

MAW Conference: Save the Earth - Abolish War, London 29th June 2019

Abolishing war - hopeful lessons from history

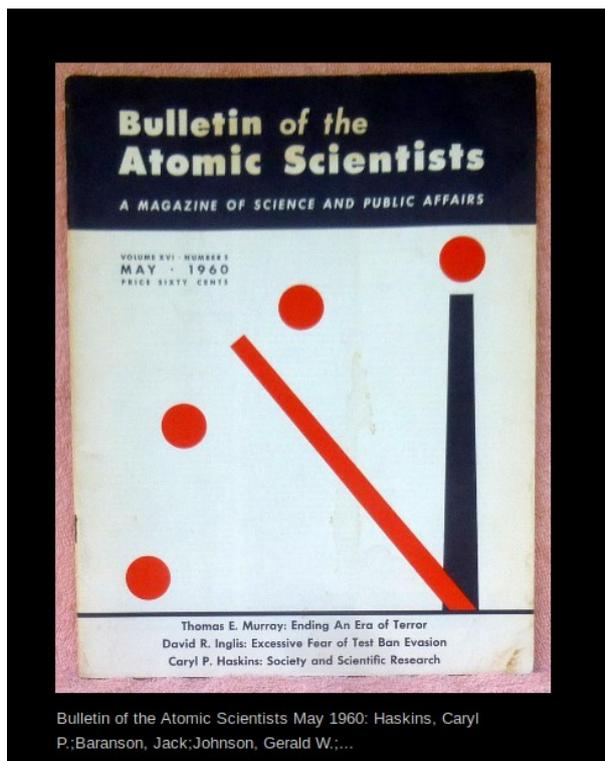
Peter van den Dungen

It is no exaggeration to say that we are living in apocalyptic times. A few days ago, in Vienna, I came across a new book with an arresting and deeply disconcerting, depressing title of only two words: *Generation Weltuntergang* - "Generation End of the World". The bestselling authors, Stefan Bonner and Anne Weiss, earlier wrote *Planet Planlos* - "Planet without a Plan". The extinction rebellion is the most recent and most visible manifestation of, and response to, this unprecedented crisis. Initiated by young people, it has also received widespread support from broad sections of society in many countries around the world. It is no surprise that so many people, especially young people, when faced with the prospect of a very uncertain future, are depressed and that those who maintain a glimmer of hope are sounding the alarm.

Away from the street protests, another sign of the times is the foundation, in 2012, of the Centre for the Study of Existential Risk at the University of Cambridge. One of the three co-founders is Lord Martin Rees, the Astronomer Royal and a former President of the Royal Society. In terms of scientific credentials, it is hard to better this. One of those existential risks the Centre is dealing with is about the existence, use, proliferation, and threatened use of nuclear weapons (and other weapons of mass destruction). [One of the partners of the Cambridge Centre is the Nuclear Threat Initiative (NTI), a nonpartisan and non-profit organization that was founded in 2001 in the US by former US Senator Sam Nunn and peace philanthropist Ted Turner.]

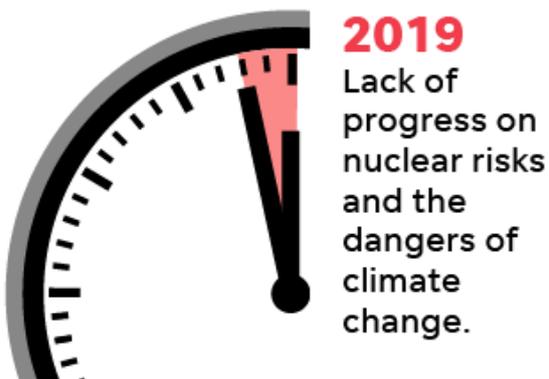
It was the invention and then use of the atomic bombs in Japan in August 1945 at the end of the Second World War that

