

Pioneers of internationalism

Esperanto and the First World War

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The state of the art

Esperanto is a planned language, with the aim of becoming an international auxiliary language. Accordingly, scholars have generally studied it from a linguistic perspective within a subdiscipline called interlinguistics (Jespersen 1931; Wandruszka 1982; Kuznetsov 1987; Schubert 1989; Barandovská-Frank 1995; Gobbo 2015; Blanke 2018; Tonkin 1997).¹ Exceptions to this trend are Peter Forster's solid *The Esperanto Movement* (1982), based on the sociology of the British case, and Andrew Large's *The Artificial Language Movement* (1985), which included as well other linguistic proposals, apart from Esperanto.

Nevertheless, in recent years social scientists have rediscovered Esperanto as a social movement. Partially because of the commercial success of Akira Okrent's *In the land of invented languages* (2009) and the popularity of the so-called Hollywood languages such as those of *Star Trek* and *Game of Thrones*, a reimpression of Forster's book (2012) was followed by a number of remarkable new contributions. Among them, Roberto Garvía's *Esperanto and Its Rivals* (2015) convincingly explains the victory of Esperanto over its rival language movements (mainly Volapük and Ido) at the turn of the twentieth century.

In fact, since the Middle Ages there have been hundreds of attempts to create an international language. Umberto Eco (1993) called this process *The search for the perfect language*.² However, only Esperanto became a living language and created a community of speakers, able to survive the death of its creator. By analysing the field of chemistry, Michael Gordin showed in *Scientific Babel* that Esperanto, and also its reformed version Ido, played a non-negligible role in the history of science (Gordin 2015). Meanwhile, Esther Schor presented in *Bridge of Words* the relationship between Esperanto and Jewish, cultural and intellectual history, as well as the vitality of the current social movement (Schor 2016). This last aspect is also the topic of a recent PhD research project in anthropology: *Of Revolutionaries and Geeks* (Fians 2019).

Whereas the Esperanto movement flourished mainly in Europe, it was also a cultural bridge between Western modernity and Asian progressive individuals, as shown in *Green Star Japan* (Rapley 2013). And it played a relevant role in Russia during the first decades of the twentieth century, as explained in *Tongues of Fire* (O’Keeffe forthcoming). Its diffusion in the Soviet Union would end in the Stalin’s Purges, coincident in time with the persecution suffered by its supporters in Nazi Germany. Such persecutions are the focus of Ulrich Lins’ work *Dangerous Language* (2020), who published his book in Esperanto in 1989. In fact, this is one of the reasons that research on the Esperanto movement is not always well known in academia, as most of it is written and published in Esperanto. Another example is a collective volume by forty authors, coordinated by José Salguero and myself, published in 2018, *Antaŭ unu jarcento. Esperanto kaj la granda milito* [A century ago. Esperanto and the Great War]. One of the contributions to this book is a detailed and amusing war (and travel) journal written by Robert Murray, a Scottish soldier who described – in Esperanto – his adventures during the four years of the war.

The creation of Esperanto

By the end of the nineteenth century, revolutions in transport and communications facilitated international contacts like never before. Moreover, the belief in progress and rationality had stimulated agreements on standards in a number of issues, such as weights and measures, but also an international prime meridian to make it easier for worldwide travelling and trading across countries. That is, crossing and passing at Greenwich, the initial meridian was linked to a universal day, beginning at its mean midnight. From this perspective, a rational language was seen as a scientific tool, necessary in a world without an international *lingua franca*.

Since Latin ceased to play such a role, different powers had been struggling for their national language to take its place. To some extent, the diffusion of each language mirrored each country’s power; consequently, the international equilibrium between 1870 and 1914 was translated into the field of language. French was dominant in the realm of diplomacy, English was gaining terrain particularly in economy and trade, German was strong in science, and Russian was also expanding its influence. In this context, the debates around an auxiliary neutral language arose naturally.

