Mary Heaton Vorse
Garrison, Dee

Published by Temple University Press

Garrison, Dee.
Mary Heaton Vorse: The Life of an American Insurgent.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/59699
Chapter Six

Women's Peace, Men's War

The three years Mary Vorse spent with Joe O'Brien were perhaps the happiest of her life as a mother. Her career prospered, enabling her to hire a maid and stenographer. This brought relief from child care during the infancy of her third child as well as more solitary time for writing. O'Brien took an eager delight in her two older children, providing much of the attention and daily supervision they required. She also gained from him a new respect for political activism and a suspicion of intellectuals who limited their revolt to sexual or cultural matters. Soon after their marriage, she had her first experience as an activist when she helped to organize the 1914 unemployment protest movement in New York.

Vorse's presence at the 1915 international women's peace conference and her later tour of the European war zones strengthened the radical feminism she had embraced at the women's meeting in Budapest. Upon her return home, she found herself completely alienated from her old circle of friends. Ironically, it was then she assumed her central role in the creation of the Provincetown Players. Although she recognized the group's importance to cultural history, and forever after took pride in having been a part of its formation, Vorse regarded the birth of the Provincetown Players as nothing more than an interesting footnote to her major achievements. The scenes of war had matured her social consciousness. She would never again feel so comfortable amid the pleasurable play of the literati.

When Vorse and O'Brien returned from Europe, Vorse established a Montessori school in Provincetown and enjoyed days of fine sailing and prolific writing. By August she knew she was pregnant. She and O'Brien
did not know that this summer of 1913 was to be their last quiet time together.

It was now that the group of artists and writers merged to form the celebrated Provincetown colony of the prewar period. Vorse and O’Brien were closest to two other literary couples—Neith Boyce and “Hutch” Hapgood, and Susan Glaspell and George “Jig” Cram Cook. For some summers, this little group was together almost exclusively. The three couples habitually spent part of the day writing and the rest of the time with their families in the open air—swimming, sailing, picnicking on the dunes.

Vorse’s best friend was Neith Boyce, who was two years her senior. Boyce had fled the Midwest for the Village, where she worked as a reporter before marrying the writer Hutchins Hapgood. Boyce insisted that “retreat [from her marriage] must be easy.” Nevertheless, she became absorbed in mothering her four children, born within seven years, while suffering in silence the forays of a husband seeking extramarital amusement. By 1913, by “writing a little every day,” Boyce had published three novels. Her fiction, like Vorse’s, centered on the dilemma of the modern woman.

Hapgood, ever in passionate pursuit of self, was driven wild by his wife’s reserve. He longed with infantile fervor to absorb her very soul. She evaded his every intrusion. In 1914, Hapgood wrote an entire book about his unrealized attempt to penetrate her core, his forlorn need to be needed. He sent this manuscript to Vorse for comment. Her response addressed the hidden pain that Boyce had endured over Hapgood’s sexual excursions. Yet Vorse was not openly critical of his infidelities. She too longed to believe that, painful as the transition might be for the pioneers of sexual freedom, the joyful end result would be, as Hapgood once put it, “the working-out of the situation into a more conscious companionship, greater self-knowledge, and a broader understanding of the relations between the sexes.” Yet Vorse had her own memories of Bert. She reminded Hapgood that his extramarital affairs had been sad little loves that led nowhere. Perhaps Vorse could afford such philosophical distancing, because, as she told Boyce, Joe O’Brien was “fiercely monogamistic, both in theory and in practice.” For Mary and Joe at least, still caught up in the exploration of their first years together, marital misery was the problem only of their friends.

Hapgood was much like Vorse in his ability to organize a ring of admirers. He had first realized this talent as recruiter for Mabel Dodge’s salon. Vorse’s new friend, Jig Cook, would serve a similar function as the evangelical spirit behind the formation of the Provincetown Players in 1915. Cook also was a writer, but his work was rarely published. As Floyd
Dell noted, Cook's stories, "so magnificent when he talked about them, were not magnificent when he wrote them." Like Hapgood, Cook was a romantic and mystic, less efficient at making a living.

When Susan Glaspell married Cook and moved to Provincetown, she too made her escape from middle America. After graduation from college, she worked for the first newspaper in Iowa to employ women as reporters. By 1913, Glaspell had published two novels and a collection of short stories. She would be best known for her plays, one of which would receive a Pulitzer Prize in 1931. Glaspell, Hapgood said, was "truly sentimental," whereas Vorse was "falsely" so. Although Glaspell raised two stepchildren, she was disappointed that a heart lesion prevented her from having children of her own. As a feminist, she wanted women's options to be enlarged, yet believed that motherhood was woman's most fundamental and essential experience in life.²

Despite the immense differences in their mind sets and interests, Vorse for years considered Boyce and Glaspell to be her closest friends. They could share their love of good conversation, their interest in their children's activities, their passion for writing, their disdain for polite tradition, and their concern with the modern woman's discontent. Yet their personal reserve and mutual need for emotional distance need not be threatened by their interaction. Each woman, too, shared the experience of an impetuous, volatile, bigger-than-life husband—Jig Cook, of the black hat, flowing cape, and inspired visions; Hutch Hapgood, with his lyrical self-explorations and tortured confessions; Joe O'Brien, the greathearted and politically aroused Irishman. O'Brien and Vorse often chided the other two couples for their lack of political activism. For Hapgood and Cook, radical expression centered about the ideal of perfect freedom in sexual love.