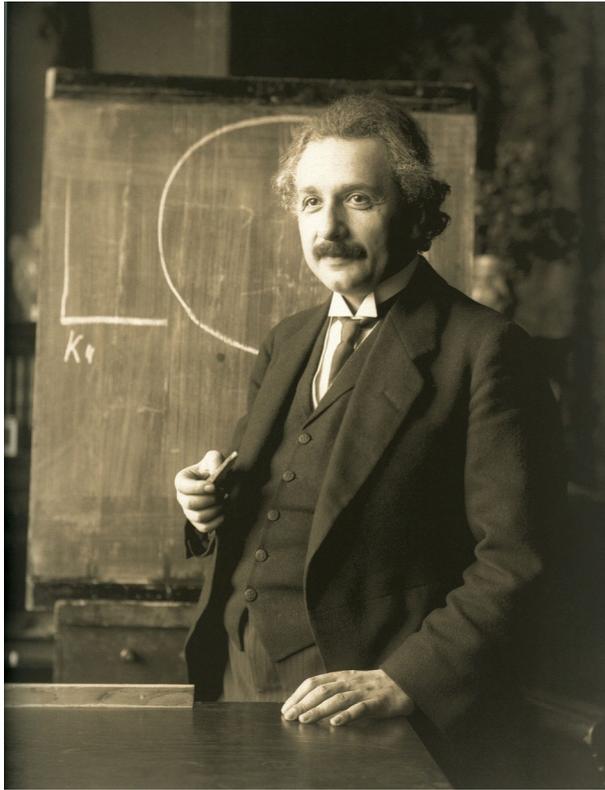
heralded the nuclear age with its promise of cheap nuclear energy and its menace of global destruction. That the latter was real was recognised by those most closely associated with the development of atomic science and the bomb, namely, the atomic scientists. Immediately following the atomic bombings, scientists who had worked on the Manhattan Project (which produced the bombs) warned about the great dangers this new weapon represented, and outlined what to do about them, i.e., abolish them.



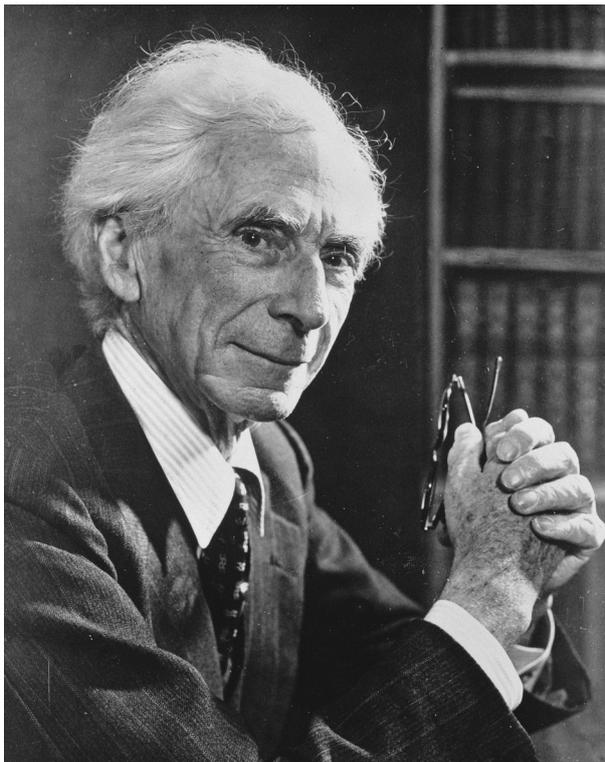
They expressed their concerns and plans for abolition in the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* that was founded in 1945; two years later, the continuous and at times imminent danger the world found itself in was represented for the first time by the famous Doomsday Clock. It was first set at seven minutes to midnight; today it stands at two minutes to midnight - the same as it was at the height of the Cold War when Armageddon was looming large.

