1970.

⁶¹ LSE Special Collections, WILPF/21/8 Folder 2, Liaison Committee for Women’s Peace Groups . Action Committee. Conference . 26 October 1968 . On the open day, see Brian Balmer, “An Open Day for Secrets: Biological Warfare, Steganography and Hiding Things in Plain Sight,” in Brian Rappert and Brian Balmer, eds., *Absence in Science, Security and Policy: From Research Agendas to Global Strategy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), pp. 34-54.

⁶² LSE Special Collections, WILPF/21/8 Folder 1 . International Conference on Chemical and Biological Warfare . A Report by Sybil Cookson and Margaret Curwen . 17 Jan 1970.

⁶³ The minutes of the organizing committee are held in the LSE Special Collections . They do not always list the affiliation of those present or those who sent apologies . Some organizations listed include: British Humanists, Co-Op Guilds, IRC (possibly International Rescue Committee), P.A. (probably Peace Action), Young Liberals, United Nations Association . The treasurer was Rev. Canon Edward Charles.

committee was formed: “the need for such a conference is clear enough, for many are now saying that CBW could well be as destructive to life as nuclear weapons, but few have any practical idea of what can be done by ordinary people to help prevent such a disaster.”⁶⁴ Once again, a well-defined division of labor was laid out. On the one hand, they claimed, “technical facts” for the “serious student” had been made available through the activities of groups such as Pugwash. On the other hand, there was a role for the general public, if they were informed enough, to support and help implement nascent UN policy on CBW. Consequently: “the conference will, therefore, need technical, scientific experts to advise it, religious leaders and other humanists to give a moral lead, statesmen of every hue to advise on what is practicable, and artists and publicists to direct the presentation.”⁶⁵

By this stage, the UN General Assembly had, in December 1968, formally adopted a resolution stemming from the August work of the ENDC, and an expert report on CBW, prepared on behalf of Secretary-General U Thant, was expected in July 1969. Preparation for the conference continued apace; the organizing committee held regular meetings and a team of volunteers, numbering anywhere from four to twenty, at the WILPF London office helped with the administration and logistics.⁶⁶

If the meeting was to be a success, it was crucial to obtain high-profile sponsorship. From the outset, the organizers sent letters inviting people to put their name to the conference. Some were happy to lend their names, though were too busy to attend, such as journalist and prominent Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) member, Lord Ritchie Calder.⁶⁷ Others declined, including seasoned Conservative MP Selwyn Lloyd, who wrote that his sponsorship was “not appropriate.”⁶⁸ Of those who agreed to both sponsor and attend, a letter from Labour MP and Nobel Peace Prize winner, Philip Noel-Baker, contained a significant proviso. With a nod to the general aim of WILPF to campaign for complete disarmament, Noel-Baker asked that the conference fit within this framework, adding: “it would be sad if a

⁶⁴ LSE Special Collections, WILPF/21/8 Folder 2 . Conference on Chemical and Biological Warfare possibly at Cambridge in early December 1969, n.d. April 1969.

⁶⁵ LSE Special Collections, WILPF/21/8 Folder 2 . Conference on Chemical and Biological Warfare possibly at Cambridge in early December 1969, n.d. April 1969.

⁶⁶ LSE Special Collections, WILPF/21/8 Folder 1 . International Conference on Chemical and Biological Weapons . A personal report . Margaret Curwen.

⁶⁷ LSE Special Collections, WILPF/21/1 . Letter from Ritchie Calder to Sybil Cookson. 6 June 1969.