Vorse and her friends were evolving a concept of "companionate marriage" to replace the older Victorian pattern of "separate spheres." But the newer ideal of modern love could be as entrapping to women as the old. Most Village men, like Cook and Hapgood, wanted intellectual and emotional intimacy with their wife-lover. At the same time they expected their women to subordinate themselves to male needs. As Floyd Dell admitted in 1919, "I wanted to be married to a girl who would not put her career before children—or even before me, hideously reactionary as the thought would have seemed a few years ago." Max Eastman expressed the contradiction plaguing the New Men in the Village better than he knew when he described his first wife, Ida Rauh, as his "friend and slender-bodied mother." In their later years, Eastman and Dell, Hapgood and Cook, en-
joyed just that—maternal love from mother—wives—much like the care Bert had elicited from Mary. The new societal norm of companionate marriage would allow intimacy and lust between men and women, so long as both bed partners remained safely separated into essentially unequal spheres.

Among these six rebel sophisticates, the question of sensual freedom danced in and out of their thoughts and conversations, enlivening their social gatherings, creating fantasies of endless youth, blunting the knowledge that though their bodies were bursting firm and healthy, they would be long bound through long lives to marriages that were now new, that the opening of one door inevitably meant the closing of another, and, in actuality, hearing in their separate lives and mutual relations the muted tones of initial discord. Yet they were still young, and their children cherished, and the beaches white and very beautiful. And so they attempted to combine a bohemian pattern of thought with the contradictory daily demands, traditional and limiting, of caring for one's children and making one's living through the production of salable prose.

They remained aloof from the younger radicals who were summering in Provincetown in force by 1914. Hapgood claimed the original Provincetown group “kept on working most of the time, held to family life without the prejudice of it, dined quietly but not too soberly together, and only occasionally were a part of such extreme outbreaks as the nude-bathing parties at night” on the beach. As Hapgood reported, Vorse, as early as the summer of 1913, was drinking more than convention allowed:

Sometimes I would have a cask at my house, sometimes Jig at his . . . [or Mary Vorse would have] a choice brand of Scotch. We would float together in the evening in a most amiable way . . . sometimes at Jig and Susan's [house], sometimes at Mary's, sometimes at ours. We gathered early, and would break up by midnight, having drunk just enough . . . to loosen our tongues and free our imaginations. But Mary's tongue didn't ever need to be loosened; drinking or not she went on like a perpetual brook, about her children, her work, the fishermen and their families, and how I . . . had led her into the evil habits of imbibing.

Vorse drifted into greater indulgence. She drank quickly to get its effect, and then, when the alcohol was consumed, sent someone out for more. Some neighbors still recall the frequent sight of Joe O'Brien drifting home from the railroad station, with his tie and his big smile equally awry. Perhaps the memory of the native Cape dwellers was colored somewhat by
their fascinated disapproval of the big-city writing crew. Yet, unmistakably, heavy drinking had become a general pastime at Vorse’s house.6

In the fall of 1913, Vorse and O’Brien left Provincetown to spend the winter in New York. They took a furnished house on East 11th Street. The small pink brick house seemed an ideal place for Vorse’s third child to be born. In February little Joel arrived, “a fine baby with red hair and blue eyes.” Not long after, Vorse went to a workers’ meeting in Paterson, where Carlo Tresca told her, “Maria, you are far too young a mother to be going over ferries to make speeches.”7

The entries in her datebook stopped abruptly after February 26, 1914, when Susan Glaspell and Max Eastman came to dinner. “Life went too swiftly after that to make notes of engagements,” Vorse recalled. That was because before the winter was over, Vorse’s house was placed under surveillance by plainclothes men from the New York Police Department. She sometimes saw them peering in at her through the basement windows. Her little pink house had become the center for the unemployment protest movement in New York City.

During the abnormally cold depression winter of 1913–14, millions of Americans were out of work. In New York, Frank Tannenbaum, then a twenty-one-year-old anarchist, later a distinguished scholar at Columbia University, led a novel form of protest by the unemployed. He directed thousands of unemployed men to various churches, where they demanded food and shelter for the night, in a nonviolent dramatization of their plight. After a visit from the jobless army, some churches offered food, shelter, or money. But on the night of March 4, a Catholic church rector sent for the police. Tannenbaum was arrested, along with 188 others, and charged with inciting to riot; he was sentenced to one year at Blackwell’s Island. The historian Paul Avrich described how the tempo of unemployment agitation increased after Tannenbaum’s arrest. “Over the next three months, open air demonstrations, among the greatest ever held in New York, took place . . . at which thousands of jobless men and women applauded the speeches of avowed anarchists, denouncing capitalism and government. Night after night, marches, occupations and rallies were staged . . . to protest the iniquities of the existing order.”8

Throughout March and April, Vorse’s house functioned as a staging center for the IWW-led wing of the unemployment protest. O’Brien was elected head of legal defense. Vorse found places for the protesters to sleep. Day after day, at a hectic pace, she directed groups who visited churches and settlements to persuade their heads to allow three or four hundred men to sleep there overnight. Her house was always filled, with
committee meetings going on simultaneously in every bedroom. Vorse remembered that she once answered the telephone seventeen times during a single nursing of her new baby. Meanwhile, she was trying to write. With O'Brien busy with political work, she was now the sole support of her household of seven, including the two maids.  

In early April, the fight of the unemployed became a battle for civil liberty as the New York police force, angered by so much overtime work, became more repressive. Often led by mounted detachments, the police viciously broke up protest meetings. Lincoln Steffens was sickened by the police violence. “I’ve seen such things for 20 years now,” he wrote, “but I can’t get used to it. It lifts my stomach every time I see a policeman take his night stick in both his hands and bring it down with all his might on a human being’s skull.”  

Vorse’s house filled with young men with scalp wounds, broken noses, and discolored faces, all telling their grim stories. What had begun for her at Lawrence was now hammered into shape by police clubs, as her friends came in with their heads laid open, or disappeared into jail on trumped-up charges. She had realized at Lawrence the conditions in which workers lived. Now she was face to face with the knowledge of how churches, police, and courts cooperated to suppress radical dissent, while most major newspapers distorted the facts of the struggle.