Doomsday clock





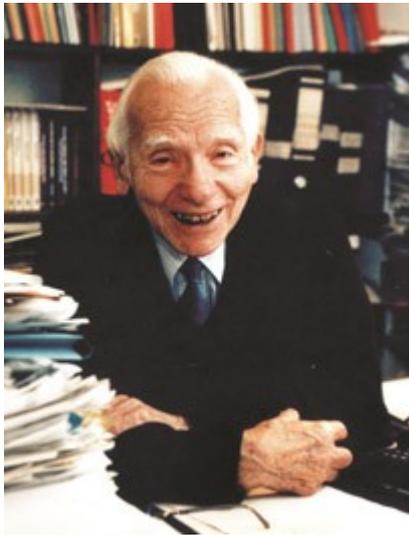
Ever since August 1945, and increasingly so as more countries developed and deployed nuclear weapons, many times more powerful than those first used over Japan, people living through these dangerous times have belonged to 'Generation End of the World'. In order to warn the world, and urge it to come to its senses and change course, Albert Einstein and Bertrand Russell - at the time the most famous scientist and the most famous philosopher, respectively, alive - issued a declaration in 1955 which led to the foundation of the Pugwash Movement (officially: Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs).



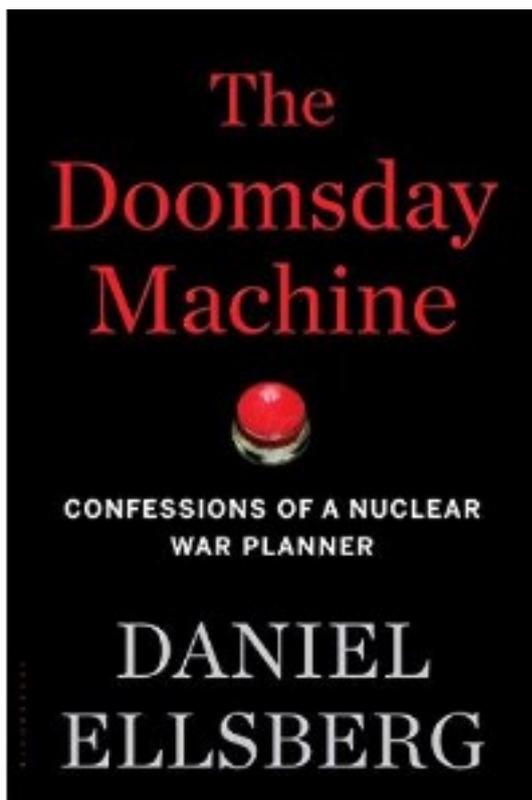
Eventually and not before time, the merits of Pugwash - and of its long-time leader, professor Joseph Rotblat - in reducing the risk of the use of nuclear weapons and working for a world free of such weapons, were recognised in 1995 when they shared the Nobel Peace Prize.

I am particularly keen to mention Joseph Rotblat, one of the great peace heroes of our

time. It was his work for the abolition of nuclear weapons, and of war itself, which inspired the foundation of the Movement for the Abolition of War of which he became the first president (a position now held by Bruce Kent).



In his 2002 Remembrance Sunday lecture at the Imperial War Museum, titled 'A World Without War: Is it Desirable? Is it Feasible?', Rotblat quoted from the Einstein-Russell manifesto - "Here, then, is the problem which we present to you, stark and dreadful and inescapable: Shall we put an end to the human race, or shall mankind renounce war?" Rotblat said, "In the nuclear age, the human species has become an endangered species". Indeed, virtually since the start of the nuclear age, every generation has potentially been a 'Generation End of the World'. The question Bertrand Russell posed in 1961, *Has Man a Future?* (a Penguin Special), remains valid, perhaps even more so today, almost sixty years on.



By the time Rotblat received the Nobel Peace Prize (1995), the world had lived a full half century with weapons powerful enough to wipe out human life on earth. We also know, not least through the recent revelations of Daniel Ellsberg (*The Doomsday Machine - Confessions of a Nuclear War Planner*, 2017) who was

centrally involved in the planning of the use of nuclear weapons, how close the world has come on several occasions to unleashing a nuclear holocaust upon itself – a situation which has not changed. And yet, the first resolution, unanimously adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on 24th January 1946, concerned the establishment of a commission to propose the elimination of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction. We are as far away from that goal as ever – how has that come about?

As Rotblat argued, the sheer survival of humanity requires not only the abolition of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction, but of war itself. The traditional notion that if you want peace you must prepare for war (*Si vis pacem, para bellum*), the assertion that only an armed peace is possible, he rightly called a ‘diabolical concept’, which time and again history has shown to be wrong. So, we must change course and not seek peace by preparing for war.



