

Aletta Jacobs:

Taking a Stand in Woman Suffrage and Pacifism

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*“With mourning hearts we stand united here... We grieve for many brave young men who have lost their lives on the battlefield before attaining their full manhood; we mourn with the poor mothers bereft of their sons; with the thousands of young widows and fatherless children, and we feel that we can no longer endure in this twentieth century of civilization that government should tolerate brute force as the only solution of international disputes.”*¹

April 28th, 1915, the Hague. The International Congress of Women convenes with more than 1,200 women from 12 countries, all dedicated to stopping WWI, which had torn apart their lives and their communities. This influential meeting, often referred to as the Women’s Peace Congress, was led by the Dutch Association for Woman Suffrage under Aletta Jacobs. Jacobs led a life filled with firsts: she was the first female university student in the Netherlands, the first female doctor, and the operator of one of the first birth control clinics. Yet one of the most revolutionary aspects of her life was the way she used journalism and travel to take a stand for women’s rights by broadcasting her ideas to a wider audience -- impacting the lives and rights of women around the world.

Over the course of the next three days, the Women’s Peace Congress worked out a non-violent form of conflict resolution, stating that a process of continuous mediation should be implemented, without armistice, until peace could be restored. This policy was set forward in a set of resolutions on May 1, 1915. Furthermore, the congress marked the foundation of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, which still exists today. Jacobs described

¹ A&E Television Networks, "International Congress of Women Opens at The Hague," History, accessed December 8, 2016, <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/international-congress-of-women-opens-at-the-hague>.

herself as “an exception to the well-known Dutch maxim that ‘pioneers come to nothing’”². Her accomplishments in woman suffrage and pacifism prove that she couldn’t have been more accurate.

Jacobs’ realization of the governmental structure that prevented her from so many opportunities began at the age of 14, when her father introduced her to John Stuart Mill’s *The Subjection of Women*. According to Jacobs, the book’s message was that woman is the slave of man; he makes the laws, she obeys them. Though this may seem horrifying in 21st-century Western civilization, the book simply stated what most powerful figures in 19th-century Europe thought. In the Netherlands, no woman could vote. There were no women politicians or lawyers -- women had no power in the government. “I realized that men not only made laws,” Jacobs wrote, “They also had the power to reserve every privilege for themselves and to perpetuate women’s subordinate role. I knew that this had to change, but as yet I had no idea how.”³

After Jacobs received letters of permission from minister J.R. Thorbecke, she began her studies in 1871 at the University of Groningen, where she and her sister Charlotte were the first female students. Jacobs traveled to London to pursue further clinical training, but met British birth-control advocates and suffrage leaders during her time abroad, inspiring her to stand up for women’s right to vote. In 1882, Jacobs found a pamphlet written by former prime minister of the Netherlands, Jan Heemskerk. In this pamphlet, Heemskerk argued that the Dutch constitution did not specifically *deny* women the right to vote -- there is no mention of woman suffrage

² Aletta H. Jacobs, Harriet Feinberg, and Harriet Pass Freidenreich, *Memories: My Life as an International Leader in Health, Suffrage, and Peace* (New York: Feminist Press, 1996), Preface.

³ Jacobs, Feinberg, and Freidenreich, *Memories: My Life*, p. 53.

anywhere, but there is no mention against it either. If nothing was stopping women from voting, Jacobs reasoned, why didn't they exercise their rights? On November 30, 1882, Jacobs contacted Samuel van Houten, a member of the Dutch parliament. He advised her to take her case to the mayor of Amsterdam if she could confirm she was not granted the right to vote. So, Jacobs registered to vote, waited for the voter registration list to be published, and saw her name had been omitted from the list. She sent a letter to the mayor of Amsterdam requesting her inclusion on the voter list, as she legally fulfilled the necessary conditions to vote.