Vorse and O'Brien were forced from active participation in the protest movements when they both became ill in the late spring. Vorse was merely exhausted. Even with the help of her maids, the job of combining the roles of nursing mother, organizer, and breadwinner completely drained her energy. O'Brien, however, was seriously ill. Although neither of them yet knew it, he had stomach cancer.

In the early summer they returned to Provincetown. By late June, O'Brien was hospitalized in Boston. Vorse and the baby stayed in Boston for a few weeks, so they could be near him. O'Brien decided to delay an operation until the fall. Vorse returned to Provincetown alone and spent most of the summer there caring for the children and household and continuing to write. With O'Brien so ill, the weight of earning their living pressed upon her even more than usual.

The worries of that summer gave rise to an intense emotional reaction. The once sparkling Provincetown parties of the Village intelligentsia turned into unbalanced drunken affairs, thick with interpersonal tensions. When in August the World War crashed down on the Provincetown group, many of the would-be revolutionaries were absorbed in masturbatory “self-psychoanalysis,” fascinated with their personal pain from which
Dr. Freud’s “science” promised relief. Fatuous self-reflection, high-blown radical rhetoric, sex, and drink marked the summer. Sensitive, unstable, feeling defeated by conservative reaction—the group’s despair at world eruption brought on one last climactic binge, during which two suicides and one murder were attempted.

It began on the day following the final declaration of war in Europe. Hapgood, Joe O’Carroll, Fred Boyd, Hippolyte Havel, and Bayard Boysen were slowly proceeding through a case of whiskey at Hapgood’s house. All bemoaned the impotence of ideas and even blamed themselves for allowing the war to begin. Their self-importance aggravated by drink, they determined to move from guilt to propose an immediate conference of the intellects in Provincetown. Inspired, the five men first sent an invitational telegram to Vorse’s house: “You are the only woman who with perfect male sympathy might be here.” They also called in Max Eastman and Jig Cook’s mother to help prepare a resolution that would make clear to the workers of every belligerent nation why they must not kill each other for the sake of the imperialistic rich. An enunciation of Socialist Purity would surely halt the madness in Europe.

Though impelled by whiskey, the wrangling conferees could not agree on the proper wording for their statement. Vorse and Mrs. Cook floated toward home. The well-bred poet Boysen, who had already begun his descent into alcoholism and melancholy, sat observant and aloof. Anarchist Hippolyte Havel was violently depressed. He and Polly Halladay had moved their restaurant from the Village to Provincetown that summer. Havel was more immediately concerned with Halladay’s suspected sexual infidelities than with the question of war.

At this point, the young Irishman Joe O’Carroll, who had been beaten by the New York police in the unemployment demonstrations and was still recovering after a month in the hospital, escaped through the bedroom window. O’Carroll emerged naked on the Provincetown beach before a crowd of alarmed local residents. Intent on a watery death, O’Carroll was wrestled into unconsciousness by Hapgood and Boysen, while the landlady stood by protesting the behavior of the cognoscenti. Max Eastman meanwhile broke up a struggle between two dogs who had been attracted by the commotion.

Just as quiet returned and the philosophic mood reactivated, Polly Halladay appeared dripping on the veranda. She announced that her own suicidal desires had been temporarily lessened by the coldness of the sea. Halladay was persuaded to go back to her restaurant and, like O’Carroll, to seek sleep. Returning to the conference of the intellects, Havel suddenly
became bent on homicide. Hapgood followed him to Halladay's bedroom and remained to oversee the noisy resolution of their lovers' debate.

Hapgood and Boyesen, much subdued, were sipping coffee at dawn when Vorse came in, greatly disturbed. She reported that Fred Boyd, after attempting to cable their resolution to John Reed and the heads of state of Germany, England, Russia, France, and Austria, had showed up at her house, brandishing a revolver. Although Vorse had not made it home during the night, she had returned to find the children and the cook in hysterics. This was after Boyd had organized one of the nude parties held on the beach that evening. The reckless night ended, Boyd and Havel quickly departed Provincetown the next day—in order to quiet the aroused citizenry. Thus did the Villagers greet the coming of war in Provincetown.

If one can set a time that marks the end of that strain of innocence which intertwined with the exuberant chorus welling up from prewar Greenwich Village, then that morning of August 6, 1914, may be as good a date as any. When the European explosion came, it caused apolitical cultural radicals, parlor-bound revolutionaries, and bloodied activists alike to concede defeat of the ideal of workers' international solidarity. In less than two years three million men would be killed on the western front alone. Hapgood claimed that many Villagers would not recover their faith until the Russian revolution came to bring spiritual meaning again.12

For O'Brien and Vorse, however, O'Brien's worrisome illness was the most compelling concern. He returned from the Boston hospital to Provincetown in the fall of 1914, seemingly much recovered. Soon after, Vorse was offered a chance to attend the women's international peace congress at The Hague and to report the war in Europe for Good Housekeeping and McClure's. O'Brien strongly encouraged her to go. True to his socialist and feminist ideals, he insisted that she must report the peace conference, while he remained home to care for the children.

Shortly after the war began in Europe, twelve hundred women in mourning dress marched down Fifth Avenue in New York City to protest the slaughter abroad. The Woman's Peace Party marked the beginning of a new peace movement that was a drastic departure in style, ideology, and leadership from the prewar peace organizations. Earlier peace groups, all male directed, had focused on legalistic devices like international arbitration and the world court to stop war. The new female-led groups looked to economic and political democratization as the means to end conflict between warring males. The new women's peace movement ranged from the Woman's Peace Party, organized by a diverse collection of suffragists and various women's clubs in January 1915, to the much more radical
Woman’s Peace Party of New York City and the American Union Against Militarism, both sparked by the socialist and Heterodite Crystal Eastman.\textsuperscript{13}

When the International Woman Suffrage Alliance’s biennial meeting, scheduled to take place in Berlin in 1915, was canceled because of the war, an international women’s committee issued a call for a women’s peace congress to meet in neutral Holland. Jane Addams, then the most respected and influential woman in America, was invited to preside over the meeting at Amsterdam. The women’s peace conference would show that women, unlike the socialists in the warring nations, could maintain international solidarity in rejection of state-based madness.

