

PEACE and DIPLOMACY

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Overview Tracing peace in world history is a far less familiar topic than dealing with war. There are nevertheless some interesting developments to note at various points of time, and also some interesting, if fluctuating, regional diversities.

Early Civilizations While formal warfare undoubtedly increased with the advent of agriculture and then the emergence of states, various regions differed in their interest in war; and, not surprisingly, greater awareness of war promoted new interest in peace settlements as well. Thus Sumerian leaders used writing to spell out agreements among rival city states in the region, designed to keep the peace; and while the oldest mosaic in the region, from Ur, has a battle scene on one side, there is an equally vigorous depiction of society at peace on the other. The first known literary product, the Babylonian Gilgamesh, emphasizes the destructiveness of war. Egypt normally emphasized peace with its neighbors, including (after a single battle) an alliance with the Hittite empire that referred to “real peace and fraternity.” In China, a bit later, a period of bitter internal conflict – the “warring states” period – yielded a number of movements, headed by Confucianism, that sought peace and harmony. This was the period also in which Sun Tzu, in his *Art of War*, urged that every effort be used to avoid outright fighting: “there is no instance of a country having benefited from prolonged warfare.” Both Chinese and Roman emperors paid tribute to peace, with a Chinese city called “Perpetual Peace”, or Changan, and the Roman Augustus claiming a mantle of peace. The peace theme was not predominant during the early part of the Agricultural Age, but nor was it absent.

The Major Religions Many of the major religions contributed significantly to thinking about peace, and some action, during the classical and postclassical periods and beyond. Hinduism of course supported a warrior caste, but it also developed the concept of ahimsa, or nonviolence to living creatures, which could motivate a variety of efforts toward peace – including, much later, the work of Gandhi. Buddhism strongly emphasized peace, though there were examples of Buddhist military men. A key emperor in India’s Mauryan dynasty, Ashoka, converted to Buddhism after disgust with war, and highlighted peace throughout the remainder of his reign. His example was cited, and partially copied, by a number of Buddhist rulers in southeast Asia later on. Christianity was a deeply pacifist religion in its early centuries, even discouraging service in the Roman army for the faithful – one of the dispute areas with the Roman state. This changed when the Emperor Constantine granted official favor; one of his conditions was acceptance of military service. Still, a strong pacifist strain persisted in the religion, at least as a minor theme. During the postclassical period, amid extensive feudal wars, Christian leaders in Western Europe – partly to protect church property – tried to sponsor the Peace of God and Truce of God, to reduce conflict, and this has some impact in taming feudal fighting. The papal summons to the Crusades was also an effort to export battle to other regions – though not, of course, a commitment to pacifism. Islam, more tied to the state, did not highlight pacifism to the same extent as Buddhism and early Christianity. But there was insistence on the idea of a just war – for defense, not offense; and a commitment to avoid needless slaughter or civilian death. And small pacifist strands could emerge from Islam at various later points. Religion did not end war, but in various ways it generated new arguments for peace.

The Early Modern Period Military action dominated this period, but there were scattered developments relevant to peace. An early Mughal emperor, Akbar, worked hard for peace and tolerance, both in policy and in rhetoric, though his successors did not maintain this approach. In Europe and soon North America, minority Protestant sects, like the Mennonites and Quakers, resisted military service and opposed war systematically – ultimately raising some new issues of what to do with conscientious objectors. The brutal Thirty Years War, centered in Germany but involving most European powers, ended in a formal peace conference, Westphalia, which in turn developed some new commitments to religious tolerance. War did not end, but the precedent of this kind of constructive solution to conflict had potential impact later on. In North America, the Iroquois tribes had worked out a mutual commitment to peace, and this had some impact on white settlers like the Quaker William Penn. Perhaps most important of all, the Spanish and Portuguese colonies in Latin America were guided by a papally-sponsored treaty, Tordesillas (1494), which allocated territory between the two powers. The Treaty did not prevent massive European violence against the native population, but did not prevent significant conflict between the colonial powers – which may in turn help explain why, through its subsequent history, Latin America has rarely been involved in major war.