A week later, Jacobs received a letter stating that “[her] request had been refused... [the Dutch Constitution] does not extend suffrage to women, [as] women [do not] enjoy full citizenship and civil rights, [and] are excluded from guardianship.”⁴ Though this response lacked any legal basis, not one council lawyer opposed it. Jacobs’ rejection letter was so late she barely had time to enter an appeal at the district of Amsterdam’s court before the legally stipulated period had expired. The court’s verdict, announced on April 13, 1883, was that “it could never have been the intention of the Dutch legislature to allow woman suffrage.”⁵ Persistent, Jacobs contacted the Supreme Court. Her appeal against the district court was rejected. The Supreme Court stated that women were denied the right to vote because they lacked full citizenship or civil rights. This was caused by their inability to vote. Furthermore, whenever “Dutch citizens and residents” are mentioned in the constitution, they should be understood as men, because any other interpretation would have already been mentioned. Though Jacobs did not succeed, her letters to the government were noticed by many Dutch newspapers. The Dutch constitution was

⁴ Jacobs, Feinberg, and Freidenreich, *Memories: My Life*, p. 54.

⁵ Jacobs, Feinberg, and Freidenreich, *Memories: My Life*, p. 55.

reformed to include only male enfranchisement, but Jacobs' publicity brought her in contact with other women fighting for their right to vote. Jacobs' correspondence with other women inspired her to stand up against the law through travel -- this time using the press and communication to her advantage.

In 1912, Jacobs was asked to join an expedition to European countries with a constitutional government and urge officials to extend suffrage to women. Jacobs accepted and became the official representative of the Netherlands. The expedition's organization became known as the International Woman Suffrage Alliance. The Netherlands was one of six founding members. During its first meeting it was decided that two members would be sent to Austria-Hungary to advocate woman suffrage -- Carrie Chapman Catt, who was the president of the association, and Jacobs. Once Jacobs and Catt arrived, though, the political turmoil in Austria-Hungary hindered them. "Our welcoming committee of Austro-Germans immediately launched into unflattering descriptions of their Czech counterparts and urged us to speak only German. No sooner had they left than a group of Czech woman arrived... suggesting we should take absolutely no notice of the opposing camp."⁶

Austrian officials were uninterested in Jacobs' and Catt's ideas; the Austrian premier told Jacobs that "the suffrage movement was a novelty that had never caught on."⁷ In 1906, universal male enfranchisement had gained the Austrian Congress' support. It was illegal for Austrian women to politically organize themselves or attend political meetings. However, Jacobs refused

⁶ Jacobs, Feinberg, and Freidenreich, *Memories: My Life*, p. 60.

⁷ Jacobs, Feinberg, and Freidenreich, *Memories: My Life*, p. 61.

to give up and continued her tour, heading to Budapest. Instead of holding speeches, Jacobs gave press interviews every day, discussing women's rights and local issues. Not everyone could travel to Jacobs' and Catt's speeches, but newspapers, which were sold everywhere, "ran a great many articles"⁸ about them. In 1911, following the International Woman Suffrage Alliance's annual meeting, Jacobs and Catt would combine journalism, travel, and suffrage once again, but on a much larger scale: a world tour.

Jacobs and Catt planned to visit less developed countries and educate the women and government officials there about woman suffrage to connect activists and increase their influence. They traveled to South Africa, the Philippines, China, and Japan, as well as the Middle East. Jacobs returned through Russia and Catt through Hawaii. Throughout her journey, Jacobs wrote reports on each country she visited: the state of their suffrage movement, women's rights, and their daily lives. She published these letters, called *Reisbrieven*, in the daily Dutch newspaper *De Telegraaf*.

Jacobs and Catt began their world tour in Cape Town. There, they lectured on woman suffrage, giving at least two speeches every day. After two weeks, Jacobs traveled to Port Elizabeth to meet with Olive Schreiner, a South African feminist writer with whom Jacobs had corresponded. She and Schreiner discussed the best approach to woman suffrage in South Africa. Jacobs and Catt reunited and stayed at the house of Martinus Theunis Steyn, the last president of the Orange Free State. They traveled through Zimbabwe, Victoria Falls, and the Zambezi.

⁸ Jacobs, Feinberg, and Freidenreich, *Memories: My Life*, p. 65.

