

WAR against WAR!

Bruce Kent

Bruce Kent was General Secretary of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and President of the International Peace Bureau. Currently, he is Vice President of the Movement for the Abolition of War. He wrote this introduction to a new, facsimile edition of War against War!, published by Spokesman on 1 May 2014, precisely 90 years after Ernst Friedrich published his original in Berlin. Photo captions, such as the one below, are in four languages.

War against War! is one of the most shocking books I have ever seen. As much a series of photographs as a book, it first appeared in 1924, the work of Ernst Friedrich, an anarchist, socialist, internationalist and peace worker.

Friedrich's aim was to make people understand what war actually means, and the horrors it inflicts on people and, indeed, on animals. Gruesome are the photos of maimed men with their faces blown half away. How did those wretched war victims get through the rest of their lives? Hidden in some home? We do not even know their nationalities: just human beings who went through the horrors of a war which should never have been fought.

Ernst Friedrich had avoided military service in the First World War, partly by being locked up because his radical ideas were thought to be evidence of insanity. Later, after playing an active part in post-war German politics, he began a peace museum in Berlin – which the Nazis ransacked, in 1933, and eventually turned into a torture chamber. Friedrich's peace views had made him notorious and, with the Hitler era, he fled to Belgium and then to France where, in both places, he began peace centres. His grandson, Tommy Spree, still runs the restored *Anti-Kriegs-Museum* in Berlin, and it is through his kindness that this new edition of his grandfather's heartfelt book appears.

There have been many editions of *War against War!* Each has captions to the pictures in four languages. The three permanent ones are English, German and French. In this edition the fourth language is Dutch, but there have been editions with

◀ *The 'health resort' of proletarian. Almost the whole face blown away.*

Russian or Chinese instead. The captions are sometimes even understated – for instance, on the photos of a military graveyard in France where, post war, all the German graves have been vandalised but the French ones honoured and covered in flowers. Hatred lives on long after war.

Astonishing, too, is the picture of the Russian military cemetery where each grave has its own cross. Private soldiers get very small ones. Officers very much higher ones. In those days, military rank evidently counted even in the next world. German dead, French dead, Russian dead, British dead – they are all here – half naked, limbs missing, lying in ditches, rotting together. ‘The pride of the family’ says one caption of a smart young soldier showing off his rifle. There he is on the next page, in half his uniform, dead and mutilated, being dragged away.

But this is not just a picture book. It begins and ends with a passionate plea to understand the causes of war and to take steps to prevent it, and is addressed ‘To Human Beings in all lands!’ Unite and work for world peace is Friedrich’s plea, made especially to the mothers of the world.

Why has the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation decided to bring out this new edition? Surely, it is because we are now being drenched with First World War centenary propaganda. ‘It had to be fought.’ ‘The only way.’ ‘Poor little Belgium’ (which had, by 1914, killed millions in the Congo). No mention of Tsar Nicholas’s passionate appeal for an end to the arms race. No mention of the women from many countries, who met in 1915 in The Hague, demanding a negotiated end to the slaughter. No mention of Pope Benedict XV’s repeated calls for an end to it all.

Children are now, a hundred years later, heading for Flanders Fields at some public expense. Schools are busy promoting World War One enterprises. Military chaplains are on the road trying to show local communities how ‘Faith’ brings us all together at times of crisis. Baroness Warsi goes so far as to bring the Empire into play. Says she:

‘Christians, Jews, Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus lying side by side, just as these men had fought side by side – proving that the fight for freedom truly transcended the boundaries of nationality and faith.’ (*British Future* 2013)

Yet that colonial world was not one of liberty and democracy.

Was Friedrich’s call for an end to war a waste of wind? Not at all; the United Nations Charter was eventually signed in 1945. According to the preamble to that Charter, the first aim of this new international institution was to do just what he wanted:

‘To save succeeding generations from the scourge of war.’

We have made at least a little progress. With the Charter, countries gave up

their individual right to decide on war. The United Nations is not a pacifist body and the right to immediate self-defence was left in place.

The major countries in western Europe will not go to war with each other again. There are some limitations on the sale of arms, without which most of the civil wars of today would be impossible. We do have, however defective it may yet be, an International Criminal Court. The UN Security Council has no right to authorise military action unless all non-violent ways of settling disputes have been exhausted. Conscientious objection is now a legally recognised human right, though this is not a right granted in many countries. The 16,000 plus UK conscientious objectors of the First World War did not suffer in vain.

But so many of the attitudes which Friedrich denounced are still there. Parts of the press can and do whip up nationalist fervour and persuade people to believe in grossly exaggerated threats. Bogus history continues to dominate. The arms sellers and 'defence' firms still have a baneful effect on public policy. Profit still counts, wherever it comes from. The weapons of today (e.g. landmines, depleted uranium shells) continue to kill long after wars are over.

With the energy and vision of Ernst Friedrich, we can move far further towards ending war than we have yet managed. To spend \$1.7 trillion a year on war and weapons, as we do today, when billions live in abject poverty, is a scandal. I hope so much that this timely edition of *War against War!* will make many more people determined to bring that scandal to an end.

*Available from bookshops and online, price £9.99
(www.spokesmanbooks.com).*