



Peace...in progress

When a humble story crosses the Big History

**The first international camp
of voluntary work
and international solidarity
1920 - 1921**



Visual book conceived by Paolo Maddonni – SCI Italy - 2009

Peace...on progress
When a humble story crosses the Big History

The **Big History** is that one of the World War First (1914-1918), a real human huge disaster. Today this piece of history is almost forgotten. Nevertheless, this war touched so strongly people's minds that a peace movement started slowly to grow in Europe and in the world.

The **humble story** is that one of a small group of volunteers who experimented the first residential voluntary action for solidarity and reconstruction: a concrete answer to the regular questions of wars and weapons for solving conflicts. The idea was simple and extraordinary: people coming from countries which were enemies till yesterday, now working side by side for rebuilding material damages and deep prejudices. It was not easy to identify, in 1920, a community wishing to host this revolutionary experience.

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When a humble story crosses the Big History

Once in Esnes, a village in the area of Verdun – France - coordinators and volunteers start their recovery activities. They face several difficulties but their motivation is very strong. People in Esnes are sometimes friendly, sometimes not: the effects and injuries of the war are still too vivid in people's minds and in the village.

We are going to relive the months of that winter, 1920-21, through the words and the pictures of those who gave life to that extraordinary experience, the first international solidarity work camp.

This experience lead to the creation of several organizations and movements which still today are using the international camps as their main tool for peace. Pierre Cérésolle, the main promoter of the first camp, founded the **Service Civil International – S.C.I..**

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Although the texts have been adapted (occasionally with some liberty) by myself, they come from original documents and reports that are part of the International Archives of SCI in Switzerland. Also other publications have been consulted.

Many thanks to Philipp Rodriguez, who allowed me to find and use those documents (archives@service-civil-international.org).

When not mentioned, images are intended not original of SCI archives and produced just for suggesting emotions to the audience. Opinions and texts are only to be considered my personal contributions to the peace ideal, and are not the official statement of any organization.

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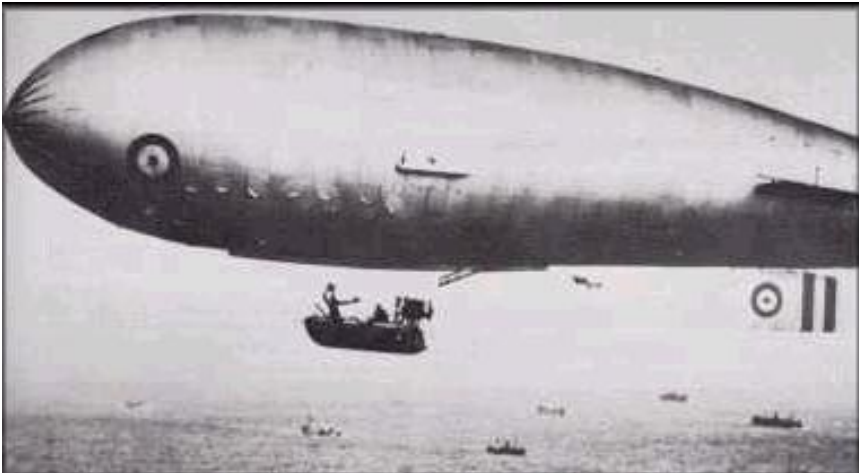


First World War

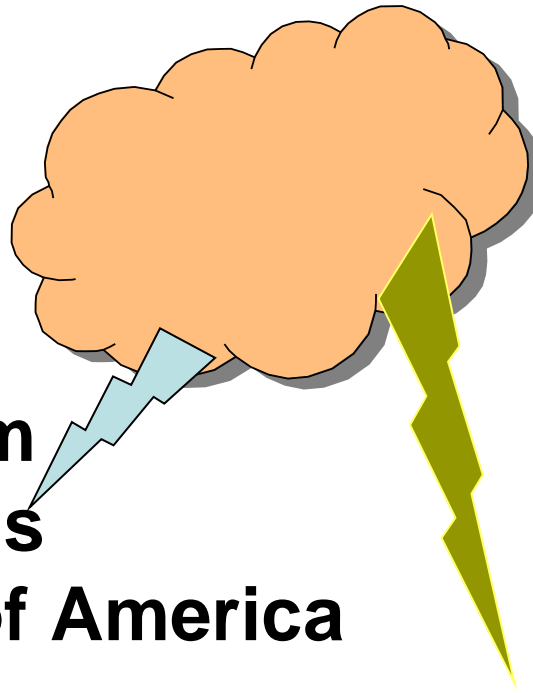
“the Big War”

1914 - 1918

la guerra



Turkey
Albania
United Kingdom
The Netherlands
United States of America
Bulgaria
Italy
Australia
Belgium
Russia



Portugal
Serbia
France
Switzerland
Montenegro
Romania
Austria - Hungary
Japan
Germany
Spain

Who was against who? Which were the neutral countries?

