

## Chapter 8. ANTI-WAR

I had expected to find information about personal Big Jolts against war from Americans who were drafted to fight in Vietnam during the 1960s and early 1970s. Unlike some earlier wars, this was widely viewed as an immoral confrontation in which many thousands of young people did not want to be involved. I hunted through a number of books about this American offensive without finding any such stories, however; often there were no biographies at all of wouldn't-be participants.

I was delighted in 1996 to find the newly-published *Hell No We\_Won't Go: Vietnam Draft Resisters in Canada* by Alan Haig-Brown. It comprised short profiles of individuals who came to Canada rather than fight in Vietnam, but surprisingly, none of the 18 men included mentioned a Big Jolt that had suddenly decided the direction their life would take. They talked instead of the widespread climate of dissent, particularly at some universities such as Kent and Berkeley, that had made them consider emigration to Canada. Theirs was a behavioral change grounded in community dissent, rather than personal epiphany, so their stories are not included here.

Unlike the other categories that we have discussed, the presence of specific societies or groups formed to fight militarism and wars seemed to give many people their Big Jolt. Perhaps they had not realize that such a position was possible in their restricted world where war was seen as more or less natural; when they found that they were not alone in their belief that war was wrong, they were intoxicated. Four European women provide good examples.

**Priscilla Peckover** (b1833) was born into a wealthy Quaker family, the sister of Lord Peckover. She did not marry, but spent her time involved with philanthropy and the temperance movement. When she was in her forties, she found that Quaker women were going to be asked to testify against war. She was thrilled. **She joined the Women's Peace and Arbitration Auxiliary, which "changed her life"** (Liddington, 1989, 28ff). She organized a petition against war which she took door to door in her neighborhood. The widespread interest she encountered emboldened her to form a Women's Local Peace Association over which she presided for the next 50 years and which established local branches around Britain. She was soon asked to address the Peace Society which she did, although she had never before made a public speech. In 1882 she founded her own sixpenny paper, *Peace and Goodwill*, which by 1888 claimed 14,000 members for the associations. One inspirational poem in the paper was:

A little explained, a little endured  
A little forgiven, the quarrel is cured.

**Baroness Bertha von Suttner** was born in Prague in 1843. To earn her living, she became a governess to the family whose son she would marry. For a time she was secretary to Alfred Nobel, who later introduced her and her husband into literary and political salons in Paris. There the conversation often focussed on tension between Germany and France. Liddington (1989, 38) writes "**Amid the chat of peace and war,**

**von Suttner made a discovery that changed her life: the International Arbitration and Peace Association now existed in London.** 'I was electrified,' she recorded in her memoirs. She was so enthusiastic that she decided to write a major new book that would have the impact that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had had on the slavery question. *Die Waffen Nieder!* (translated into English in 1892 as *Lay Down Your Arms* and also into French, Spanish and Swedish) is a melodramatic anti-war novel that tells the tragic epic of Martha von Tilling against the backdrop of bloody Austrian battles. It sold well and proved "sensationally successful propaganda" against war. Nobel congratulated her on her "admirable masterpiece" which helped persuade him to bequeath his Peace Prize. Leo Tolstoy also liked it, comparing it (she would have been pleased) to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Von Suttner helped found the Austrian Peace Society in 1891, and was the first woman to win the Nobel Peace prize in 1905.

**Emma Chatterton** was born in 1913 near Bradford, England. Because her father, a miner, was killed in the Great War when only 24, Chatterton had to leave school at age 14 to work in the Clayton mills (Liddington, 1989, 159ff). She married and had two children, the second born at home in 1937. Her aunt, who had helped deliver her son and who belonged to a committee of the Clayton Women's Co-operative Guild organized to sign up new members, asked her to join this group to pay her back for her help at the birth. The Guild at that time was heavily involved in anti-war initiatives. **When Chatterton attended her first meeting, she was entranced. She wrote, "I fell for it, hook, line and sinker...** for the first time from being married, I was able to think about something outside my home." Membership in the Guild changed her life; she continued in pacifist work, wearing white poppies on Armistice Day and attending peace conferences.