[Those of you who live by the *Housmans Peace Diary* will have seen the quote for this week. It is by Emma Goldman: ‘So few people realise that war preparedness never leads to peace, but that it is, indeed, the road to universal slaughter’. Two days ago, it was the 150th anniversary of the birth (on 27th June 1869 in what is now Kaunas, Lithuania) of the famous American anarchist, anti-militarist and feminist. She migrated to the US in 1885 where she was a leader in the anti-conscription movement during World War I. This resulted in an 18-

month prison sentence, after which the US government deported her to Russia.]

And yet, in virtually all societies no other profession is held in such high esteem, and beyond criticism, than the profession of arms. Today happens to be 'Armed Forces Day' in the UK. No industry is more flourishing and lucrative than that of the 'merchants of death', 'the bloody traffic in arms'. Indeed, traditionally, notions of courage, glory and heroism have been largely associated with the soldier and the bloody field of battle. Those who have opposed war have traditionally been condemned as cowards and traitors - or, more charitably, as (dangerous) dreamers, idealists, utopians.

Yet, history is (or at least should be) not only - and not even mainly - the story of wars and battles, but the story of the advancement of human civilisation through the realisation of dreams of a better world. Those who believe in the possibility, nay, the necessity, of the abolition of war are in good company.

Were those who believed that one day slavery and the slave trade would be abolished, wrong? Their belief and action made it come true.

-The same applies to those who believed that one day women would have the right to vote and would even become leaders of companies and countries.

-The same for those who believed that children should not be forced to go down mines and chimneys, but that, instead society had a duty to provide education and schooling for the young.

-The same for those who believed that one day the profession of hangman would no longer exist, or that witches would no longer be burnt, or that animals would no longer be subject to cruel treatment.

-What happened to duelling which often resulted in the death of one or other of the duellists? More often than not, it resembled two bold men fighting over a comb, but with a deadly outcome.

-Was Rosa Parks wrong when she refused to give up her seat in the bus? She set in motion a whole civil rights movement

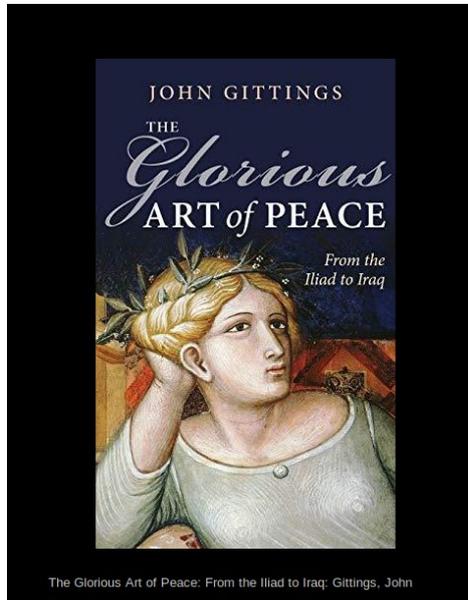
which, in relatively few years, brought a black president to sit in the White House. Imagine!

The list goes on and on, and the work for creating a better society is never-ending. But the message is loud and clear: our ideas about what is right and wrong change over time, as do the practises, professions and institutions which embody them. And invariably it is the lone, brave man or woman, or small group of people, who set this process in motion. Initially, their ideas and efforts are ridiculed and dismissed as utopian by the powers that be before they become the new norm. The American anthropologist Margaret Mead summed it up well in her famous saying, 'Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has'. And the 18th century Anglo-Irish statesman and conservative political theorist Edmund Burke wrote, 'Nobody made a greater mistake than he who did nothing because he could do only a little'.

Why is it that the story of human enlightenment has not yet moved beyond war, what Andrew Carnegie famously referred to as the 'foulest blot upon our civilization'? That was his verdict, even before he had witnessed the catastrophe that was the First World War. It is perhaps no great surprise that, disillusioned, he died shortly after its end, in August 1919 (soon, 100 years ago). No one has ever invested more in efforts to abolish war than the Scottish-American steel tycoon and philanthropist (the Bill Gates of his day).