One side : central empires and allied countries

Austria – Hungary, Turkey, Bulgaria, Germany

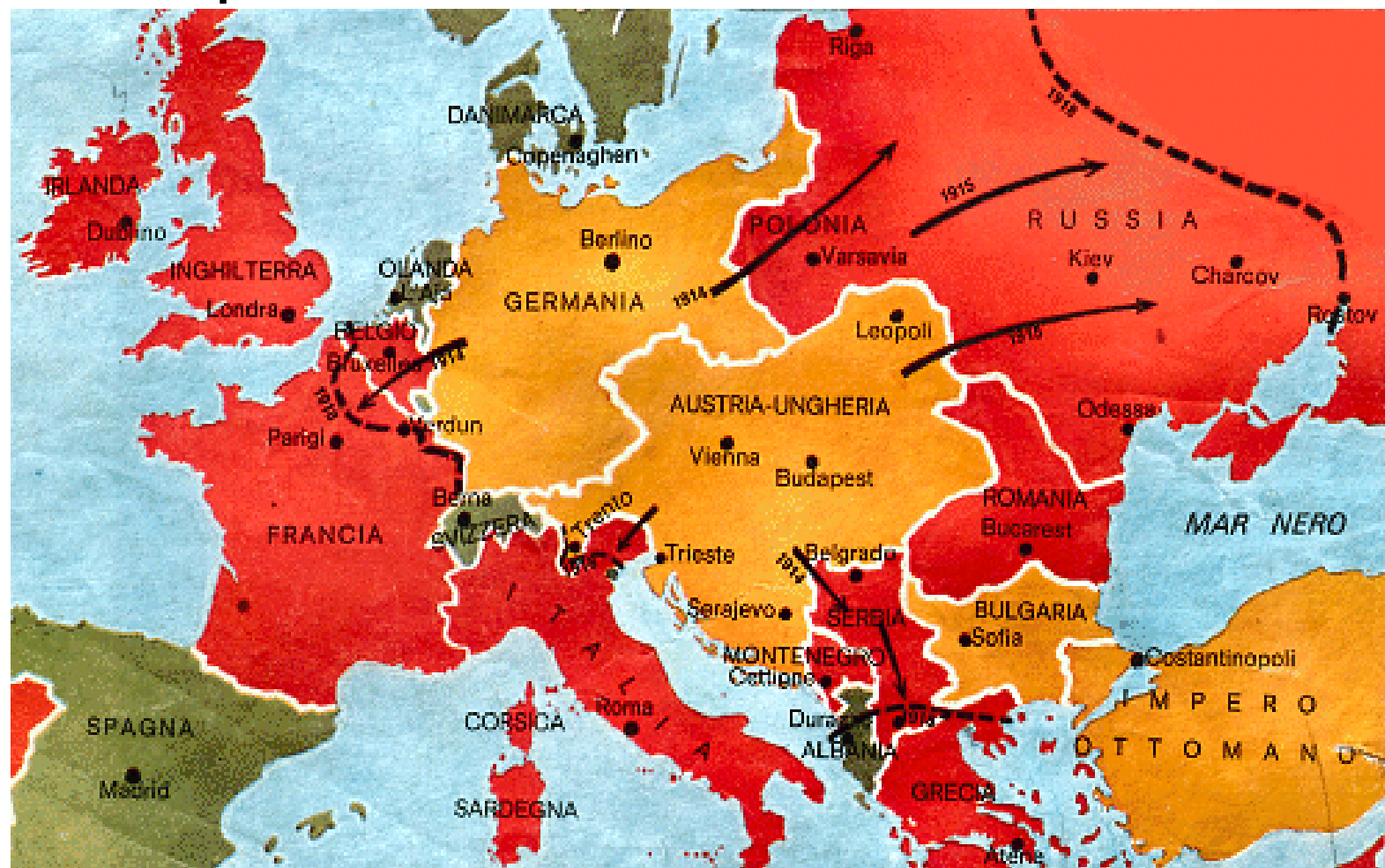
The other side: Entente and allied countries