⁶⁸ LSE Special Collections, WILPF/21/1 . Letter from Rt Hon Selwyn Lloyd MP to Sybil Cookson. 1 August 1969.

conference like yours were to divert attention from the major problem of the nuclear stocks which may so easily destroy the human race.”⁶⁹

The final list of thirty individual sponsors advertised on the conference program listed eight senior clergymen, including Canon Paul Collins, first chair of CND.⁷⁰ Several sponsors were members of the Houses of Lords and Commons, including Labour MP Tam Dalyell, who had recently been sanctioned for leaking classified information on CBW to the media.⁷¹ Other high-profile sponsors included Quaker, chemist, and former president of the WILPF British Section, Dame Kathleen Lonsdale; Massachusetts Institute of Technology linguist and outspoken critic of the Vietnam War, Noam Chomsky; and also Gerald Leach, science correspondent of *The Observer* newspaper. There had been less successful attempts to raise the profile of the meeting by inviting famous celebrities to attend. Eager to appeal to a younger audience, organizers overruled the objections of some committee members and invited John Lennon and Yoko Ono, who earlier that year had protested against the Vietnam War through their widely publicized “bed-ins.”⁷² Comedian Peter Cook was invited instead. None appeared in the final program. The list of invitees demonstrates that WILPF and the organizing committee were determined that the meeting have a diverse spread of high-profile supporters, signaling that this was to be a serious meeting rather than an ill-informed protest.

As conference preparations quietened during the summer holiday period, the WILPF International Executive Committee maintained momentum for the meeting. The July UN expert committee report on CBW had called for all nations to work toward abandoning these weapons. In support, the International Executive Committee passed an emergency resolution supporting the move as a step towards total disarmament. Their opposition was not based on plain revulsion. Reporting on the resolution, the committee articulated the reasons why these weapons were worth singling out for condemnation:

⁶⁹ LSE Special Collections, WILPF/21/1 . Letter from Rt Hon Philip Noel-Baker MP to Sybil Cookson. 23 June 1969.

⁷⁰ LSE Special Collections, WILPF/21/1 . International Conference on Chemical and Biological Warfare . 21-23 November 1969 . Programme.

⁷¹ Balmer, *Secrecy and Science*, pp 94-96.

⁷² LSE Special Collections, WILPF/21/8 Folder 1, International Conference on CBW Meeting of Organising Committee. Minutes. 15 October 1969; International Conference Organizing Committee Meeting. Minutes. 29 July 1969.

Chemical and Biological Weapons so much cheaper to manufacture than nuclear weapons, so much easier to keep secret, and to release at a moment's notice, constitute a grave danger even in peacetime. As armaments they stand in a class of their own, for they exercise their effects solely on living matter, leaving buildings and other installations intact. All these facts must be squarely faced and made public. This is why an International Conference on Chemical and Biological Warfare has been called.⁷³

The conference took place at the NUFTO hall in London, November 21–23, 1969, with around 200 in attendance. It was made clear on the cover of the programme that the initiative for the conference had arisen at the 1968 WILPF congress and that the organizing committee address was the WILPF London office.⁷⁴ Cookson and Curwen later described the atmosphere of the meeting: “We planned this to be a conference with a difference, and from the opening session a sense of urgency and expectancy appeared evident among the 200 participants from 20 countries.”⁷⁵

The speakers and session chairs, as with the sponsors, reflected the ambitions of the organizers. Representatives from different political parties were visible. Philip Noel-Baker opened the conference, and plenary sessions were chaired by Joyce Butler MP (Labour) and Joan Vickers MP (Conservative), as well as George Kiloh (Young Liberals).⁷⁶ SIPRI, Pugwash, the Swedish National Defense Research Institute, and the Czech Academy of Sciences were all represented among the speakers.⁷⁷ Scientists spoke on both the “facts” and the “moral aspects” of the problem. Matthew Meselson, a Harvard biologist who had been active in advising and campaigning against chemical and biological weapons was the opening speaker, followed by Oganov Baryon from the Soviet Academy of Sciences. Australian physiologist Dr. G.M. Waites opened a floor discussion on moral aspects of chemical and

⁷³ LSE Special Collections, WILPF/21/8 Folder 2, A Short Historical Account of WILPF's Opposition to Scientific Warfare for Mass Destruction. Margaret Tims and Cornelia Weiss in connection with the International Conference on Chemical and Biological Warfare, London 21-23 November 1969 .