Vorse was appointed as a delegate to the congress by the New York Woman Suffrage Party of New York City. Representing 151,000 women of greater New York, she sailed in April for the peace congress in Holland with forty-one other American delegates. They were a distinguished group of women, including Grace Abbott, Fannie Fern Andrews, Sophonisba P. Breckenridge, Leonora O’Reilly, Alice Hamilton, Jane Addams, and Emily Balch, the last two later to win the Nobel Peace Prize. Twelve of the delegates had advanced degrees. Several were the wives of wealthy or prominent men. Most were suffrage leaders, social workers, educators, or writers. Included were three socialists and two leaders of women’s trade unions.

Abusive protest accompanied their departure. Their most vociferous critic was ex-President Theodore Roosevelt, seemingly almost crazed by his lust for war. TR judged their cause “silly and base” and called the women physical cowards who sought peace “without regard to righteousness.” The American women were almost the only passengers aboard the Dutch liner \textit{Noordam}. They sailed through mine-strewn waters, flying a blue and white homemade banner with the single word “Peace.”\textsuperscript{14}

Feeling isolated as a Villager among this collection of serious reformers, Vorse was nevertheless impressed by their heterogeneity. Along with some of the most influential and forward looking American women, she told O’Brien, she also found “cranks, women with nostrums for ending war, and women who had come for the ride, New Thought cranks with Christian Science smiles and blue ribbons in their hair, hard working Hull House women, little half-baked enthusiasts, elderly war horses of peace, riding furious hobbies.”

On the way, the women met three times daily for conferences and lectures. Vorse wrote O’Brien: “Today a little Miss Wales, small, dark and slender, a thin little flame of emotion surrounding her, read a pamphlet on Armistice Without War. It is so simple and so naive that it is as though
a wee child ran into one of the cabinets of Europe and with a word showed the way out of all difficulty. Such things haven't happened in real life since Jeanne d'Arc. 15

Despite Vorse's note of sarcasm, however, Julia Grace Wales's proposal was both simple and wise. Endorsed by the Wisconsin legislature in 1915 and recommended for the consideration of Congress, the plan was an unprecedented call for continuous mediation, prior to any armistice agreement between the belligerent countries, by an international committee of experts who would sit so long as the war lasted. The proposed mediation committee was to study the issues and to continue to revise plans or to offer new ones until peace was achieved.

Vorse was mildly repelled by the intellectual hospitality of Jane Addams, who listened to the most impractical suggestions with courteous attention. The American delegation as a whole, Vorse felt, was composed of women "full of inhibitions, not of a radical habit of thought, unaccustomed for the most part to self-expression, women who had walked decorously all their days hedged in by the 'thou shall nots' of middle-class life." Yet she found their meeting all the more remarkable on that account. The women were bound by their courage to face ridicule and by their belief that the follies of male governments could be overcome by the sane, unifying diplomacy of women.

If Vorse was impatient with most of her co-delegate's nonradical perspectives, she had also learned to respect the energy and determination of mainstream suffrage leaders. Since 1911, Vorse had been active in the suffrage campaign. By 1915 the New York suffrage crusade, led by middle-class and society women, was the storm center of the national movement. Suffrage work in New York rose to a height between 1915 and 1917 that in number of participants and level of activity was never equaled in any other area of the country.

Determined to out-Tammany Tammany, Carrie Catt had organized New York's suffrage workers along political lines, dividing the state into twelve campaign districts and over two thousand election districts, each with a devoted woman director. A systematic suffrage effort of speeches, parades, and mass demonstrations operated with military precision. The male political hierarchy was astounded by the efficiency of the well-groomed women who mobilized to pass the state suffrage amendment, a goal finally achieved in 1917.

Vorse had headed one of the five subcommittees of the Press and Publicity Council of the Empire State Campaign Committee. The council members produced prosuffrage literature, newspaper copy, and advertis-
ing, while also serving as speakers and agitators. “It was our pride,” Vorse said, that “we never refused a request to speak, even if it came in the middle of the night from a location far upstate.” In the New York campaign, Vorse learned to admire the tenacity and intelligence of the rich women who, she said, mingled with “free and democratic spirit with us poor wage-slaves of the slums.” Vorse knew that wealthy Vira Whitehouse, chair of the Press and Publicity Council, could crack a whip better than any radical male labor leader Vorse had ever met.

While en route to the peace meeting in Europe, Vorse helped the American delegation prepare a series of resolutions to be offered at the congress. She volunteered to form a committee with Sophonisba Breckenridge, professor of social economy at the University of Chicago, and Leonora O’Reilly, one of the two women trade unionists in the American delegation. The three devised a resolution that stated:

Inasmuch as the investment by capitalists of one country in the resources of another and the claim arising therefrom are a fertile source of international complications, this International Congress of Women urges the widest possible acceptance of the principle that such investments shall be made at the risk of the investor, without claim to the official protection of his government.

A controversy arose immediately as to the advisability of naming capitalists as the offending sector. Some members of the delegation wished “citizens” to be substituted for “capitalists.” After a debate, the more polite “citizens” was accepted by a majority vote. But the condemnation of “capitalists” was returned to the final official resolution passed at the congress, a sign, perhaps, of the less conservative influence of the European delegates to The Hague.