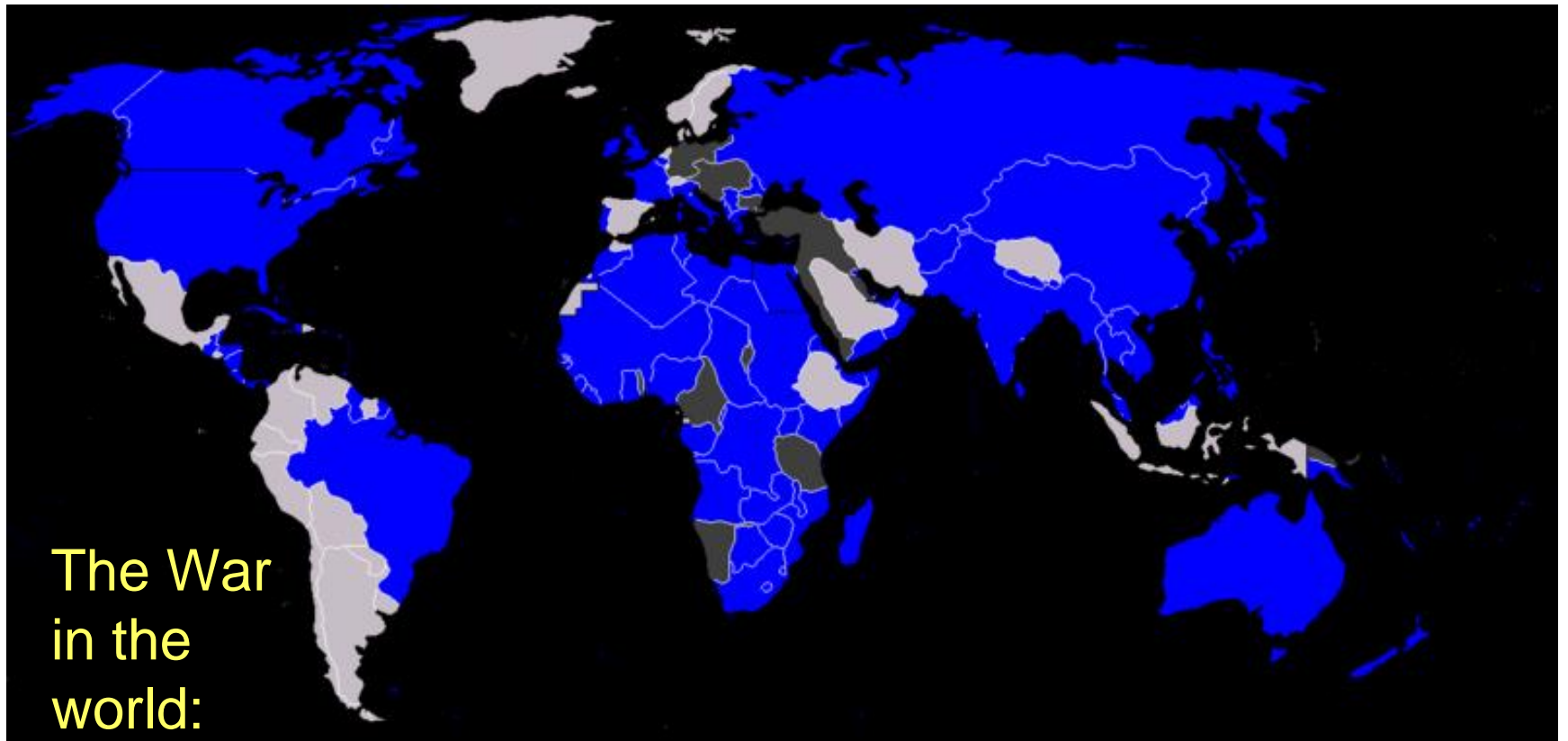
Belgium, Portugal, Serbia, Italia (from '15), France, Australia, United Kingdom, Montenegro, Japan, United States of America (from '17) Romania, Russia (till '17) (then also Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Liberia, Greece, Brazil, Guatemala, Cuba, Siam)

Some neutral countries:

The Netherlands, Spain, Switzerland, Albania, Scandinavian countries...

Europe in 1914





The War in the world:

in blue the
countries
officially
involved

How it started

1914 – Sarajevo: the archduke Ferdinand and his wife Sofia are killed by Gavrilo Princip, young member of the group for an independent Slav country. Austro-Hungarian Empire declared war to Serbia.



Soldiers



Public opinion and war



Protests,
demonstrations,
strikes,
departures



How many victims among soldiers and civilians during the whole conflicts?

A - 9 millions deaths, 20 millions injured

B – 4 millions deaths, 6 millions injured

C – 15 millions deaths, 12 millions injured

D – 2 millions deaths, 3 millions injured

Finally, the war produced more than 9 millions of deaths and over 20 millions of injured people.

Right after the war, the epidemic of “Spanish” fever provokes in whole Europe more than 1,700.000 victims, 600.00 only in Italy.

Reminder - The Second World War:

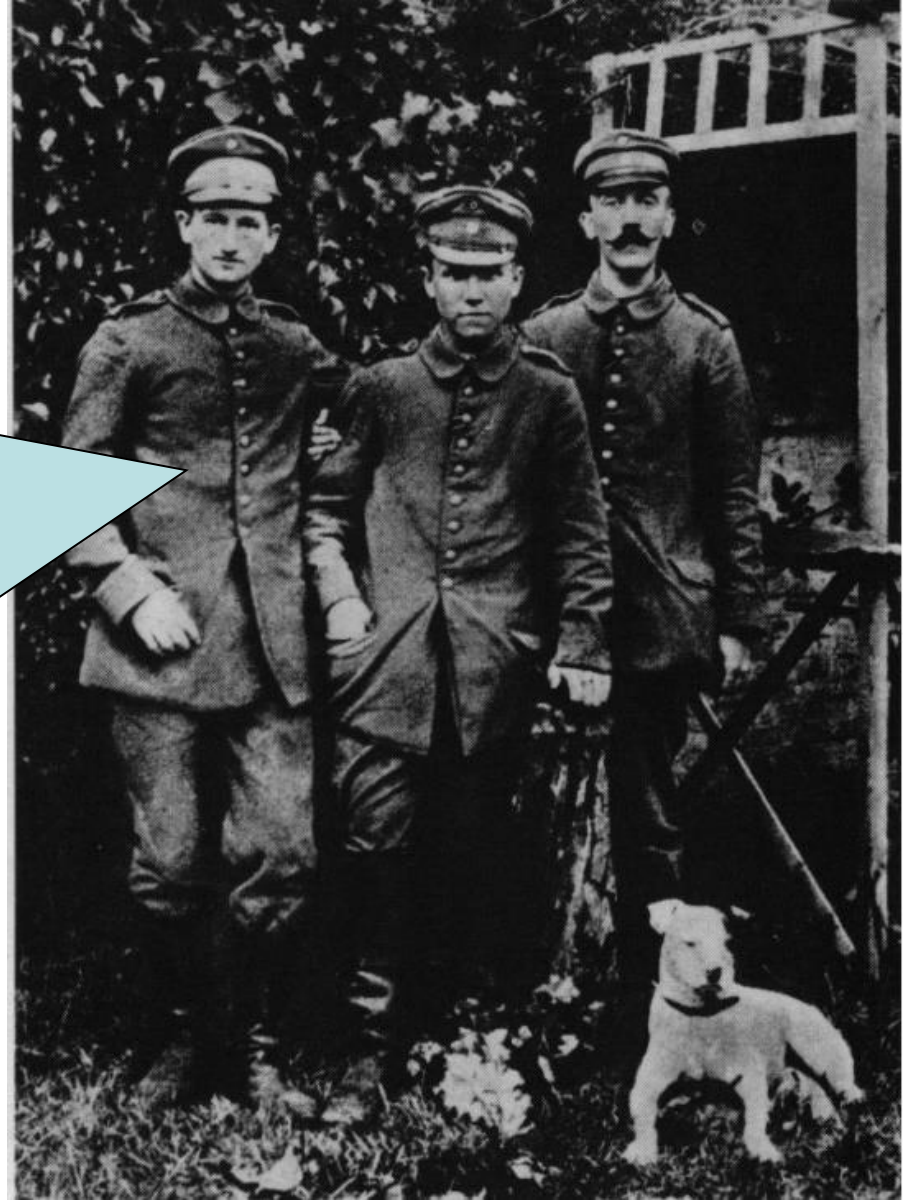
60 millions deaths, including 25 millions soldiers and 35 millions civilians

Europe in 1923, new countries, new frontiers

50. L'Europa nel 1923, all'indomani della Grande Guerra

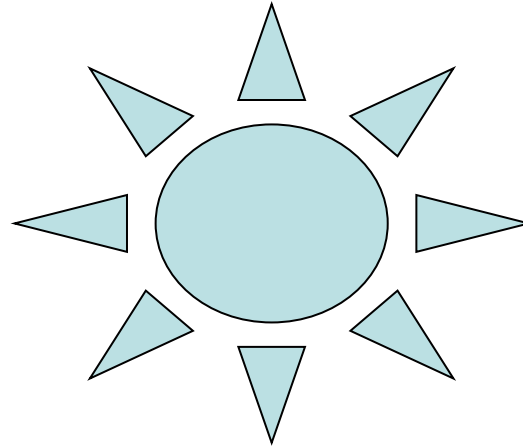
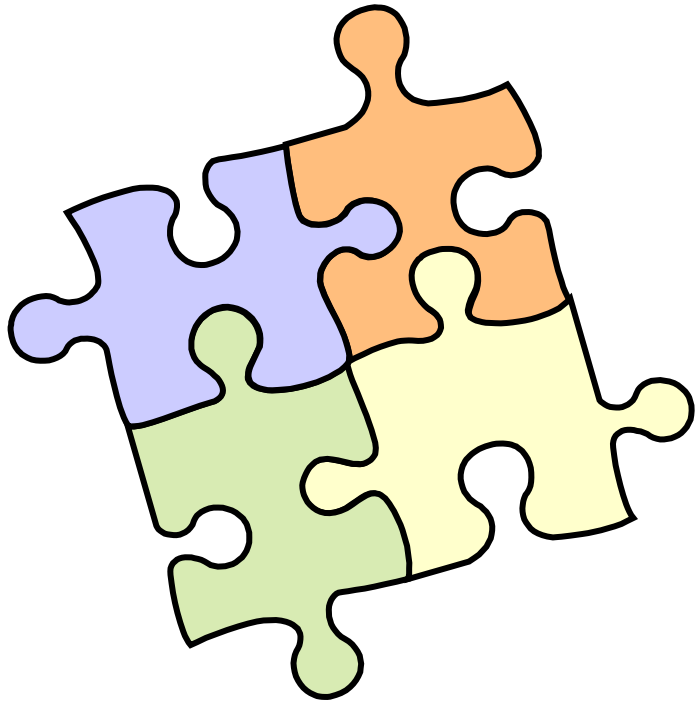


Who is this
young Austrian
soldier of
WW1?