“There was hardly a day during our three months in South Africa when we did not speak at some meeting on female enfranchisement.”⁹ During their last meeting, held in Durban, Catt set up the South African Alliance for Woman Suffrage.

Next, Jacobs and Catt travelled along the east coast of Africa by boat, stopping at “each port between a few hours and a day or two”¹⁰ to advocate their cause. They ended in Port Said, then traveled to Jerusalem and stayed there for ten days. Afterwards, Jacobs and Catt visited Syria and Palestine, and returned through Beirut to Port Said. Throughout her journey, Jacobs was amazed at the “pre-modernized state”¹¹ of these countries. After two months, Jacobs and Catt traveled to Alexandria and Cairo by train. Though their lectures were successful, they “had far more opportunity to learn about the lives of [local] women than to exert any influence of [their] own.”¹² In January 1912, Jacobs and Catt travelled to Ceylon (modern-day Sri Lanka). They spent several weeks there, during which Jacobs sent letters to the women they had met in South Africa, Jerusalem, Syria, and Palestine. Next, they travelled to the Philippines and Java, where they talked with governors about giving local women the right to vote. Lastly, Jacobs and Catt visited China and Japan. Though they had been advised not to go beyond the coast of China due to the second Chinese revolution, they toured the mainland as well. Upon visiting Chinese suffragettes, Jacobs was shocked: they “lacked any form of organization or unity of purpose”¹³ and used the “militant methods”¹⁴ of the early English suffragettes to advocate their cause.

⁹ Bosch, Mineke. "COLONIAL DIMENSIONS OF DUTCH WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE: Aletta Jacobs's Travel Letters from Africa and Asia, 1911-1912." *Journal of Women's History*.

¹⁰ Jacobs, Feinberg, and Freidenreich, *Memories: My Life*, p. 156.

¹¹ Jacobs, Feinberg, and Freidenreich, *Memories: My Life*, p. 157.

¹² Bosch, Mineke. "COLONIAL DIMENSIONS OF DUTCH WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE: Aletta Jacobs's Travel Letters from Africa and Asia, 1911-1912." *Journal of Women's History*.

¹³ Jacobs, Feinberg, and Freidenreich, *Memories: My Life*, p. 161.

¹⁴ Jacobs, Feinberg, and Freidenreich, *Memories: My Life*, p. 161.

Jacobs and Catt held lectures about the woman suffrage movement around the world, introducing Chinese suffragettes to different methods of activism. “[Though] both of us opposed the [Chinese] suffragettes’ methods, this trip... demonstrated that... women all over the world [were] aware of their own disadvantaged positions and of the need for organized campaigns.”¹⁵ After a few weeks, Jacobs and Catt traveled to Yokohama, Japan. The women they met there were “very different”¹⁶ from those in China; they were less militant, organized, and less “prepared to fight for their rights in the way that their Chinese sisters were.”¹⁷ After their visit to Japan, Catt traveled to Honolulu, while Jacobs returned to the Netherlands by train. They had met thousands of women and united them through correspondence. Their use of letters, especially Jacobs’ *Reisbrieven*, gave women across the globe a chance to learn and organize themselves.

Jacobs believed women’s rights and pacifism were inherently connected, because “the philosophy of peace would gain government recognition when women’s opinions were also being expressed in parliaments everywhere.”¹⁸ In her opinion, women had to be emancipated before they could contribute to the peace campaign. Many pacifists disagreed with her views -- Austrian peace activist Bertha von Suttner once told Jacobs that “you can work either for women’s emancipation or for world peace, but not both at the same time. Each issue demands total commitment.”¹⁹ Jacobs did not alter her beliefs, but did little work for pacifism in the next

¹⁵ Bosch, Mineke. "COLONIAL DIMENSIONS OF DUTCH WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE: Aletta Jacobs's Travel Letters from Africa and Asia, 1911-1912." *Journal of Women's History*.

¹⁶ Jacobs, Feinberg, and Freidenreich, *Memories: My Life*, p. 162.

¹⁷ Jacobs, Feinberg, and Freidenreich, *Memories: My Life*, p. 162.