**Vera Leff**, who had Jewish, central European roots, felt, unlike Chatterton, that the Guild's pacifism was increasingly unrealistic with the build-up of weaponry in Germany. She experienced her Big Jolt in London about 1934 at a meeting of a local Communist Party cell of about ten young people. She wrote, "I began to feel exhilarated. At last I was among people to whom I felt akin. I loved them all. **When [my cousin] said, 'Comrades, we will now begin the meeting', I suppose I felt a thrill of a new initiate to a ritual ceremony"** (Liddington, 1989, 164ff). It changed her life. She became secretary of her cell, which discussed how to defeat fascism. When she married a cell member in 1937, their property was vandalized with swastikas painted on their front gate. Later, after the war, she became one of the first people to speak about radiation risk from H-bomb tests. She fought such testing with other members of the Women's Co-operative Guild which she had now joined. Their efforts helped found the immensely important Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament.

When the Vietnam War in the 1960s began to escalate, people in America found it difficult to identify with a place so far away. Who knew anything about the Vietnamese except that they must be saved from communism? Who knew what the United States' initiative would really mean for the people living in Vietnam? But then the fighting

started to be covered in detail by television reporters. Americans began to see on their home televisions what was really going on. **Holly Near** (1990, 88) writes that **"Something happened to the US citizenry when we watched the Vietnamese child running down that road, trying to get one step ahead of the napalm that enflamed her body."** Kim Phuc, a South Vietnamese girl of nine, had been napalmed by an American plane. This 1972 photograph portraying the destruction of innocence and the insanity of modern warfare is credited with turning the tide of public opinion firmly against American participation in the Vietnam War and virtually bringing the war to an end. Kim herself survived, and although she still suffers from her burns, she is now married with a son and lives in Toronto (Cuff, 1997).

Something also happened when we watched a monk immolate himself before the world in hopes that someone would come forward and put out the fire that burned the world...." When they saw such images on television, Near states that some viewers wondered whether it was in a movie rather than the news, some "grabbed their hearts and turned away from the screen so that they might retain the ability to feel the difference" between reality and fiction, some went to the street to cry out and perhaps be heard by others crying out too, while others stayed to watch and soon became inured to such violence.

**Kate Millett** (1994, 138), in her research on torture, describes the rare photograph that does more than just depict a scene or condition, a photograph that "nearly annihilates one with its power, it becomes an epiphany." She recalls that such pictures brought her first to "abjectly personal emotion, powerful, perhaps embarrassing, feeling that overwhelms and overmasters one, devastates. I call this reaction 'shock'...." The power of the image depends on one's culture and sex, as well as one's personal experiences. Photographs of terrible events such as those from Dachau or Bergen-Belsen may not shock because they have been seen many times; photographs that reveal something never before seen or imagined are more powerful.

Millett (b 1934) decided to write her 1994 book *The Politics of Cruelty* because of a photograph she saw on the cover of a book in a bookstore window of a boy crucified in Cambodia-- one of the personally "shocking" photographs described above (Millett, 1994, 145). Millett writes that this pivotal photo was "seen by chance as I was walking along a street in Paris...intent upon nothing more than a Pernod and a good lunch...." After lunch she was drawn back to look at the book. She tried to analyze why the photograph had so shocked her-- not that it was a crucifixion, because this image was so omnipresent in Christianity that it had little power to disturb, but that it was a modern crucifixion, as she could tell from the boy's shorts and the uniforms of the soldiers. She writes that **it was "A book in a window that changed my life in an instant."**

Millett's *Politics of Cruelty* aims at trying to end world-wide torture and cruelty. She writes "In asking the reader to accompany me over this ground, I have the same motive that first drove me: if we know these things, there is some hope that they can be changed; if we care, there is the possibility of action against this evil." She ends her preface, "The many forms of state terrorism are now a global situation, there for this generation and the next to face, and possibly, with fortitude and determination, to

dismantle and abolish."