Adolf Hitler

After the war destruction ...



... re-building peace

No more war: the beginning of an international peace movement



Three international peace groups were founded in Bilthoven, the Netherlands, in the aftermath of [World War I](#): the [International Fellowship of Reconciliation](#) in 1919, [Service Civil International](#) in 1920, and [War Resisters' International](#) in 1921. The founding meetings of all three groups took place at the home of the pacifists and educators [Kees and Betty Boeke](#)

Pierre Ceresole - The Founder of Service Civil International



Pierre Ceresole was born in 1879 in Lausanne. His family was wealthy and his father was for some time the president of the Swiss Federal Council. Pierre was gifted and was given a good education. He studied mathematics with a plan of becoming an engineer and was expected to make a brilliant career. However, he was neither attracted by money nor position. He gave the money he inherited from his father to the State, because he did not think he deserved it.

Pierre's interests in people took him out on a long journey in 1910. He went to the USA, where after some time he got the idea of continuing around the world. But first he had to earn some more money. He tried many different jobs. Amongst other things he worked as a gravedigger, using a pick and shovel for the first time. These tools were to become very important in his life.



Pierre CERESOLE attended the meeting in Bilthoven in 1919. He became the secretary of the International Fellowship of Reconciliation and proposed to identify a village on the French-German border in order to start a peace action. Later he founded Service Civil International.

A German delegate to Bilthoven – 1919

“We have been talking for two days: is there no practical work we can do to give expression to what we have been saying?

My brother was a soldier in Northern France: he killed, and he was killed in Verdun.

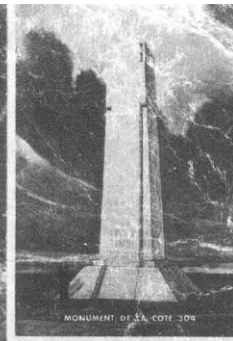
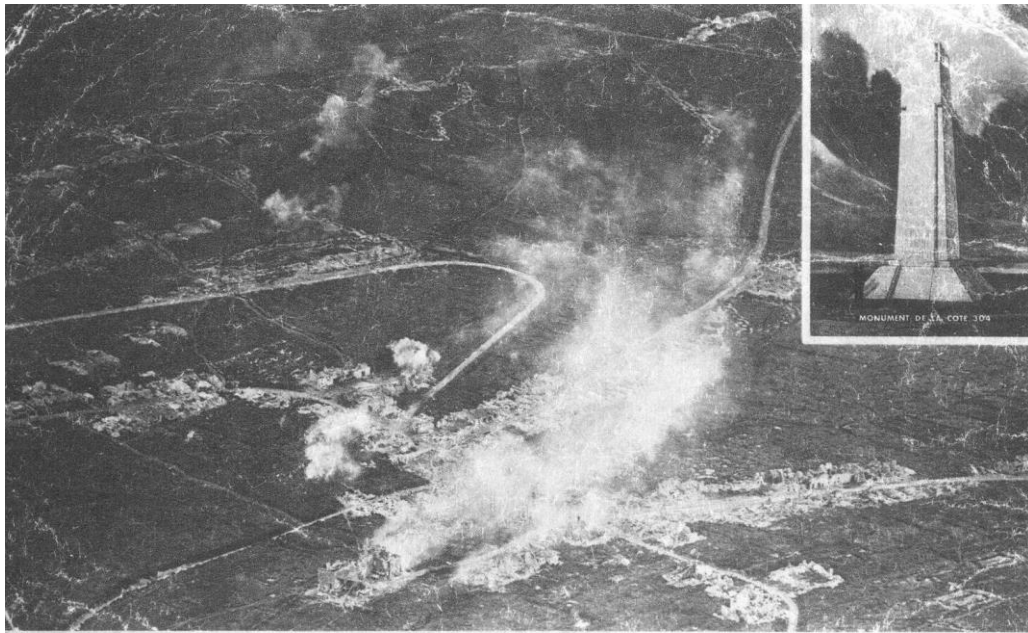
We need to help rebuild these ruins.”



Pierre Cérésolle and his colleague Hubert Parris visited several villages: local authorities were happy to host volunteers, but then refused to have German people among the volunteers.



Only at Esnes, village close to Verdun, totally destroyed by the war, the Major accepted the peace volunteers' conditions.