¹⁸ Jacobs, Feinberg, and Freidenreich, *Memories: My Life*, p. 75.

¹⁹ Jacobs, Feinberg, and Freidenreich, *Memories: My Life*, p. 76.

ten years. Even as the threat of a world war grew, Jacobs believed major powers like Germany would not declare war if they could not rely on the support of their citizens.

Sadly, she was proven wrong. On August 1, 1914, just after the beginning of WWI, Jacobs took a friend to a train station in Vlissingen, the Netherlands. The station was “bustling with men”²⁰ who were drafted into the army to fight. Jacobs talked to the soldiers’ wives, and discovered that the state compensation was not enough to survive. Shocked, Jacobs called for an emergency meeting of the Association for Woman Suffrage. The Association decided to use the press to stand up for these women. They sent letters to the executive committees of the Association informing them about the issue. Then, they printed and distributed leaflets directed at women facing financial difficulties because the head of the family was drafted. These women could contact the Association for advice and money. They printed advertisements in daily newspapers, asking for donations to help provide support. However, Jacobs did not fully support standing up for women through philanthropic work. Jacobs believed that helping relieve the consequences of war for women contributed to its continuation. “If women had *not* agreed to take over wherever needed... to perform the work of men, then the governments would have been forced to abandon [their role in war].”²¹

Jacobs wanted to organize a meeting of the International Woman Suffrage Alliance to discuss this idea, but her plan was not well received: Russian and French associations refused to send any delegates, and other countries couldn’t obtain visas or find representatives. Jacobs

²⁰ Jacobs, Feinberg, and Freidenreich, *Memories: My Life*, p. 80.

²¹ Jacobs, Feinberg, and Freidenreich, *Memories: My Life*, p. 82.

wrote to suffragettes Dr. Mia Boissevain and Rosa Manus, who invited women outside the Alliance from Belgium, Germany, and England. The International Congress of Women convened on April 28, 1915, with “1,136 delegates from 12 nations”²². The Congress had both women’s rights and pacifism as its core objectives. To combine them, a new organization was established: the International Committee of Women for Permanent Peace.

Their next plan was to meet with European leaders to advocate peace. The Congress met with Dutch, English, German, Viennese, Swiss, Belgian, Italian and French government officials, as well as the Pope. Following the advice of English foreign secretary Sir Edward Grey, Jacobs travelled to the United States to meet with President Woodrow Wilson. Wilson, however, refused to accept any more peace talk visits. Jacobs visited Secretary of State Robert Lansing and Colonel Edward House instead. Lansing and House were impressed by Jacobs and the Congress, and continued to keep in touch with them. Though her efforts to stop WWI were unsuccessful, they did not go unnoticed. “[The] peace talks might not have been successful, but they [started] a trend. Around the world, during armed conflicts, women would take the initiative to protest war.”²³

Jacobs described herself as “an international leader in health, suffrage and peace”.²⁴ This couldn’t be more true. Jacobs founded associations that connected and unified women around the world in their fight for woman suffrage. Her travels educated people about life in different

²² Siegel, Mona L. "International Congress of Women." *World History: The Modern Era*, ABC-CLIO, 2017, accessed 4 Feb. 2017, worldhistory.abc-clio.com.

²³ Rolf Ter Sluis, Drs., e-mail interview by the author, January 1, 2017.

²⁴ Jacobs, Feinberg, and Freidenreich, *Memories: My Life*, title page.

countries, and her usage of letters and the press to advocate and broadcast her ideas to a wider audience influenced the methods of suffragettes everywhere. Jacobs showed the power of words while taking a stand in two movements that still affect us today. Drs. Ter Sluis said that “[Jacobs] didn’t just ask for attention [towards pacifism and woman suffrage]. She acted as well. She marched on the streets and wrote articles or pamphlets. She had an international role during her peace attempts [in the] Great War. She achieved a lot in [The Netherlands], and she was part of international movements around the world.”²⁵

Primary Sources

Bosch, Mineke. "COLONIAL DIMENSIONS OF DUTCH WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE: Aletta

Jacobs's Travel Letters from Africa and Asia, 1911-1912." *Journal of Women's History*.