European ethnolinguistic diversity was particularly evident in places such as Białystok, today in Poland and then part of the Russian empire. In that city there were communities of Poles, Russians, Germans, Belarusians, Tatars, Ukrainians, Lithuanians and Chuvash, but the Jews formed the majority of the population. One of them, Lejzer Zamenhof, was born in 1857 and adopted as well a Christian name in the Polish language, Ludwig. As a child he observed tensions between the different groups, the Jews often being those who bore the brunt. Sensitive and polyglot, he soon realized that they were all more alike than they thought, but they lacked a common language to communicate with each other.

Still a teenager, Zamenhof took on the exciting task of creating an interlanguage, not to replace other languages, but to use it among people with different mother tongues.

On 26 July 1887, he published in Warsaw the grammar of the new language. First in Russian, then in a quadrilingual edition: Polish, German, French and Russian. The following year, in English and in other languages, always with the same desire: to help achieve a fairer and more peaceful world. As he used the pseudonym Dr Esperanto, 'he who has hope', his work would be known as 'the international language of Dr. Esperanto', which would later lead to 'Esperanto'. In a few years dozens of clubs and publications in the new language had been created, mainly in Europe.

At the beginning, those interested in Esperanto were predominantly Jews from the Zone of Residence, many of them speakers of Yiddish variants and aware of the importance of neutral communication between different language groups. Secondly, those who had studied a previous project (Volapük) also switched to the new language, more democratic and easier to learn than the one created by the German priest Schleyer, who considered it as personal property. A third group was formed by the followers of the pacifist writer Tolstoy, who had openly expressed his support for Esperanto.

In fact, many will be the links between Esperanto and pacifism (Lins 2000; Alcalde 2021). For example, most of the winners of the Nobel Peace Prize between 1901 and 1914 were related to the international language, such as Alfred Fried and Henri La Fontaine. Zamenhof himself would be a candidate for this prize eight times. As far as other Nobel recipients of this period are concerned, worth mentioning are Wilhelm Ostwald (chemistry), Romain Rolland (literature) and Charles Richet (medicine).³ Meanwhile, Jules Verne imagined in his last (unfinished) book a not-too-distant future in which Esperanto is effectively used as an international auxiliary language.

Esperanto conquered intellectuals because of its rationality, with sixteen grammar rules easy to assimilate. Nouns ended in -o, adjectives in -a and adverbs in -e. It was a phonetic language, to each spelling corresponded one phoneme and to each phoneme a single spelling. There were no exceptions. Most of the roots were taken from the Romance languages, but they were also present in Germanic and Slavic languages. The idea was that a person with knowledge of an Indo-European language could intuitively understand the meaning of *lingvo*, *internacia* or *demokratio*. The use of the derivation made it easier for words to be learned, not through memory, but through logic. Thus, the prefix mal- created antonyms, so that the adjectives *granda* and *alta* were transformed into *malgranda* and *malalta* to mean small and low. This gave the language a great expressive capacity, developed through a remarkable literary production, first as translations and then as original creation.

Pioneers of internationalism

At the turn of the twentieth century, the centre of the Esperanto movement moved to Paris, the city of light. In 1905, the first international Esperanto congress took place in France, with 688 participants from all over the world. Without interpreters, they carried out all kinds of activities. Zamenhof was appointed Knight of the Legion of Honour, and Esperanto, until then a written language, became a spoken language. Since then, annual meetings brought together people aiming to contact other people from different countries, with whom they shared interests.

One of the groups interested in an international language was the railway workers. Because of their profession, they travelled frequently and experienced limitations in communicating with the local population. At the Barcelona congress in 1909, they created the *Internacia Asocio de Esperantistaj Fervojistoj*, with the following objectives: to promote Esperanto among railwaymen, to create a specialized dictionary, to promote international relations within the framework of their profession, to publish a list of addresses for their members, to facilitate exchanges for children in the non-school period and to help the participation of railway workers in Esperanto congresses. At that time, no other international railway association existed.

The Barcelona meeting also went down in history because it was the first in which there were international floral games. That is, an international literary contest – in Esperanto – which took its name from a medieval Occitan-Catalan event. The jury praised the German poet Marie Hankel, and among the winners there was also a young Carles Riba, who would later become famous as a poet in the Catalan language.