ESNES ET LES PENTES SUD-OUEST DE 304 SOUS LE BOMBARDEMENT EN 1916



VUE AÉRIENNE D'ESNES EN 1916

REPORT no. 1

Pierre Céréssole and I left Frankfurt on the evening of 16th November, and we arrived in Clermont the next day at noon. We collected materials, furniture and tools generously provided by the local group of the Movement for Reconciliation. Two hours before our departure from Clermont, on Thursday 18th November 1920, we rejoiced for the arrival of our Dutch friend **Chris Rison**, who was able to join us during the first difficult days in Esnes. There, we settled in a ruined shack without floor or windows. Nevertheless, we put down our camp beds and we even slept well, regardless of the 15 degrees below zero! The next day we fixed up our base and on Saturday we placed the first stone of the first portable house we would build for the homeless people in Esnes.

We are full of enthusiasm and people thank us all the time, but we are still waiting for our German friends, who will hopefully join us soon.

On behalf of the Service Civil International group

Hubert Parris

Esnes, 21st November 1920





Report no. 2

Right on Christmas day, our first friend-former enemy finally joined us: it's a good omen for the work we started here to rebuild "peace on earth for the men of goodwill". He is **Adalbert Szilard**, a musician and student of architecture in Budapest. Today it's in Hungary, but one year ago Budapest was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Since our last report, we have achieved the construction of two temporary houses for homeless people, one of which is now our base. A third one will be ready soon. At the end of November, a Dutch teacher, **Maria Van der Linden**, joined our group and her presence has been essential for a best management of the house and the meals. Unfortunately, a week later, Chris, the other Dutch volunteer, had to quit the camp for family reasons. The delay in the arrival of the German volunteers should be due to visa problems, but local authorities have told us that everything is ready now. We look forward to welcoming them, as we need them so much for speeding up the construction.

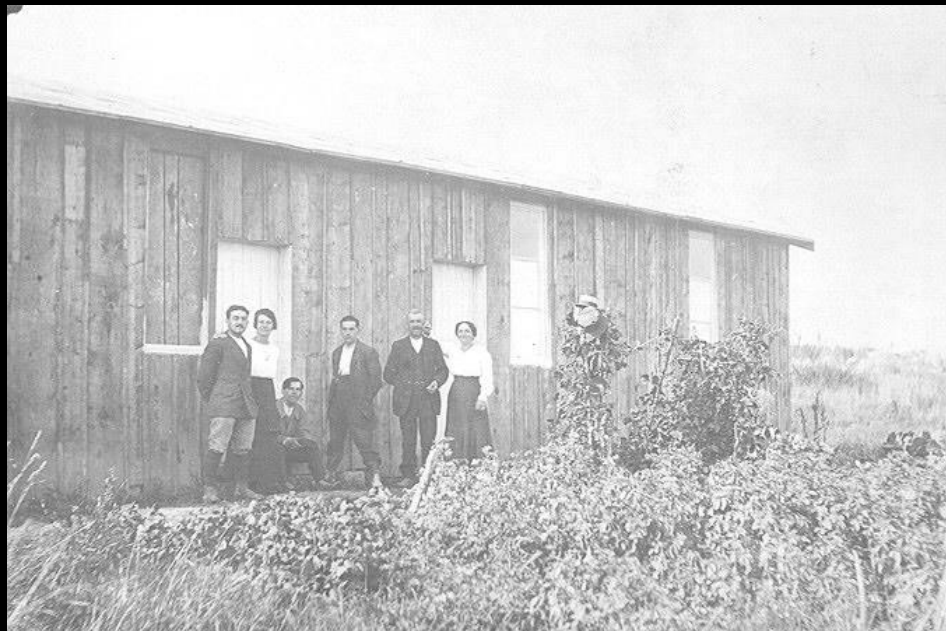
As suggested by **Madame Biéler**, head of the Relief Committee, Hubert Parris has started to give English lessons to about 15 boys and girls of Esnes.

On behalf of the Service Civil International group

Pierre Cérésole

Esnes, 26th December 1920





REPORT no. 3

At the turn of the new year, our international group is now finally completed. Three German volunteers have arrived, and we welcome them warmly:

Valentin Hopper, artisan, soldier in France

Karl Keinath, also an artisan, soldier in Belgium and Russia

Helmut Starke, shop tenant, soldier in Russia

They look shy and don't speak French, so they communicate in German with some of us, but they are very motivated and ready to work. Perhaps other German friends will join the camp, and in the meanwhile Pierre's brother, **Ernest Cérésolle**, has also arrived in Esnes. He has been a lieutenant in the Swiss army, so he is a bit strong in discipline, but he likes a laugh too. Our fourth house is almost completed, with a delay caused by the lack of some iron joints that never arrived. In the end we decided to make our own. Karl has been extremely useful in this task, as he worked as a smith in Cologne before the war. He has even been able to restore a rusty military forge which villagers are now using to repair farming tools.

There are also bad news, and we are worrying for the future of our project: it seems that the French government intends to reduce the support to these areas, so that they will probably not send us more portables to build. Nevertheless there are so many urgent jobs to do, we just need to find the financial resources.

Thanks to you all for the support you provide us all the time.