⁷⁴ LSE Special Collections, WILPF/21/1 . International Conference on Chemical and Biological Warfare . 21-23 November 1969 . Programme.

⁷⁵ LSE Special Collections, WILPF/21/8 Folder 2, *The Supreme Folly: Chemical and Biological Weapons*.

⁷⁶ LSE Special Collections, WILPF/21/1 . International Conference on Chemical and Biological Warfare . 21-23 November 1969 . Programme; LSE Special Collections, WILPF/21/8 Folder 2, *The Supreme Folly: Chemical and Biological Weapons* .

⁷⁷ The title “Swedish Institute of National Defence” was used in the conference literature but the correct title was the Swedish National Defence Research Institute (FOA).

biological weapons.⁷⁸ The political dimension was covered by two late additions to the program: Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs Evan Luard MP provided the UK government voice, while Congressman Richard McCarthy (Democrat of New York), spoke about his own ardent opposition to the weapons.⁷⁹

Adding to the gravity of the conference, WILPF had also secured a short statement from U Thant, which they read aloud at the meeting. The UN secretary-general wrote that his organization needed not only political support but wider international public support in order to be effective. He praised WILPF for its historic involvement in “bringing about an informed body of public opinion” and added that his own concerns about chemical and biological weapons centered on their appeal to smaller countries as cheap alternatives to nuclear weapons.⁸⁰ After three days of talks and debate, the conference produced three statements calling on all governments to abide by U Thant’s proposals, to ensure that the Geneva Protocol applied to all chemical and biological weapons, and that an international agreement should be reached that halted the development, production, and stockpiling of these weapons.⁸¹

The Committee on Chemical and Biological Warfare

The conference organizers judged it a success. An interim continuing committee was briefly formed and reported at the final meeting of the organizing committee, in December 1969, that they had already reproduced the conference statements and, along with a covering letter, sent them to all participants and speakers, as well as U Thant, the prime minister, and the UK ambassador to the United Nations. They also circulated at this meeting “the already considerable file of newspaper cuttings” resulting from the various press enquiries they had fielded.⁸² Shortly after, WILPF published *The Supreme Folly: Chemical and Biological*

⁷⁸ For Meselson’s own account of his role see Jeanne Guillemin, Matthew Meselson, Julian Perry-Robinson, Nicholas Sims, “Witness Seminar: Origins of the Biological Weapons Convention”, in Filippa Lentzos, ed., *Biological Threats in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Imperial College Press, 2016), pp. 357-384.

⁷⁹ LSE Special Collections, WILPF/21/8 Folder 2, *The Supreme Folly: Chemical and Biological Weapons* . On McCarthy’s opposition to CBW see “Horrorified Wife Started Drive on Gas Warfare: Rep. McCarthy’s Mate Inspired Campaign to Ban Germ and Chemical Weapons,” *Los Angeles Times* December 5, 1969.

⁸⁰ LSE Special Collections, WILPF/21/8 Folder 2, *The Supreme Folly: Chemical and Biological Weapons* .

⁸¹ LSE Special Collections, WILPF/21/8 Folder 2, *The Supreme Folly: Chemical and Biological Weapons* .

⁸² LSE Special Collections, WILPF/21/1 . DSCN2608 Minutes of Organising Committee meeting 17 Dec 1969

Weapons, which contained summaries of the conference proceedings, including the statement by the UN secretary-general and the documents that had been endorsed by the conference.⁸³

There had been no plan to continue any organized campaign following the conference. Days after it ended, President Richard M. Nixon announced that the United States would abandon its offensive biological-weapons program. The covering letter accompanying the conference statements welcomed the Nixon decision and called for a universal ban on chemical and biological weapons.⁸⁴ The hastily formed interim continuing committee established itself as the national Committee on Chemical and Biological Warfare (CCBW), again centred on WILPF but with representation from a range of organizations.⁸⁵ This move was complemented by the formation of a separate International Continuing Committee, chaired by Philip Noel-Baker, which took on a wider responsibility to address CBW, nuclear and conventional disarmament.