Accessed 4 Dec. 2016.

This document contains a summary of the *Reisbrieven* Aletta Jacobs wrote during her world tour.

They helped me immensely in increasing my understanding of what the world tour was like, how Jacobs used the press to increase understanding of woman suffrage in other countries, and Jacobs’ opinion of her trip.

Jacobs, Aletta H., et al. *Memories: My Life as an International Leader in Health, Suffrage, and Peace*. New York, Feminist Press, 1996.

This book, written by Jacobs, contains a complete summary of Jacobs’ life, her medical work, her campaign for woman suffrage, and her travels. This source was extremely helpful and provided me with countless quotes by Jacobs that would have been hard to find

²⁵ Ter Sluis, e-mail interview by the author.

elsewhere. It also gave me a greater comprehension of Jacobs' opinion of her own work and life.

Ter Sluis, Rolf, Drs. E-mail interview. 1 Jan. 2017.

I interviewed Drs. Rolf Ter Sluis, an expert on Jacobs who works at Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, the university Jacobs attended. Because Jacobs was the first woman in the Netherlands to attend a university, the Rijksuniversiteit Groningen has much information on her life and the impact she had on others. Ter Sluis' quotes provided me with a professional opinion of how Jacobs impacted our world.

Secondary Sources

"Aletta Jacobs." *Encyclopedia of World Biography*, vol. 26, Gale, 2006. *U.S. History in Context*. Accessed 17 Nov. 2016.

I found this summary of Aletta Jacobs' life, originally published in *Encyclopedia of World Biography*, on Gale's U.S. History in Context Database. The Gale Databases combine biographies written by expert historians with primary sources, news articles, and videos. This source provides a summary of Jacobs' life, including her early life and medical career.

"Aletta Jacobs." *Notable Women Scientists*, Gale, 2000. *U.S. History in Context*. Accessed 17 Nov. 2016.

This piece, which I found on the Gale Database U.S History in Context, helped me find out more about the influence of Jacobs' activism for woman suffrage.

"Aletta Jacobs." *Almanac of Famous People*, Gale, 2011. *Biography in Context*. Accessed 17 Nov. 2016.

I found this summary of Jacobs' life on the Gale Database Biography in Context. It had much information of Jacobs' early life and her usage of travel to advocate woman suffrage.

"Aletta Jacobs." *Encyclopedia of World Biography*, vol. 26, Gale, 2006. *Research in Context*. Accessed 17 Nov. 2016.

This source, which I found on the Gale Database Research in Context, provided me with details on Jacobs' campaign for woman suffrage outside the Netherlands.

Alihusain, C. "Dr. Aletta Jacobs: Working for World Peace." *Peace Palace Library*, 24 Apr. 2015. Accessed 14 Dec. 2016.

I found this piece at the Peace Palace Library, the library of an international law administrative building in The Hague, the Netherlands, which houses the International Court of Justice, the Permanent Court of Arbitration, and the Hague Academy of International Law. The Peace Palace Library has many detailed pieces written by expert historians on Jacobs' involvement with pacifism.

Alihusein, C. "Interview Professor Mineke Bosch on Dr. Aletta Jacobs." *Peace Palace Library*, 3 Apr. 2015. Accessed 8 Dec. 2016.

This is an interview with Mineke Bosch, an expert on Aletta Jacobs at the Rijksuniversiteit Groningen. I contacted Bosch multiple times, and she stated that many of her answers to my questions were stated in this interview, which I found at the Peace Palace Library. This interview provided me with an expert's opinion on Jacobs' impact on pacifism.

"Carrie Clinton Lane Chapman Catt." *Dictionary of American Biography*, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1974. *Biography in Context*. Accessed 4 Dec. 2016.

This source provided me with an overview of the life of Carrie Chapman Catt, an American suffragette with which Jacobs travelled to Austria-Hungary and Budapest, and with whom she planned and executed her world tour

Feinberg, Harriet. "Aletta Henriette Jacobs." *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*. 1 March 2009. Jewish Women's Archive. Accessed 4 Dec. 2016.