On behalf of the Service Civil International group

Hubert Parris

Esnes, 28 gennaio 1921



VALENTIN, letter – 15th February 1921



Dear Mummy,

I've been here in Esnes for one month now, and everything is all right. Don't be scared for me, the war is over. It has been really important to me to return to France after the two years I spent

fighting in a trench at the front, where I saw and did horrible things. I would not have been able to live a normal life, if I hadn't got the chance to "see" the consequences of the evil of a war. They sent us singing to the war, but our eyes were shut. Now I'm silent, but the peace is opening my eyes.

I can only communicate with these people by gestures, but I can see the sorrow of a broken life.

Yesterday I was helping an old peasant to remove stones and rubble from his fruit garden. When he realized that we were alone, he came very close to me and spoke in a comprehensible German. He told me in a whisper that his grandmother was from Berlin. Then he started crying, and he said: "The war will start again. It will end only when either Germany or France will disappear. We hate each other too much...".

Mum, I'm 22 years old. I don't want to think that after this horrible war another one will come. These extraordinary people working with me let me hope that everybody, on their humble side, can do a lot. I'm using my brain now, and for the first time in my life, I feel I am important to somebody.

A big hug,

your Valentin



Report no. 4

Dear friends,

If I had sent this report to you only one week ago, you would have read of enthusiastic perspectives for our service in at least 3 other villages close to Esnes. There we could have worked to help the farmers to clear their fields from mines and ruins, as well as to reconstruct houses and roads. Thanks to the donation of 100 pounds from the British committee of the Fellowship of Reconciliation and the loan of a vehicle from the French committee we were on the point of planning the recruitment of other groups of volunteers from England, Switzerland, Germany and the United States.

But two days ago, right the day before three of us were supposed to move to a close village to start the activities, we received the peremptory order by the Prefecture – on behalf of the Municipality of Esnes – to stop any work we were doing. The order also stated that no local authority in the future can appoint us any kind of work, paid or voluntary. No explanations justified this order.

As a matter of fact, during the last couple of weeks we have only been working with individuals and families, helping to clean their fields or repair their house, in exchange of some food or simple vegetables. This was because we had finished building the portable and were waiting for new tasks from the municipality.

We know the reason behind this behaviour: this order tries to satisfy those few people here in Esnes that are hostile to our service: Madame Biéler, in particular, and her Relief Committee. They are right: we are attempting to destroy the hatred towards Germany by the French, and we are trying to fight the fanatic patriotism, which is now the dominant religion in the country. But we don't intend to give up: with your usual and really appreciated support, we can continue.

On behalf of the Service Civil International group

Hubert Parris

Esnes, 9th March 1921





Finally, Pierre is called for
a meeting with the
authorities of Esnes.



Madame Biéler

“Mister Cérésolle, we don’t want to undervalue the very useful work done by the international volunteers. Their arrival last November gave us vitality and hope to overcome the disaster of the war. Furthermore, our Committee got new impulse and our people rediscovered the spirit of solidarity. We sincerely thank you very much.”

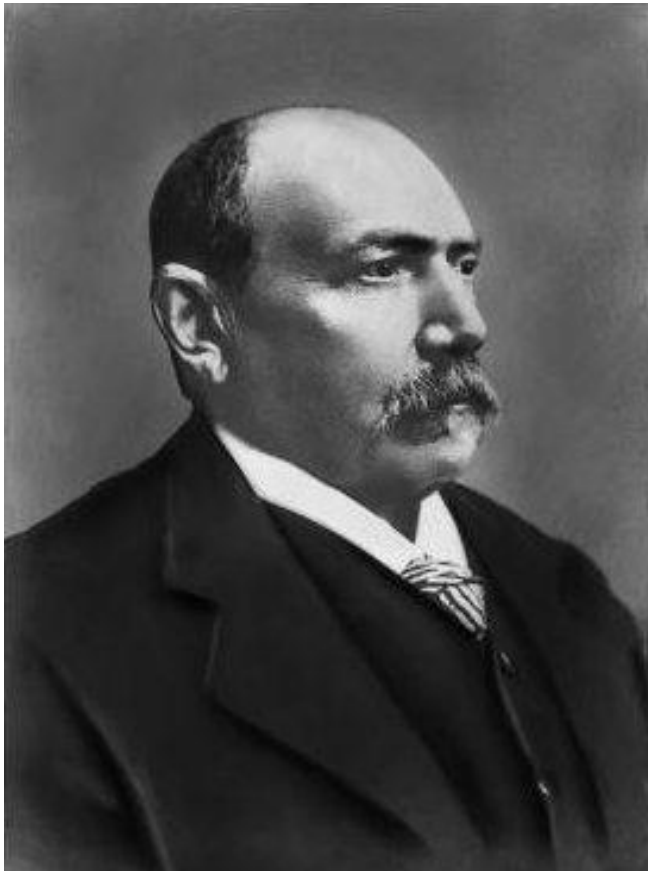


“But we cannot accept the presence of these ENEMIES of our homeland, of these butchers of our people, this is a violence that cannot be imposed upon us! Our widows and orphans have to be protected from this new outrage.