Both Curwen and Cookson were keen to demarcate the role of the International Continuing Committee, and by implication the CCBW, from that of Pugwash. They argued that, despite its successes, “Pugwash is a meeting of scientists, even though the term is used in a wide sense, it does not obtain the value of a membership drawn from a wider section of the community.”⁸⁶ Cookson and Curwen recommended that, similar to the conference, the international committee should consist of “lawyers, religious leaders, artists, teachers, trade unionists and economists, as well as a few scientists to give technical advice.” While clearly a statement about specialist expertise, it can be conjectured that the WILPF members were also mindful that Pugwash was largely a male organization.⁸⁷

The national CCBW pulled in a wide range of member organizations while maintaining a narrow remit: “The aim of the CCBW is purely educational: to spread information on CBW

⁸³ LSE Special Collections, WILPF/21/8 Folder 2, *The Supreme Folly: Chemical and Biological Weapons* .

⁸⁴ LSE Special Collections, WILPF/21/8 Folder 2, Letter Margaret Curwen. Continuing Committee of the International Conference on Chemical and Biological Warfare. n.d. probably Nov/Dec 1969.

⁸⁵ The WILPF Australian Section also set up a similar committee, which produced an Australian version of the *Danger to Mankind* pamphlet, mentioned earlier, entitled *New Perversions of Science*. The Scandinavian Section campaigned for a CBW-free zone . The Library of the Religious Society of Friends, London, WILPF, *New Perversions of Science*, WILPF Australian Section, 1969; Foster, *Women for All Seasons*, p.61.

⁸⁶ LSE Special Collections, WILPF/21/8 Folder 1, International Conference on Chemical and Biological Warfare . A Report by Sybil Cookson and Margaret Curwen . 17 Jan 1970.

⁸⁷ It is difficult to build a picture of the gender composition of Pugwash meetings as the lists of participants are largely given the title Dr or Professor . A list of Pugwash members who died between 1997-2007 lists 100 men and 5 women (7 names were indeterminate) . “Remembering Pugwashites who have died, 1997–2007,” *Pugwash Newsletter*, Volume 44, Number 2 (October 2007), pp. 24-25.

to all sections of the community, mainly through the channels of the member organizations... the CCBW hopes to increase awareness of policy on and commitment to CBW (especially in Britain) in the field of both research and development and arms control.”⁸⁸

There is no indication in the archival record as to whether the reasons the committee chose to limit itself to an educational remit were pragmatic, principled, or a combination of both. Certainly, confining themselves to education would have limited their workload, avoided them being seen as a direct action group, and might have been designed to pull in as wide a variety of organizations within the peace movement as possible. Moreover, this focus on information provision does not appear to be indicative of a general strategy for the British Section of WILPF, who reported that their activities around Vietnam in 1968 had included participation in protest marches, demonstrations and vigils.⁸⁹

Over the next few years, the committee met frequently and had a core of active members, eventually splitting work between this core action group and a wider, less active membership, who would be invited to less frequent plenary meetings.⁹⁰ A sense of industriousness can be gleaned from some of the activities discussed at their meetings. These included organizing a small travelling exhibition on CBW as well as film screenings and discussions of relevant television programs, such as the 1968 BBC documentary on Porton Down, *A Plague on Your Children*.⁹¹ They also collected 2,327 signatures on a petition declaring “abhorrence” of CBW and urging the UK government to transfer its purported “defensive” CBW research to the Ministry of Health and Social Security. The petition also called for an international agreement to ban biological weapons.⁹² They presented this petition in person to Defence

⁸⁸ LSE Special Collections, WILPF/21/8 Folder 2, Committee on Chemical and Biological Warfare, Minutes of Meeting 8 July 1970 . The member organizations were listed here as: Anglican Peace Fellowship, Bristol Standing Conference on Disarmament, British Association for World Government, British Humanist Association, British Society for Social Responsibility in Science, Chemical and Biological Warfare Action Group, Christian Action, Church of England, London Co-Operative Society Political Committee, D.A.T.A., Federation of University Women, Fellowship of Reconciliation, Society of Friends, Methodist Church, National Peace Council, National Union of Students, National Union of Townswomen’s Guilds, Roman Catholic Church, United Nations Association, UNA Youth, UN Student Association, Voice of Women, Women for Disarmament, Women’s Advisory Council of UNA, Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, Women’s Liberal Federation, Young Liberals.