This summary of Jacobs' medical life and involvements with woman suffrage, which I found on the Jewish Women's Archive, provided me with a basic outline of Jacobs' life and accomplishments which I could model the outline of my paper on. It also included a detailed bibliography that provided me with many other sources about Jacobs' life.

"Gender." *Europe Since 1914: Encyclopedia of the Age of War and Reconstruction*, edited by John Merriman and Jay Winter, vol. 3, Charles Scribner's Sons, 2006, pp. 1182-1190. *World History in Context*. Accessed 3 Dec. 2016.

This piece provided me with a full description of the legal rights women had in many European countries in the 1900's.

Golderman, Gail, and Bruce Connolly. "The Gerritsen Collection of Aletta H. Jacobs." *Library Journal*, 1 Jan. 2013, p. 110+. *Student Resources in Context*. Accessed 4 Dec. 2016.

I found this summary of Jacobs' campaign for woman suffrage in the Netherlands on the Gale Database Student Resources in Context.

Hattingh, Alistair. "Aletta Jacobs." *World History: The Modern Era*, ABC-CLIO, 2017. Accessed 4 Feb. 2017.

I often use the ABC-CLIO database for research, as its summaries go to great detail, yet remain very readable and understandable. The pieces are written by expert historians and are very trustworthy. This piece on Aletta Jacobs was especially helpful in finding quotes and detailed explanations of her pacifist work.

Heroines: Remarkable and Inspiring Women ; an Illustrated Anthology of Essays by Women Writers. New York, Crescent Books, 1995.

This book, which I found at my school library, provided me with a summary of Jacobs' life and focused on her correspondence with other suffragettes.

"International Congress of Women Opens at The Hague." *History*, A&E Television Networks. Accessed 8 Dec. 2016.

This piece, which I found on the *History* website, describes the International Congress of Women, and the events that led up to it, in full detail.

McDaid, Jennifer Davis. "Olive Schreiner: Overview." *DISCovering Authors*, Gale, 2003. *Research in Context*. Accessed 4 Feb. 2017.

This source provided me with an overview of the life and influence of Olive Schreiner, a South African feminist writer whom Jacobs met during her world tour.

"Pacifism." *Europe Since 1914: Encyclopedia of the Age of War and Reconstruction*, edited by John Merriman and Jay Winter, vol. 4, Charles Scribner's Sons, 2006, pp. 1942-1951. *World History in Context*. Accessed 3 Dec. 2016.

Jacobs' work to advocate pacifism and stop WWI is an important part of her legacy. This source was helpful in providing me with a detailed overview of pacifism in Europe in the 1900's, an enriched me with a better understanding of the issues WWI created in Europe.

Saelemaekers, Monika. "Jacobs, Aletta Henriëtte." *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, edited by Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, 2nd ed., vol. 11, Macmillan Reference USA, 2007, p. 45. *U.S. History in Context*. Accessed 17 Nov. 2016.

This source, which I found in the Gale Database U.S. History in Context, gave me a better comprehension of Jacobs' influence on American society, specifically through President Wilson and Carrie Chapman Catt.

Siegel, Mona L. "International Congress of Women." *World History: The Modern Era*, ABC-CLIO, 2017, worldhistory.abc-clio.com. Accessed 4 Feb. 2017.

I found this source on the ABC-CLIO Database. It contained a detailed description of the International Congress of Women held by Jacobs and its influence on WWI, woman suffrage, and the modern world.

Solomon, Isidor, et al. "Politics." *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, edited by Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, 2nd ed., vol. 16, Macmillan Reference USA, 2007, pp. 338-354. *U.S. History in Context*. Accessed 17 Nov. 2016.

This source provided me with a detailed description of the legal rights and political leaders of many of the countries Jacobs visited during her world tour.

"Steyn, Martinus Theunis." *The Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia*TM, Columbia University Press, 2017. *Research in Context*. Accessed 4 Feb. 2017.

This source gave me information about the life and accomplishments of Martinus Theunis Steyn, the last president of the Orange Free State, whom Jacobs and Catt stayed with during their visit to South Africa.