The class issue surfaced several more times on the trip across the Atlantic. When Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence from England addressed the group on the subject of working girls and slum children, Emily Balch of the American delegation thought Pethick-Lawrence’s words reeked with “the unconscious patronage” of the English elite. Hoping to soothe trade unionist Leonora O’Reilly’s feelings, Balch “tried to counteract a little” with her story of how a striking shirtwaist worker had found most Wellesley graduates to be pampered innocents. “I think Miss O’Reilly enjoyed my effort to turn the tables,” Balch noted in her shipboard diary. On another occasion, Vorse and the few radical women aboard organized an evening lecture series. O’Reilly spoke on the labor question, and Marion Cothren,
a socialist lawyer and the only Heterodite beside Vorše on the ship, spoke on the breakdown of socialist internationalism.17

Held up for four days in the English Channel by the British, the American women's peace delegation arrived at The Hague on April 28, barely in time for the first evening session. The congress drew more than two thousand visitors and 1,136 delegates, with a thousand of these from the Netherlands. European and American press reactions to this meeting of women from warring and neutral countries, united, for the first time in the history of the world, to protest war, ranged from sarcastic derision to accusations of treason.

On her first morning at The Hague, Vorše was puzzled by the dominant rhythm of the gathering. As an experienced reporter, she struggled to sense the preoccupation of the audience. She had anticipated a more animated spirit in a group of women “whose very presence there was a revolutionary act and who were enacting one resolution after another of a revolutionary nature—resolutions, which, if they could have been carried out, would have reorganized the planet.” Only after a time did she gauge the emotional mood as one of contained grief. The spirit was familiar to her. She had met it first in Provincetown. There she had observed the same “granite calm” of women during a storm when their men were at sea. “As they grow old, the faces of such women take on a sort of iron repose,” she remembered, “terrible to look at when you know its reason. It was this resisting quiet that held the women at the Hague.”

From the platform the women told their personal stories. They spoke of men who had left singing and who had returned wounded or dead. They spoke of infants without homes or parents, of mothers trying to feed their children on boiled grass. One woman, obsessed with the memory, repeated over and over the story of the swamps she owned. There, German and Russian soldiers had first fought each other, and then slowly drowned together. In Poland, Bavaria, Belgium, they spoke of vast suffering.

Vorše’s deepest sympathies lay with the small group of radical women. Their spirit was expressed in a resolution, never voted on, but put forward by some Austrian women. It read:

We openly declare that women refuse to do the work men cannot do because they are busy murdering other men—that women refuse to repair the damages brought about by men when they wantonly burn and destroy houses and property—that we refuse . . . our help to mitigate poverty and misery caused by the war.

Women’s Peace, Men’s War
Where are the women, another militant group asked, "who will lie down on the roads so that men, horses and cannon must pass over you to reach the battle fields"? 18

The majority of women delegates paid little heed to these voices. Like Addams, they sought to stop the war, not by militant action, but through the force of public opinion, rational argument and the enfranchisement of women. Indeed, it seems unlikely that Mary—because of natural temperament or because of her responsibility as wage earner and mother—would have risked immediate action to oppose war. Her support of the radicals was more ideal than real, a fantasized vision of the brave decisiveness she longed to muster.

The congress drafted a series of resolutions that set the conditions for a just peace. Further resolutions called for general disarmament, nationalization of arms manufacture, free trade, freedom of the seas, investment made only at the risk of the capitalist, education of children toward the ideal of permanent peace, and the participation of women in the future peace settlement. When Jane Addams later presented these propositions to President Wilson, he called them the "best formulation which up till then has been put out by anybody." Many of these were later to be embodied in his Fourteen Points.

In its most hotly debated decision, the congress of women voted to send peace delegations to urge Wales's plan for continuous mediation without armistice upon the neutral and belligerent countries. The delegation to the war capitals was headed by Addams. A second delegation of four women was chosen to visit the neutral Scandinavian countries and Russia. These journeys made by a handful of women seeking peace were ridiculed by the international press. In the end the women's proposal for continuous mediation by a conference of neutrals came to nothing. 19

From the perspective of some seventy years later, it seems apparent that the women meeting at The Hague in 1915 had a limited understanding of the possibilities of ending war. Their faith in a universal elevated morality of women has not been borne out by the coming of female suffrage or by the entire history of nationalism. The women of 1915 failed to examine another difficult question: They did not consider how absolute opposition to violence would serve to cement the status quo, and thus to perpetuate the injustice imposed by state-uniformed soldiers on oppressed peoples in many parts of the world.

Still, in retrospect, the women's plan for mediation was both sensible and humane. Like enfants terribles, they dared to speak the truth that others would not admit. They understood that economic greed, male
socialization, and the ancient struggle for power between elite males create the conditions that lead to war. Perhaps the most important offering of the congress of women was its symbolic inspiration. Their statement of female horror at the barbarism of warring males, their protest at the violation of women that accompanies war, their heart-rending concern for the life of their children, their understanding of the most essential and compelling needs of humanity—these were their enduring contributions to feminism as a historical movement, and to world peace as the necessity of the nuclear future.

For Vorse, the climax of the meeting at The Hague came near the end. The delegates rose and stood silent for a few minutes, thinking on the dead of Europe and on Europe's suffering women. She wrote:

I do not know how long we stood there in that terrible quiet. I stood looking into their stricken faces. Tears streamed down the faces of the women. An iron-faced old man opposite me held his head up, while tears slid unchecked down his face. Behind me I could hear the stifled sobs of Wilma Glucklich, for whose family in Hungary I had not dared to ask. An awful, silent, hopeless, frozen grief swept over this audience which, throughout the Congress, had been so contained. . . . When . . . we sat down at last, it rushed over me; these stricken women were not the women who had suffered most. They were neutral, for the most part; and those who came from the warring countries, were not, and could never be, the most deeply affected.20

Vorse recognized that in the belligerent countries it was the poor women, not these middle-class delegates, who would pay the heaviest tolls of hunger and want and irreparable loss. In the hall there “was only a faint shadow of the grief and despair of the women of Europe,” she wrote. The meeting of these more privileged women was only a gesture, she knew, a “final protest, as brave as it was futile.”