**Donald Hall** (b 1929) was turned against cruelty and war not by one image, but by a movie (Hall, 1991, 18). When he was eight, like the other boys his age, he bought small cards along with chewing gum depicting atrocities of war. He thrived in the bellicose air of 1937 fostered by the rise of Hitler, the Spanish Civil War, and the Japanese invasion of China. He loved airplanes and watching parades of soldiers.

Hall's attitude to war changed after he saw the film *The Last Train from Madrid*. He writes, "**My horror [of war], I think, started with this film.** Certain connections of war retain the power to make me burst into tears, especially the random slaughter of civilians. It is hard to remember the outrage people felt over Guernica-- after London, Dresden, and Hiroshima-- but Picasso's painting registers the shock and incredulity. I remember, in late adolescence after the war, trying to read an essay that told how French mothers had struggled, dreading air raids in 1939, to fix their gas masks onto the tiny heads of their babies. I could never finish the sentence." The plot of the movie indicates that all those who leave on the last train will survive, while those who are left behind will die at the hands of an unnamed army. During the last day, the film depicts the story of those who manage to get onto the train and of those who try but are prevented, and therefore die.

When Hall saw this film again in 1990, he was impressed not with its brilliance, but with its banality. He called it "bad art" with the plot improbable, the motivation incredible, and the writing clumsy and full of clichés. What made it terrifying was the randomness of war horror, the haphazardness of who would live and who would die.

**Eva Figes** (b c1930) was jolted not by images of violence from war, but by being exposed to the real thing. She belonged to a Jewish family living in Germany which had emigrated to England and safety before the Second World War (Figes, 1978, 64). She and her brother were excited rather than horrified when they saw daylight air raids over London where they lived. The family then moved a second time to Cirencester to escape from the air raids.

One day Figes and her brother had been sent early to bed when they heard the sound of guns and then of a plane shot down in a nearby park. She writes "We let out a cheer for our side, duly elated, though sorry to be cooped up in bed at such a moment." When she visited the park the next day and stared at the crumpled heap of metal, she was no longer jubilant: "I was overcome by a feeling of appalled horror, because the main body of the plane, where the airmen had been sitting, was smashed and twisted. For the first time I began to apprehend the war, not as a kind of football match between Them and Us, but as a game which involved death. **It came home to me that Germans, too, were flesh and blood, and I hardly dared to think how mutilated the airmen inside the plane had been** if the impact with earth had done so much damage to solid machinery." This incident, Figes writes, "was a turning point... in my attitude to the war, and made a deep and lasting impression on me." War was no longer for her only an exciting event, but a terrible, destructive one.

**Joan Hinton** (b1921) was jolted violently against war and its weapons following the dropping of two atomic bombs on Japan (Wong, 1996, 195-9). To most people, the atomic bomb was a symbol of horror, but to Hinton it was much more than that. She had held one in her hands. She was an atomic physicist who had worked with Enrico Fermi to build the atomic bombs in Los Alamos, New Mexico. As such, her future was bright as an American scientist. When the bombs were dropped in 1945 killing 150,000 people, however, she realized with horror what she had helped produce. **She had thought that scientists might be able to control the use of the bomb, but now she knew that was not so. This realization changed her life.**

Although Hinton at this time knew she was against war, she did not know what she was for. She gave up physics and decided to visit China following the revolution in 1949, hoping to find there the best way for a human society to function. In China she married Sid Engst (1919-2003) who had arrived there in 1946 with a United Nations group. While investigating a famine in Hunan province, **"The shock of seeing destitute women selling their dull-eyed children for a sack of rice as fat officials drove by in fancy cars converted Sid overnight to communism"** (Wong, 1996, 196).

The couple stayed in China for the rest of their lives, raising their three children to speak only Chinese; (when their daughter Karen flew to America in 1980, a blue-eyed blond with an American passport, the customs could barely credit that she spoke only Chinese rather than English). They worked at jobs given to them by the government, pleased to be able to support this new non-capitalist country; they were among the few westerners who supported even the extreme Maoist Cultural Revolution.

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