The Long 19th Century Spurred by Enlightenment thinking (including Immanuel Kant's writing on peace) and then the conflicts around the French Revolution and Napoleon, the years after 1815 were marked by an unprecedented surge of peace advocacy and peace organization, through much of Europe and North America. Even in the 1790s an American statesman presented the first-ever proposal to establish a Peace Department in the new United States government, though his idea was not taken up. Widespread optimism resulted from Enlightenment faith in human progress and also from growing emphasis on commerce, with many businessmen arguing that war should be obsolete now that focus was on economic advance. Peace movements spread from the United States to Russia (where the author Tolstoy would be deeply involved). In Persia, a new Bahai religious group also urged peace, building out from Islam, urging European governments to reduce their military expenditures. Obviously, this flurry did not have wide impact on actual policy in an age of imperialism. There were however a few practical developments. The Treaty of Vienna (1815) that settled the Napoleonic Wars was not seriously affected by peace thinking, but it did set forth a fairly constructive arrangement particularly in taking the interests of France, though a defeated country, into some account. More European governments, from the later 18th century onward, became involved with mutual arbitration of certain kinds of disputes, for example over fishing rights. Two nations, Switzerland and Sweden, began to define themselves as neutral, an interesting innovation. Geneva Conventions, first emerging in the 1860s, sought to regulate treatment of war prisoners and sounded, an important new step related to peace efforts. Later in the 19th century a number of parliamentary leaders began to suggest further international arrangements to reduce conflict, and the result was a new World Court in the Hague, which did in fact arbitrate a number of disputes early in the 20th century. Even the Olympic Games, revived in the 1890s, were intended to provide alternatives to war.

The Interwar Years World War I was a huge shock to casual optimism. Its carnage encouraged a revival and extension of interwar pacifism, and hostility to war became a policy factor in places like Britain and the United States. International naval conferences agreed on limits in this area, effectively ending earlier competition over battleships; though other rivalries developed instead, and of course attention increasingly shifted to airpower in any event. The new League of Nations constituted an important extension of the belief that new global organizations could reduce the risk of war. The powers of the League were constrained, however, despite French efforts to generate some military support for League decisions; and United States nonparticipation was a huge blow. The League famously failed to generate any impact on the German, Italian and Japanese moves toward war in the 1930s. Even before this the Paris Peace Conference that generated the Treaty of Versailles, after World War I, was notoriously unbalanced, particularly in its effort to punish Germany, and helped to contribute to later tensions and ultimately military response.

Since 1945 The United Nations was set up to rectify some of the weaknesses of the League, and despite continuing limits, particularly because of the need for great-power approval in the Security Council, it would play a more robust role, cautiously during the Cold War and more extensively since 1990. A large number of UN military missions helped resolve conflict, as in parts of Africa, or police post-conflict agreements. The end of World War II also generated new precedents in dealing with war crimes, which would later lead to the institution of a new World Criminal Court for this purpose – though amid great debate about what policies best resolved conflict. Several nations, headed by Germany and Japan, substantially demilitarized, cutting military expenditures and building a public opinion that was extremely skeptical of military engagement. Substantial demilitarization spread to key parts of Central America and, after the end of the Apartheid system, to southern Africa. Most West European countries, though not formally demilitarizing, also cut military budgets. Peace organizations and advocacy spread widely, in many cases building on religious precedents. International agreements sought to limit access to nuclear weapons, with some success – several regions such as Southeast Asia worked to remain nuclear-free. An earlier ban on chemical and biological weapons was revived, with virtually every country signing on and many destroying weapons stocks in consequence. Some social scientists argued that these very developments, plus increasing attention to democracy and consumerism, might actually reduce the incidence of war on a durable basis. And it was true that in many regions, war had either faded or was increasingly replaced by civil rather than inter-state strife. But of course the verdict was still out, despite the obvious fact that the post-World War II years had introduced a number of vital innovations, as well as pious hopes, into the quest for peace.

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Suggested Reading:

Peace Treaties and International Law in European History: From the Late Middle Ages to World War One. Edited by Randall Lesaffer (Cambridge University Press, 2008)

Peace: A History of Movements and Ideas. By David Cortright (Cambridge University Press, 2008).

Peace in World History. By Peter N. Stearns (Routledge, 2014).

Discussion

1. What were the most important features of early concepts of peace?
2. Describe concepts of peace in history of Indian religions.
3. What were the approaches to peace in the three missionary religions? What results did they have?
4. How was the idea of peace contested in early modern England? How did this impact later conflicts?
5. What impact did the Treaty of Westphalia have on further historical developments in peace? Why was its impact not immediate?
6. Why did peace ideas and movements proliferate in the 19th century? What results did they have?
7. In what ways was Versailles a worse peace treaty than Vienna had been? And why?
8. What transnational movements contributed to pacifism in the contemporary period? How did pacifists contribute to other social movements?
9. To what extent have global conditions for peace changed since World War II?
10. Does democracy contribute to peace? What impact has globalization had on peace?
11. What has led to increased global disarmament? How has cyber warfare challenged peace agreements and the concept of peace in contemporary history?
12. Why is war a more prevalent topic than peace in world history? How can peace be incorporated more fully into historical scholarship?