Perhaps it was her identification with the poor women of Europe, who were not present at the congress, that caused Mary to position herself as she did in the official photograph of the American delegation to The Hague. In the picture, she stands alone, several feet apart from the group, in the top tier, the only woman whose face is turned away from the camera.

While in Holland Vorse talked with refugees and interned soldiers from the war zones. The beauty of springtime in the Netherlands provided a poignant contrast to the victims of violence. By way of distraction, a kindly Dutchwoman took a group of women on a tour to the tulip and hyacinth.
beds of Haarlem. As the band of women walked past the blossoms, a Belgian woman at Vorse's side told her in a flat voice of how she had watched all her sons and her husband being executed in the village square.

Curious to know what the women in Germany were saying about the war, Vorse decided to travel to Switzerland via Frankfort. With little difficulty she passed over the border into Germany. In contrast to anxious Holland, Germany seemed prosperous and gay. In Dusseldorf she changed cars and watched a troop train slide through the station. The soldiers carried flowers in their gunstocks. They were laughing and drinking from bottles, happy young men en route to the places where they would be shot. The people in the station cheered and waved back.

She was for the first time in a nation at war. The herd instinct was in operation. As she moved farther into Germany, troop trains became common: more boys with nosegays and picnic food, singing as they went to be killed. She had a sense of unreality, as though everyone around her were hypnotized, marching in lockstep to a wailing rhythm.

Vorse drove down from the little border station of Leopoldshohe in a clattering omnibus. She was a conspicuous figure, a well-dressed woman traveling alone, among a crowd of peasant women. The peasants were complaining to the German soldiers that their sons had lain hours on the battlefield with no care. The soldiers shrugged. "That's war," they said.

At the border, a mustached German officer searched her bags and announced that she could not pass. Vorse was taken back to Leopoldshohe under armed guard. She was sent from there by train to Locher where she was questioned again by a group of frontier officers. The inquisition went on for hours. Again and again, they asked her the date of her birthday, as though there were something dark and fatal about that day. Incredulous and frightened, she realized that she was suspected of being an important international spy. Gradually the questioning became less intense. The officers began to see her as a harmless crank, a strange woman from the peace conference who believed in female suffrage and galloped about Europe on foolish, fruitless business. The atmosphere changed; her questioners became polite. She was carried by motorcar to Stettin, where her baggage was examined once again. From there she was sent to Basel, exuberant to be safe in Switzerland at last.

Vorse was driven now to report the effect of war on the ordinary people of Europe, and especially on women and children. She deliberately ignored the great diplomatic and military events of the time. Fresh from the peace congress, she concentrated on her understanding of women as
both victims and rescuers in wartime. She believed that women instinctively hated war. She had a theory that birth was woman’s most intense moment—and that war was man’s, that governments in which women held their rightful power would find other means short of war to resolve disputes. She wanted to tell the story of European women to those women in America who would understand and who would listen.

Moving on from Switzerland to Paris, Vorse felt more comfortable. She fancied that the French were less maddened by war than the Germans. She now noticed scenes that comforted her. “It was somehow reassuring to see a very young soldier crying as he took leave of his family who cried, too.” But in the hotel foyer, her illusions died. She heard a young French boy talking of how he had killed Germans, crawling at night on his belly to shoot. The old male servants in the hotel listened to the youngster, avidly sharing his blood-drenched adventure.

At a little distance stood two women in black. The women looked at the boy with pity. Vorse felt an instant bond with them. For the women there was no pleasure or thrill in the tale of death. “There is that which makes man his own enemy and even woman’s,” Vorse wrote in her diary then. “Man takes passionate joy in risking his own life while he takes the lives of others. When women’s understanding of this becomes conscious, it is called feminism.”

During the next few days she drove around the city through the familiar streets she had known as an art student. There were a million refugees living outside the war areas. Thousands were housed in Paris. At a refugee center, Vorse saw children too small to tell their names. Many had been picked up by the soldiers in the trenches. Nearby, other orphaned children, most of them weeping, were lined up in long rows, on their way to schools.

If the scenes in Paris were terrible, those in the northern countryside of France were worse. The people lived in patched shelters. Graves with new crosses were scattered in the fields and along the roads. Except for bands of wounded soldiers, there were few young men. So topsy-turvy were all values that Vorse found nothing strange in the words of a woman who told her, “Fortunately, my husband is a hunchback [and could not go to war].”

In the spring of 1915, the staging for murder on a grand scale was pervasive. On the western front, the trench system was fixed, a continuous row of parallel excavations running four hundred miles from Switzerland to the English Channel. The front contained a total of twenty-five thousand miles of trenches, enough to circle the earth. You could smell the
front lines—the stench of dead horses and dead men—miles before you reached them. Month after month, the sacrificial blood flow continued, as men, like dream walkers, advanced and retreated, dying by the tens of thousands to gain, or lose, a few hundred yards of earth. Sometimes British troops demonstrated the gallant sport of war by kicking a football toward the enemy lines while attacking. Few at home seemed to judge this an obscene act. Casualties rose to incomprehensible levels: in France, from 850,000 in 1914, to over 2,500,000 in 1915; in England, an average of 150,000 a month during 1915; in Germany, over 100,000 in a single battle of 1914. And the butchery of 1916 would be worse. Before the national savagery called the Great War had run its four-year course, over 9,000,000 combatants were dead.