⁸⁹ LSE Special Collections, WILPF/18/15 17th WILPF International Congress. British Section Report to Congress.

⁹⁰ LSE Special Collections, WILPF/21/8 Folder 1. Committee of Chemical and Biological Warfare . Minutes of meeting 19 Jan 1972

⁹¹ LSE Special Collections WILPF/21/8 Folder 1. Invitation from CCBW, free showing of the film ‘A Plague on Your Children’ on 17 May 1971, Panel Q&A Session chaired by Monseigneur Bruce Kent .

⁹² LSE Special Collections WILPF/21/8 Folder 1. Copy of Petition on CBW; Committee on Chemical and Biological Warfare, Minutes of Meeting 3 May 1971.

Secretary Lord Carrington. The CCBW also joined the chorus of protest from nongovernmental groups after Harold Wilson's Labour government announced in 1970 that it now interpreted the 1925 Geneva Protocol as not applicable to CS tear gas, which had recently been used in Vietnam and Northern Ireland.⁹³ As the negotiations on the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) continued at the Geneva-based Conference on Disarmament, the CCBW prepared a short pamphlet called *A Warning About Chemical and Biological Warfare*, and, in 1972, organized a talk on the newly signed convention by David Summerhayes, the head of FCO's Arms Control and Disarmament Department.⁹⁴

Amidst growing environmental awareness, particularly related to the impact of science, some had suggested at the July meeting "that the Committee extend its scope at least to cover the new concept of 'ecocide' and possibly all new developments in weapons technology. After a good discussion it was agreed not to change the name of the Committee but to widen its scope to cover all non-nuclear methods of warfare with long-term effects on the environment. This would include such things as the recent reports of rain-making over Vietnam."⁹⁵

At about the same time, there were signs of wider pressures bearing on the British Section of WILPF to constrain their work. A year earlier, membership had dwindled to 679, and the 1970–71 annual report lamented that: "the trend away from organizations of our sort, while Women's Liberation and the British Society for Social Responsibility in Science have been growing at great pace, must give us a lot to think about."⁹⁶ The following year's report, nonetheless, reported that the continuing work of the CCBW meant that "WILPFs concern for disarmament is continuing in a really practical way."⁹⁷ However, by the 1972–73 report, there is no mention of the CCBW. Instead, a number of sub-committees, including a disarmament sub-committee, had been established to aid the work of the British Section's Parliamentary Committee. It appears that the CCBW had been subsumed into this committee,

⁹³ LSE Special Collections, WILPF/21/8 Folder 1, Committee on Chemical and Biological Warfare, Minutes of Meeting 29 March 1971 . On the CS decision see: Alex Spelling, " 'Driven to Tears': Britain, CS Tear Gas, and the Geneva Protocol, 1969–1975," *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, Vol.27 No.4, (2016), pp.701-725.

⁹⁴ LSE Special Collections, NPC 10/15. Leaflet from Committee on Chemical and Biological Warfare "A Warning About Chemical and Biological Warfare"; WILPF/21/8 Folder 1 . Committee of Chemical and Biological Warfare . Minutes of a plenary meeting held on Tuesday 4 July 1972 .

⁹⁵ LSE Special Collections, WILPF/21/8 Folder 1 . Committee of Chemical and Biological Warfare . Minutes of a plenary meeting held on Tuesday 4 July 1972 . On science and environmental thinking in this period see: Jon Agar, *Science in the Twentieth Century and Beyond* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012).