When talking about dreamers, visionaries, and prophets, what could be more desirable for the vast majority of the world's population (indeed, for everyone, except for the merchants of death) than to be spared the horrors and miseries of war. There is no more beautiful, elevating and encouraging history, than that of the dreamers - who were often also doers - of peace. But this part of history, this way of looking at history from the perspective of peace, anti-war, and nonviolence, is largely unknown. In fact, it has often been repressed. It is also largely unrepresented and invisible - it is not in the history books used in schools, it is not shown in public monuments and statues, it is not shown in museums. I am grateful to the Movement for

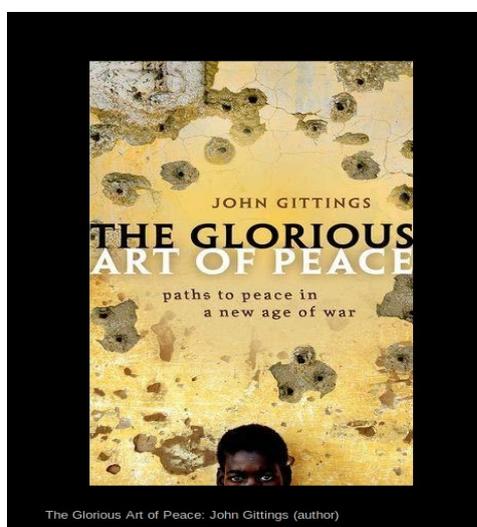
the Abolition of War, and especially Bruce Kent and Valerie Flessati, for having initiated more than ten years ago, as one of the Movement's projects, a series of annual peace history conferences.



They have revealed a wealth of peace initiatives, campaigns, organisations, and heroes of the distant and recent past which deserve to be remembered and honoured, and which provide hope and inspiration for today. I also salute Meredid Hopwood who organised such a wonderful conference in Cardiff last year.

An excellent introduction to this unknown history is *The Glorious Art of Peace: From the Iliad to Iraq* by John Gittings. First published in 2012 by Oxford University Press, a

paperback edition was published last year, with a new sub-title, *Paths to peace in a new age of war*.

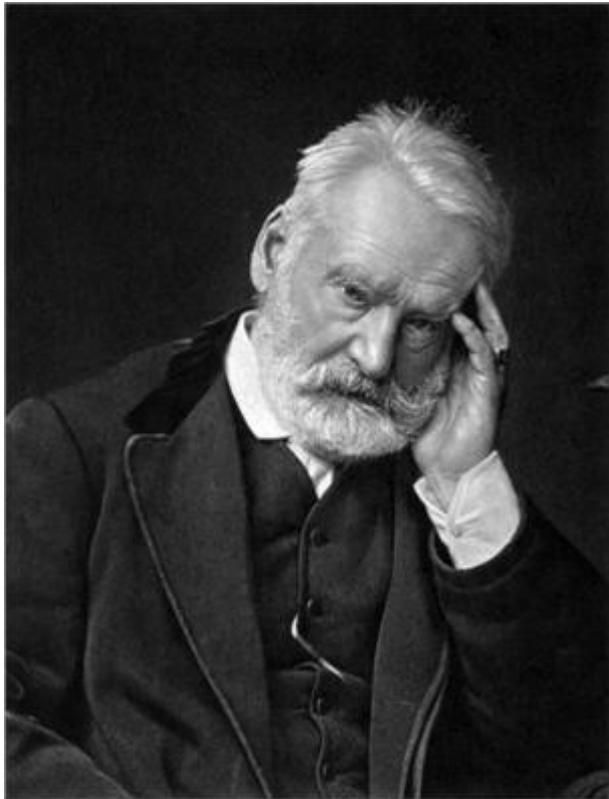


The book has been written to provide the general reader with 'an overview of the way that peace has been perceived (and mis-perceived) from ancient times to today, and to bring to life at least a small portion of the wealth of peace advocacy and imagery in philosophy and political argument, in literature and art, which has accumulated over several millennia'. The author has also succeeded in his aims 'to recapture some of the idealism and the

enthusiasm of the peace thinkers and movements of the past'

and to present a vision which can inspire people today to believe in, and work for, a more peaceful world. We learn about criticisms of war, and praise of peace, in ancient Greece and China, in the writings of Erasmus and Shakespeare, in the writings of the *philosophes* of the Enlightenment and the activities and achievements of the 19th century and pre-World War I peace movement.