Near the destroyed village of Sermaize-les-Bains, Vorse spent the night in an improvised bed atop a billiard table. Far off she could hear the guns near Verdun. She talked with a schoolmistress who was teaching eighty children and acting as mayor of the village. The woman pointed to an immense pile of unanswered correspondence. Two thousand French soldiers had died in the battlefield across the road. The teacher was attempting to answer the inquiries from their families.

Vorse walked through the heaps of rubble where the village had once stood. She mulled over the cataclysm produced by men, contrasting the work of the schoolteacher with that for which the males of Europe had been preparing. "Never had I a story with so many conflicting threads and it is going to hurt so to write," she told O'Brien in her letter home. The sum of Vorse's experience in the past weeks overwhelmed her ability to absorb it all. She had visited barracks where wounded families lived, met women searching for children, parents, and husbands, seen hundreds of lost infants whose mothers would never find them. She was bone tired and desperately lonely. "But there was more in this awful homesickness than a desire to be at home with Joe and the children," she wrote. "It was a longing like thirst to be back in a world that no longer existed, a world in which there could be no war."

When she returned to Paris, Vorse went to see Madame Etienne, her former concierge. Vorse asked her about her three sons. The concierge told her in a hard and steady voice: "They are all dead, all! All three died within six weeks. Since then I have read no papers. There is no victory for me. There can be no victory for those whose sons are dead." From the street outside the door came the sound of singing. They watched silently as cabs, draped with Italian flags, and filled with singing soldiers, clattered
by. Mme. Etienne stretched out her arm and cried, "So long as men love war like that, there will be war, and when they hate it as we hate it, there will be no more war!" It seemed to Vorse that the old woman had spoken a profound piece of wisdom.

Twenty years later, thinking of that moment, Vorse wrote:

I do not believe these things any more. When the drums beat most women go to war with their men—and upper and middle class women who do war work get from war man's excitement minus the danger. While I have been writing this, there has been a parade of sailors, and marines past the house. The most martial and warlike part, by far, was the local women’s auxiliary with their scarlet capes and their banging drums.

And yet, and yet—"I recall that peace conference where for the first time middle-class women of warring nations defied public opinion, and wonder what would happen if there were a peace movement as resolute and fanatical as that for suffrage." ??

When Vorse returned home after six weeks abroad, O'Brien met her at the boat and they went at once to Provincetown. When she saw the long little town, untouched by war, she burst into tears. She found that something strange had happened to her. She felt isolated from everyone except O'Brien, unable to communicate what she had seen: "An explosion more far-reaching than that of Lawrence. A reevaluation of all life." It was the difference "between knowing academically that war exists and the emotional realization of it, as different as knowing that death exists and seeing one's own dead before one." Her little clan at Provincetown was oblivious to the war that Vorse was sure would soon engulf them. Not only was she emotionally estranged from her old friends, she could not sell any of the articles she had written on her trip through the war zones. In the summer of 1915 editors did not want to buy such disagreeable stories.

She was relieved to see that O'Brien seemed fully recovered. Drinking, writing, perspiring profusely, arguing and shouting about the war, the IWW, and all matters of social justice, he worked like a carpenter, building four bedrooms on to the house. O'Brien's last summer was a good one.

Mabel Dodge was again in Provincetown. Having lost John Reed as a lover, Dodge had given up the pursuit of social causes and returned to aesthetic preoccupation. Her new salon on the Cape featured her most
recent lover, the painter Maurice Sterne. Dodge, who had never liked Vorse, pushed to assume the central position in the Provincetown circle. Hapgood became concerned that "Mary, in Mabel's eyes, occupied the position of an enemy, and I saw that Mary's friends were becoming alienated from her without knowing just why. Mary was a special outcast and she was becoming quite a witch in the eyes of Mabel's group. Mary, of course, was not permanently injured, largely because her vitality is such that she cannot be destroyed, except through the cumulative power of extended living; but it looked as if she might have been unreasonably separated for a time from her own group." 23

But Mary wanted only to be left alone with Joe. "I am cut off as by a high wall," she wrote, "from wants and needs... and in the silence which I strive to make around me break children and friends with desires, complaints and turmoil." She shrank from the people around her "who had theories about keeping out of war and who wanted their lives to go on undisturbed."

In one of her better short stories of that season, Mary Vorse expressed her new distaste for artistic aesthetes: "They went so fast and they made so much noise as they went that they had no chance to meet life. Their lives were stale and flat, and they masked this staleness from themselves by their restlessness. . . . Life and more life they wanted, things moving faster and faster. It was as if they had tacitly agreed that there must be no empty moment in their lives and no instance of silence—especially no silence." She and her friends had always amused one another before; they had a "certain harmony and mutual forbearance." But now "there was in the atmosphere something uncomfortable, as though there were depths within them which some unseen thing had disturbed." 24

The intangible barrier between Vorse and the original Provincetown group reflected the crisis of American progressivism itself. The declaration of war in Europe changed everything. It fractured the prewar alliance among the three groups of rebels represented in Provincetown. One element, the older reformists like Boyce and Hapgood, Glaspell and Cook, felt accused of only playing at social protest, of falling back to defend what they perceived as the vital middle ground. These middle-aged Provincetowners were losing the allegiance of the second group, the younger revolutionaries and anarchists symbolized by John Reed. The third subgroup, the art-for-art's sakers centered around Mabel Dodge, was denounced as frivolous by the romantic reformers and the party of youth alike. In the throes of demoralization and division created by war, and by the coming revolution in Russia, all would choose their different paths—some to co-
operation with the Wilson administration, others to artistic retreat. A few
would find their way to revolutionary commitment.

In quick anticipation of a mood that would become general, Vorse
sensed the coming split, and waivered uncertainly outside the confines
of every faction, isolated and alienated from the whole. She fell back
temporarily on the comfort of family life with O'Brien. She rejoiced anew
in his grasp on reality.