⁹⁶ LSE Special Collections, WILPF/20/11 . WILPF British Section . Fifty-Fifth Annual Report 1970 to 1971.

⁹⁷ LSE Special Collections, WILPF/20/11 . WILPF British Section . Fifty-Sixth Annual Report 1971 to 1972.

although the problems facing WILPF at this stage were far broader. By 1976, with an annual deficit of over £2,000, and with several other wider peace initiatives from the Section having floundered through lack of interest, Honorary Secretary Carmel Budiardjo claimed that WILPF was facing a generational divide: “The main problem would appear to be an inability to link up peace issues with issues that have a direct appeal to women, in particular younger women.”⁹⁸

While the late 1960s and early 1970s were the high watermark of international WILPF’s anti-CBW activities, they continued to give the issue sporadic attention. In the mid-1980s, a still very active though retired from teaching Evelyn Murray organized a Nerve Gas Task Force. Its task was to “research, document and lobby” on a range CBW issues, with particular attention paid to opposing the US acquisition of binary weapons.⁹⁹ The task force instigated a letter-writing campaign and circulated leaflets, short reports, and lists, such as a record of who in the House of Representatives had voted for and against the production of binary chemical weapons, and the 1987 pamphlet *Nerve Gas In Your Town*, listing laboratories that held contracts to work on chemical warfare agents.¹⁰⁰ They later shifted focus to the protracted Chemical Weapons Convention negotiations, using similar campaign tactics, including a 1990 campaign to send Christmas cards with a message to President George H.W. Bush calling for an international ban on chemical warfare.¹⁰¹ Into the early twenty-first century, WILPF’s attention shifted to nuclear and space issues, although in 2006 they expressed concern about the US and other national biodefense programs.¹⁰² They sent representatives to the Fifth (2002, 1 delegate), Sixth (2006, 5 delegates), and Eighth (2016, 1) Review Conferences of the BWC.

Conclusion

With each phase of WILPF’s interest in CBW there remained a consistency of approach, with the league eschewing large-scale protest in favor of less radical action, such as formulating

⁹⁸ LSE Special Collections, WILPF/20/11 . WILPF British Section . Annual Report 1975 to 1976.

⁹⁹ University of Sussex, HSP SHIB . F2.2.1.7 . WILPF . Nerve Gas Task Force. Binary weapons are filled with chemical precursors of nerve agents in separate compartments . They then combine while the missile is in flight to create the chemical weapon.

¹⁰⁰ University of Sussex, HSP SHIB . F2.2.1.7 . WILPF .

¹⁰¹ University of Sussex, HSP SHIB . F2.2.1.7 . WILPF . Nerve Gas Task Force Alert, 1990.

¹⁰² University of Sussex, HSP SHIB . F2.2.1.7 . WILPF . Post by Carol Umer, WILPF to Listserve biodefense@lists.sunshine.project.org 25 September, 2006.

resolutions, letter writing, creating educational material, and organizing public meetings with the wider goal of creating a climate of public opinion hostile to the research, development, and use of chemical and biological weapons. There was a difference, however, between the approaches of the 1920s and 1960s that seem more rooted in the backgrounds of the individuals driving the interest in opposing CBW. Woker and Sahlbom were female scientists, a rare intersection of identities in the early twentieth century. They orchestrated a campaign within which the role of WILPF was to mobilize science to speak out against CBW. By drafting and circulating an appeal to scientists, particularly prominent male scientists, the voice of science became a proxy for the voice of WILPF. The campaigns of the late 1960s and early 1970s certainly made some use of science in this way, for example by gathering the opinions of scientists into *Danger to Mankind*. But, that said, Curwen and Cookson in the British Section of WILPF most certainly saw a distinct awareness-raising role for non-scientists, with WILPF's identity firmly and openly stamped on the 1969 conference and ensuing CCBW, which was separate from the scientific voice exemplified by Pugwash. Science, in this sense, was not to be a proxy for the voices of women or the wider peace movement.