That movement was especially rich in ideas, campaigns, achievements, and inspiring leaders. Emerging in the opening decades of the 19th century, partly as a reaction to the devastation of the Napoleonic wars, that movement culminated



in 1849 in the second congress of the organised peace movement that was held in Paris, under the presidency of Victor Hugo. His beautiful speech, which has become known as 'The United States of Europe', was prophetic, and still deserves to be read today. His address was oratory of the highest order which was frequently interrupted by outbursts of applause. Professor Sandi E. Cooper, a leading historian of the 19th century peace movement, has called it its 'best-known document'. Her book is significantly titled

Patriotic Pacifism: Waging

War on War in Europe, 1815-1914 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991, p. 24). What especially still speaks to us today is the 'opportunity costs' of war and preparation for war; the enormous sums that have been wasted 'against an imaginary danger' while 'misery, which was the only real danger, has by those very means been augmented'. 'We have been looking out

for wars when there were none, and we have not seen the revolutions that were coming on' (those revolutions were of course very much in evidence the previous year, 1848, when they affected many countries on the continent).



In 1693, one hundred and fifty years before Victor Hugo's presidential opening address, William Penn, an early leader of the Quakers in England, had already outlined his proposal for a European Parliament as a means to avoid war. It took 300 years, and many wars, before Europe, exhausted by incessant war, decided to follow his wise advice. Last year, we celebrated the 325th anniversary of its publication and commemorated the 300th anniversary of the author's passing (1718). But now this

country has decided to leave that Parliament and the Union of which it is a key institution.

Among his many other achievements, Penn founded Pennsylvania in the new world and was also the architect of its first and main city, Philadelphia, the name (city of brotherly love) itself suggestive of the high purpose of the new, peaceful society that he established and whose main feature was the harmonious relations that existed between the immigrants and colonists from across the Atlantic and the native Americans. This was unheard of, and showed that a new society, based on equality, humanity, justice and nonviolence was possible. The essence of the Quaker philosophy about war and peace was well summed up by A.J. Muste: 'There is no way to peace, peace is the way' (a saying which has also been attributed to Mahatma Gandhi).



Why would one of the most horrific, inhumane, destructive practices of humanity – the practice of war – be an exception to the broad progressive trend that history reveals? [I know that progress is not linear, and that the 20th century was the most destructive on record, with two world wars, the Holocaust, genocides, and totalitarian regimes which caused the deaths of millions]. Why has humanity not abolished war [mass murder, potential omnicide, by any other name] especially when it is threatening the very survival of humankind? The First World War clearly showed that war was no longer a rational instrument for states to resolve their conflicts and this really should have been the war to end all war. Nothing less could have justified the unprecedented slaughter and maiming of millions upon millions. The Second World War heralded the start of the nuclear age which only reinforced the view that war was no longer an option as it put the future of the whole of humanity at risk as never before. This is still the reality which confronts us. Why no school strikes then and since? – Greta, we

need you and all young people in campaigns to end this murderous madness.