Suspicion and bitterness tainted the old group of Provincetown intim­
ates in the summer of 1915. Paradoxically, it was then that they found
a way to hold their fragmenting pieces together. From the midst of what
Hapgood called “the poison of Provincetown” there emerged that extraor­
dinary creation—the little theater that would become the Provincetown
Players.

It began one evening when Vorse and O'Brien, Boyce and Hapgood,
Glaspell and Cook, and Wilbur Daniel Steele and his new bride were
sitting around a driftwood fire on the beach. Cook was vehemently blasting
the commercial, bourgeois theater. Even the new little theater in the
Village had refused to risk the production of Suppressed Desires, a play he
and Glaspell had written that satirized the Freudian gospel. Boyce
mentioned that she had written a play called Constancy that spoofed the
love affair of John Reed and Mabel Dodge. Boyce and the others had
been mightily amused the year before at the thought of Dodge and Reed
creeping away each night for lovemaking in Dodge's silken tent pitched
on the beach. The group around the fire giggled at the memory of this
sunset rendezvous. They suddenly decided: Why not put on these plays
themselves, for fun? 25

The Provincetown Players were born in the Hapgood house on Com­
mercial Street, on July 15, 1915, at 10 PM. They used the veranda with the
ocean front as backdrop for the first play. The audience then reversed its
seats and turned toward the opposite side of the room for the second play,
seen through a broad open door.

A few days later, in response to the demand from Provincetown visitors,
they decided to present the plays again. Cook convinced Vorse to donate
her wharf with its unused fishhouse for the theater. The group assessed
each person five dollars for alterations. Boats, nets, and oars were cleared
from the wharf. In her trunk Vorse found a stage curtain she had used as
a child for theater productions in Amherst. The audience brought chairs
from home, while lamps were held as illumination. “I sat in the audience
on the hard bench, watching the performance, hardly believing what we
had done.” Vorse wrote:

Women's Peace, Men's War
The theater was full of enthusiastic people—a creative audience. In spite of its raining in torrents, everyone had come down the dark wharf lighted here and there by a lantern. People had leaned their umbrellas against one of the big timbers which supported the roof. I noticed an umbrella stirred, then slowly slid down an enormous knothole to the sand thirty feet below. With the stealth of eels, other umbrellas went down the knothole to join their fellows under the wharf. The dark interior, the laughing audience, the little stage with its spirited performances, and the absconding umbrellas are all part of the memory of the first night of the Provincetown Players.26

Amateurs all, they acted the plays themselves and found it marvelous fun. A second bill was also produced. It included Wilbur Daniel Steele's Contemporaries, a drama of the Tannenbaum-led unemployment protest, and Cook's Change Your Style, a light satire on academic versus modern art. "No group ever had less sense of having a mission than did the Provincetown Players," Vorse said. Their success was an explosion that "comes only in times when a creative breath is blowing through all society." Except for Jig Cook's drive and passion, the Provincetown Players might have ended there, without them knowing who they were. But this rebirth was to occur the next summer.

O'Brien acted in the first play. He helped clear out the wharf fishhouse for the second bill. Then the illness came to him again.

Boyce accompanied Vorse to New York where Joe O'Brien was taken to the hospital. Vorse stayed with Frances Perkins. In late October, Boyce wrote Hapgood, "Joe died this morning. Mary is very quiet and calm, but exhausted. . . . He was with only a nurse at the end although Mary was lying down in the next room. No one expected the end so suddenly."27

For the Masses, Susan Glaspell wrote a eulogy:

Joe

It's strange without you, I do not like it.
I want to see you coming down the street in the gay woolly
stockings and that bright-green sweater.
I want you to open the door of my house and brightly call
"Hello!" We used to rage about the way you kept us waiting—
Honest now, were you ever on time anywhere?
But I'd wait—oh, I can't say how long I wouldn't wait if there was
any chance of your finally swinging along and charming away
my exasperation.
That was a mean advantage—
Letting us wait and then spoiling our grievance with a smile.
I want to sit over a drink with you and talk about the IWW and
the dammed magazines and the Germans; I want to argue with
you about building bookshelves and planting bulbs.
I want awfully to tell you about a joke I heard yesterday.
And now that you are gone, I want intensely to find you.
What were you, Joe? I don’t think any of us really know.
Many are talking about your gaiety; none of them loved it more
than I did.
But I want to know about those reservations; I want to know the
you that brooded and lived alone.
You saw things straight; nobody put it over very hard on you.
The thing in you that thought was like a knife blade,
Muddling and messing made you sick.
Your scorn put the crimp in a lot of twaddle that goes on among
our kind of folks—
How I’d love to hear you cuss some of them out again!
Graceful levity—fiery dissatisfactions.
Debonair and passionate.
Much I do not know and never shall, but this I know:
I feel the sway of beauty when I think of you.
A fresh breeze; a shining point;
Pure warmth; pure hardness.
Much given and something withheld;
A jest—a caress—an outrageous little song. A gift. A halt in
speech—a keen grave look of understanding.
Undependable and yet deeply there.
Vivid and unforgettable.
Is that at all you? Would you laugh if you saw this?
Well, laugh, but I say again,
Unforgettable.
Strong, clear violet; the flash of steel;
The life of the party—a tree way off by itself.
Oh, What’s the use? I can’t.
I only know my throat’s all tight with the longing to have you
open the door of my house and brightly call “Hello!”

For the second time in five years, Vorse was a widowed mother. Grief
immobilized her for weeks. She did not stir from bed. As was still the

Women's Peace, Men's War  101
custom of that day, a kindly physician eased her hurt with morphine. "We all see Mary constantly," Hapgood wrote Boyce. "She seems very weak and very soft and lovely. Under veronal and morphine all the time." 29 Vorse would remember the grace of that dark paradise.