A long time will be needed for our injuries to be cured and healed, if this will ever happen. Rebuilding cannot mean to forget to mourn our dead and our ruins.”

Monsieur LeGay, Major of Esnes

Listen to me, dear Pierre, the people of Esnes are really happy to host your volunteers. Of course there are always rude people: but how to forget that one year ago we were still under the cannons' fire?



You know very well that I don't think anything bad against these Germans and Austrian you took here. But some – like Madame Biéler – still look at them as if they have their helmets on their heads. Besides, they don't speak one word of French, we cannot make friends with them and somebody is even whispering that they are spies preparing a new attack from Germany. I tell them that these ideas are just absurdities, but it's impossible to argue with these obstinate farmers and widows! Your help is precious to us, Pierre.

Listen to me: send home those Kraut... sorry, I mean those German volunteers, and you'll see that in Esnes everybody likes you again.

Pierre calls the group of volunteers for a meeting and report what Monsieur LeGay and Madame Bièler have told him.

“The major and the Relief committee thank us a lot for our support and intend to continue with our camp and they. But at the condition that our German friends quitted the camp. I don’t want to take decision alone, as we are a group. What do you think we should do?”



All the volunteers express their opinion.



Helmut (translated by ADALBERT)



I think, and I'm sure my German comrades agree, that we don't want to create troubles to the project. The idea of an international work camp is just wonderful, we feel so happy to share this experience with you.

It's true, we don't speak French, but somehow we can communicate with the people in the village. But the war is still too close to them. It's too early to speak about peace, even though we don't speak but we work for peace.

We'll leave tomorrow, your work here is too important to be endangered.

Helmut (to show his effort to learn French)



ehm... ehm... MERZI !

Ernest Cérésole



We are, all together, a group. A close-knit group. We are here for a very important reason and purpose, which is not clearing a field or building wooden houses.

We are building the future. In time of war as in time of peace we have to achieve our objectives

**ALL TOGETHER,
OR**

**ALL TOGETHER
WE WILL DIE!!!!**

... well... I mean... we will go away all together.



MARIA

Maybe we could try to find a compromise. We can ask the local French ladies of the Relief Committee to teach French to our German friends, so they will be able to understand and speak to everybody.

Or we can send them back home for 2 or 3 weeks, so the local authorities will give us some more work to do. Then our German volunteers can study some French at home and finally they can come back here.



KARL (very angry!)

SPEAK FRENZ KAPUTT HART!
DAMN!
DEPARTURE, DON'T LIKE
MYSELF.
WE WORKEN WELL UND
CONTENT.
YOU SWITZERISCH UND
ENGLISH MEN, YOU LEAVE.
WE DEUTSCH, WE STAY HERE.
WE WORKEN FUR PEACE.
UND IF FRENZ PERZONS NOT
LIKE WE DEUTSCH,
I TAKE MY GROSSE HAMMER
UND... KAPUTT!!!!!!!!!!



The discussion continued for long time: what do you think they finally decided?

Take one minute for you. If you were one of those volunteers, which solution you would have suggested?

At the end, the group took a decision. The next days, Pierre Cérésole and the volunteers asked to meet the major and the community of Esnes.

Pierre CERESOLE – to an open meeting with the community in Esnes

**“Distinguished Major, member of the Relief Committee, people of Esnes,
We are in April now, and for 5 months we – our group of international
volunteers - have been living inside your community, which suffered so
much because of the war. We arrived in wintertime, and
met ruins and sorrows. We tried to provide help and solidarity.
We met hope too: a special hope that is your hope and our hope.
Peace must become stronger than war.**

We will leave tomorrow, we will ALL go away.

**Our solidarity is without borders, we don't accept violence or hate,
we don't accept divisions and prejudices. We thank you with all our heart
for your hospitality and also for having allowed us to test our motivation.
We will continue our experiment elsewhere. We too want to create an army,
a peace army of people of goodwill. An army specialised against the
poisoned gas of misunderstanding, prejudice, hostility and hatred
imposed by political powers. A peaceful army made of men and women
who choose to leave their comfortable homes and their safe habits to bring
support and solidarity to those who are in need or to share a common
ideal. Men and women who fight in order to use all their positive energy to
highlight what we have in common rather than arguing on what divides us.
Here in Esnes we planted a seed. History will help it to grow. “**



We'll leave tomorrow ...

... we will all leave tomorrow

So the group left and the first international camp ended without achieving all its purposes. Nevertheless the seed planted in Esnes gave its fruits, and many organizations and thousands of volunteers will start to move around the world.



Brief history of projects in the world



First camp for consciousness objectors
Switzerland 1924

First camp in India

1934



*Am 20. Januar vor
dem Camp*



Civil war

Spain - 1937



Camp in Israel - 1951

First camp East-West, Warsaw – Poland - 1955





First camp in Algeria - 1963