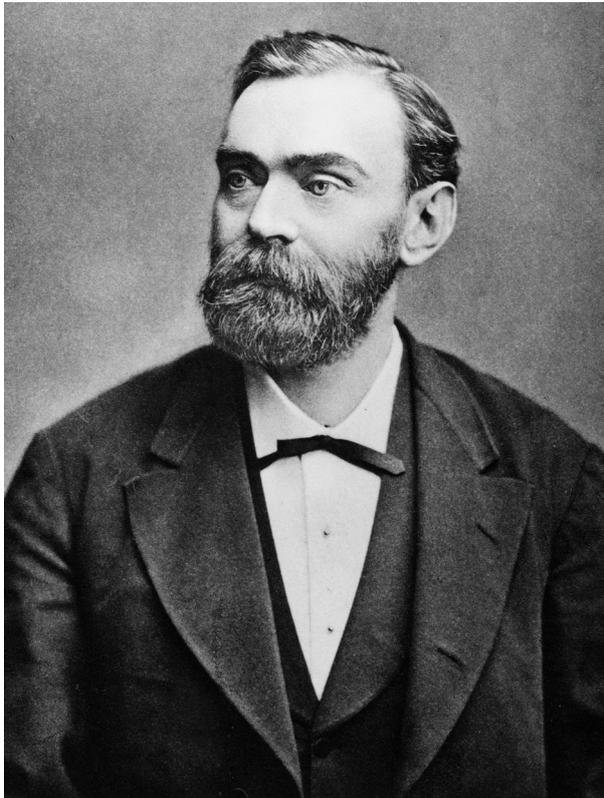
The institutionalisation of violent conflict 'resolution' through armed force (waged by armies, navies and air forces, the latter a contribution from the 20th century) and widespread belief that this guarantees peace and security – the old 'si vis pacem, para bellum' dictum – is manifestly a hindrance, not a help. This was recognised, already well before the nuclear age, by the great thinkers from the past.



In 1795, one hundred years after William Penn, Immanuel Kant published his slim but profound essay entitled *Towards Perpetual Peace*, perhaps the single most important writing on the subject. Next year we can celebrate its 225th anniversary. In the third of his preliminary articles, the German philosopher specified that 'standing armies shall in time be totally abolished' – 'For they incessantly menace other states by their readiness to appear at all times prepared for war; they incite them to

compete with each other in the number of armed men, and there is no limit to this'. Again one hundred years later, Alfred Nobel, the inventor of dynamite and creator of the prizes which carry his name, wrote in his testament (drawn up in Paris on 27th November 1895) that annually a prize should be awarded for 'champions of peace' who had done the most or the best work 'for the abolition or reduction of standing armies' (one of the three kinds of activities specified). Please note that the

demands of Kant and Nobel were made well before armies had nuclear weapons at their disposal; what would they say today?



A few countries, notably Costa Rica, have indeed abolished their armies and have not suffered as a result, rather the opposite. In his acceptance speech for the award of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1987, President Oscar Arias Sanchez of Costa Rica, said, 'we shall never resort to violence, we shall never support military solutions to the problems of Central America. It is for the new generation that we must understand more than ever that peace can only be achieved through its own instruments: dialogue and

understanding; tolerance and forgiveness; freedom and democracy'.

After the Second World War, Germany and Japan adopted (some might be tempted to say: were forced to adopt) peace constitutions. Especially article 9 of the Japanese constitution (promulgated in 1946) deserves to be quoted: 'Aspiring sincerely to an international peace based on justice and order, the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes. - In order to accomplish the aim of the preceding paragraph, land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained. The right of belligerency of the state will not be recognized'. It is a debatable point whether the article renounced also wars of self-defence (and the minimum armed forces they would require). The start of the Korean War in 1950, and the Cold War, and

external (largely US) pressures on Germany and Japan have weakened their peace constitutions.

So what is the essential problem? - It is lack of knowledge and understanding, it is ignorance, prejudice, unexamined assumptions. The answer is obvious: education, specifically, peace education. It is great that we are meeting here in the headquarters of the National Education Union because teachers, from kindergarten to university, are - or should be - playing a crucial role in helping to create a culture of peace and nonviolence. In the programme my affiliation is given as International Network of Museums for Peace. Indeed, I passionately believe in the great potential of peace museums to provide lively, stimulating peace education for a large public, away from the formal schooling system. It is a shame and an outrage that we have literally hundreds of war and military museums (not a few here in London alone), but only one small, struggling peace museum in the provinces. The same is true in all countries, with the sole exception of Japan. Would it not have been wonderful - and natural - if we could have been meeting today in the conference hall of the national peace museum here in the heart of this world city. I remain hopeful that one day soon a peace philanthropist, a modern-day Carnegie or Nobel, will come forward and endow such institutions which are long overdue.

Peter van den Duggan

29/06/19