

*Review Essay*

## **Women and Peace**

**Terry Anderson**

PEACE AS A WOMEN'S ISSUE: A History of the U.S. Movement for World Peace and Women's Rights. By Harriet Hyman Alonso. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press. 1993.

WOMEN STRIKE FOR PEACE: Traditional Motherhood and Radical Politics in the 1960s. By Amy Swerdlow. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1993.

ONE WORLD OR NONE: A History of the World Nuclear Disarmament Movement Through 1953. By Lawrence S. Wittner. Volume one of THE STRUGGLE AGAINST THE BOMB. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press. 1993.

"In total," writes Harriet Hyman Alonso, "what I have done here is to use my general definition of *feminism* to study women's peace organizations, framing the book within a continuum from 1820 to the 1990s" (8). That is a big order, and that is where the first chapter, "Coming To Terms," should have ended. Unfortunately, it does not, and in the next pages the author introduces her own political activities and addresses issues that should have been developed throughout the book and examined in the conclusion. Also, the views of the women of the past, the topic of this book, are not clearly distinguishable from the present ideas of the

author. In a few sentences Alonso merges her historical subjects with “the single-headed households of today,” while employing contemporary language—date rape, ecofeminism—and the “psychological, economic, and political oppression” of women. This reaches a crescendo when the author declares that “the most sophisticated connections between militarism and violence are evolving at this very moment” and dismisses all armed forces: “In a very physical sense, the presence of the military, whether or not in an actual war situation, has always been bad news for women.” Are those the sentiments of American females during World War II? A more important question is, where is the historian’s distance and objectivity, and why are the author’s controversial beliefs presented in the first few pages of a book apparently aimed at women’s studies survey courses?

After this rocky start, the book improves as it surveys the topic, peace as women’s issue. Yet by chapter four the focus narrows considerably as Alonso relies almost exclusively on primary documents of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom and traces the evolution of that organization, one of four such groups formed in the 1920s. This approach might be appropriate for the era of the 1930s to the 1950s, since WILPF was the most important organization then, but the method makes little sense in the 1960s, when the Vietnam war provoked millions of women into the streets to protest U.S. foreign policy, and few of them were members of any organization.

Any Swerdlow has written about a 1960s organization, Women Strike for Peace. Like books by Mary King, Sara Evans, Todd Gitlin, and others, this one is a participant history; Swerdlow was a founding member of WSP in 1961. The author tells her story in heroic terms: “The women who struck for peace in November 1961 were ready to accept the challenge to save the world. Free for the most part from paid employment outside the home and from childcare, deeply angered by the nuclear recklessness of the superpowers, and frustrated by what they perceived as the timidity of the traditional peace movement, they made a conscious choice to step forward to save their children and the planet” (48).

Like most participant histories, this one is favorable treatment, and like many organizational histories, this one tends to be history in a vacuum. Many younger feminists never appear, many important events of the women’s liberation movement are not discussed, and this results in overstating the significance of WSP. Chapter five on the House Un-American Activities Committee’s 1962 investigation of WSP, for example, exaggerates the importance of inquiry because the author fails to note that, two years earlier, one thousand Berkeley students—females and males—confronted and discredited HUAC during the Black Friday affair in San Francisco.

Yet these lapses do not detract much from this book. Swerdlow’s aim is to probe the gender consciousness that moved “ordinary housewives” to become activists, and to restore an important 1960s organization to its place in history. With few reservations, she has succeeded admirably. After noting that the “working women” and “housewives” who formed WSP had little or no knowl-

edge of previous women's peace movements, she traces the growth and development of this important organization, and of the individuals involved. The interviews are interesting, the writing is lucid, and the story is dramatic. Swerdlow has written the definitive study of Women Strike for Peace.

Lawrence Wittner's *One World or None* is the first of a projected three-volume study, *The Struggle Against the Bomb*. The author has written many fine books, and his goal for this one certainly is ambitious: "to provide the first history of the world nuclear disarmament and to grapple with the question of why, despite the clear necessity of freeing humanity from the threat of nuclear destruction, that movement has not been more effective" (xi). Based on the primary and secondary documents of many nations, Wittner has created a magnificent volume that traces the story through 1953. Along the way the reader learns about scientists, clergy, and others who opposed the atomic bomb, the world government, and various peace movements, and numerous other surprising facts: after the Soviet Union "tested an atomic bomb, Italians—convinced that the pope would be an early target—began trying to sell buildings and apartments near the Vatican" (124). Wittner concludes that the movement was "a breaking action—albeit and important one—in the nuclear arms race" (337).

A small problem with this volume is a natural consequence of the enormous task: since the same issues are examined in many nations, at times the book becomes repetitive. But that is minor. Wittner has written an impressive book, judiciously researched in numerous languages, smoothly written, and quite enlightening. This is superb international history, and it is the source book for all historians of the peace movement.