While it is difficult to gauge the direct impact or influence of the various WILPF activities, it is possible to make some assessment. To begin with, WILPF rarely acted on their own in respect to CBW, so their campaigns should be taken as one element of a larger outcry against these weapons. In the 1920s, it appears that the buildup of political energy around chemical disarmament provided ample opportunity for WILPF to home in on efforts to support a ban on chemical warfare. Events in Geneva likewise formed an impetus for WILPF in the 1960s, coupled with growing anti-chemical weapons sentiment associated primarily with the Vietnam War. WILPF was far from alone in expressing and articulating this sentiment, as evidenced by the range of groups willing to become involved in both the 1969 conference and the CCBW. So, in making the claim that WILPF contributed to a climate of public opinion and offered a counter-narrative to dominant narratives, such as claims about the humane nature of chemical weapons, it is possible to take a step further and point out that WILPF played a coordinating role for activities that were neither mistimed nor isolated. In addition, their predominantly educational mission, together with the sponsor and speaker list for the 1969 conference, is testimony to the gravitas that WILPF wanted attached to their campaign. And indeed, the conference attracted the attention of bishops, parliamentarians, academic experts, and, of course, the UN secretary general. Not John Lennon. Throughout

the 1960s and 1970s, WILPF added further substance to the claims about the effects of contributing to a climate of public opinion. Within the UK government, there is plenty of evidence that civil servants and politicians were sensitive about issues concerning CBW, wanting to either keep them secret or at least cocoon them with public relations exercises such as the Porton open days.¹⁰³ Recent historical research has demonstrated the direct impact of this sensitivity, as politician after politician during this period cited public opinion as they pushed back against secret demands from the chiefs of staff for the acquisition of a first-use, nerve agent capability.¹⁰⁴

Commenting on the threat of nuclear annihilation and the revival of the women's peace movement in the 1950s and 1960s, Liddington points out that, despite such new animation, "none of these [phases of revival] was a 'mass movement'; the problem of being half-buried remained."¹⁰⁵ The problem, then, was compounded for WILPF and CBW as their efforts were "half buried" beneath the flurry of activity around nuclear issues. Yet, as we revisit the historical record, we find that from the early days of the organization onward, we can recover significant bursts of anti-CBW activism by the women of WILPF. These efforts are all the more unexpected considering that there is no evidence in the primary sources that WILPF regarded CBW as a specifically gendered issue in the way that, for instance, strontium-90 fallout had been perceived in some quarters.¹⁰⁶ It is a remarkable achievement that, in an organization devoted to total disarmament and suspicious of apparent half-measures, several members succeeded in focusing WILPF's attention on a singular group of weapons, at several junctures in its history, and with effective outcomes.

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¹⁰³ Balmer, *Secrecy and Science*, pp. 91-114; Brian Balmer, "Keeping Nothing Secret: UK Chemical Warfare Policy in the 1960s," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, (2010) Vol. 33 No. 6 (2010), pp. 1-23.

¹⁰⁴ King, *The British Nerve Agent Debate*, pp. 180-191.

¹⁰⁵ Liddington, *The Long Road to Greenham*, p.175.

¹⁰⁶ More recently, in 2019, WILPF co-authored a joint NGO statement to the UN BWC Meeting of States Parties where BW disarmament is framed explicitly in terms of gender:
[https://www.unog.ch/80256EDD006B8954/\(httpAssets\)/BBF5EA58E635441AC12584C6005873E9/\\$file/MSP+2019+statement+with+endorsements.pdf](https://www.unog.ch/80256EDD006B8954/(httpAssets)/BBF5EA58E635441AC12584C6005873E9/$file/MSP+2019+statement+with+endorsements.pdf)

historian Helen Kay, as well as the late Julian-Perry Robinson, Kathleen Vogel, and the journal reviewers and editors for feedback on earlier drafts of this article.