Also in 1909, a mass exercise was held by the Red Cross to see how humanitarian workers could deal with wounded soldiers in a foreign territory during war. A few days later, in Valencia, an accident in which several participants in the congress were involved served to test the practical utility of Esperanto. Afterwards, the magazine of the *Société Française Esperanto-Croix Rouge* would dedicate six pages to this event, describing the relief experience as very satisfactory. Such exercises by the Red Cross had already been tested the previous year in Dresden. Concerned about the growing tensions between the various powers, the international community was preparing itself to face the next war.

In 1908, new professional associations were formed in Dresden. Among them, the one for pharmacists, *Internacia Esperantista Farmaciista Asocio*. Also the association of doctors, *Universala Medicina Esperanto-Asocio*, aware of the vital importance of communication between doctor and patient. In addition, vegetarians used the congress to establish two associations. The fact that the International Vegetarian Union was created in an Esperanto congress shows the close connection between both social movements. As an anecdote, the Esperantist vegetarian association was created two days before the international one.

The *Internacia Sciencia Asocio Esperanta* had been created in 1906 at the Geneva congress. There the *Internacia Societo de Esperantistaj Juristoj* was also founded. The latter had three objectives: to facilitate international contacts between jurists, to work through Esperanto to develop international and comparative law, and to write a legal terminology in Esperanto. At that time, there was no other association that put in contact lawyers from different countries.

Meanwhile, different religious groups were also interested in the possibilities offered by an international language. Following an ecumenical perspective well advanced to its time, in 1902 *Espero Katolika* appeared, a publication which would soon collide with the hierarchy of the church. Since then, several associations not only of Catholic Esperantists and of Protestants, but also within other religions, have been created. Worth noting are the cases of spiritualism in Brazil, the Japanese religion Oomoto and an Islamic trend known as Baha'i. All three had prophets who had spoken about the need for a neutral language of communication, and had some Esperantists among their most prominent members.

In fact, already at the first Esperanto congress in 1905 in Boulogne-sur-Mer there were groups that launched international associations. For example, the Freemasons at the time founded an international lodge, *Espero Framasona*, whose working language was Esperanto. Known Esperantists who were also Freemasons are Alfred Fried (Nobel Peace Prize Laureate), Charles Richet (Nobel Prize Laureate for Medicine), Henri La Fontaine (Nobel Peace Prize Laureate), Wilhelm Oswald (Nobel Prize Laureate for Chemistry), Wilhelm Molly (future founder of an Esperanto micro-state) and Gaston Moch. All of them were also convinced pacifists. Such a strong relationship between Esperanto and pacifism was embodied in the *Internacia Societo Esperantista by Paco*. Established by the French serviceman Gaston Moch, this association sought to promote Esperanto among pacifists, as well as pacifism among Esperanto speakers. Many of the leaders of the Esperanto movement were members of this association, such as Hector Hodler and Edmond Privat (founders of *Universala Esperanto-Asocio* (UEA)), the eminent mathematician Carlo Bourlet, Professor Théophile Cart (future president of the *Akademio de Esperanto*) and the writers Antoni Grabowski, Marie Hankel and Henri Valienne, initiators of the Esperanto literature.

In 1914, war broke out, a hard blow to all internationalist ideals. But it also evidenced the need to increase friendly contacts between people from different countries, with the aim of avoiding future wars. Multiple initiatives proliferated. In 1918, Alexander William Thompson and Norman Booth, two young British soldiers in a French battlefield, created the *Skolta Esperanto-Ligo*. Until then there was no international association to unite Boy Scouts. Their founder Baden-Powell also recommended them to learn Esperanto.⁴

A world to discover

The emergence of Esperanto in 1887 made it possible for people to consider having international contacts, thus overcoming linguistic barriers. Two years later, the first *adresaro* [the suffix -aro indicates 'set of'] was published with 1,000 addresses, 919 of them in the vast Russian empire and the rest in Germany, Austria-Hungary, England, the United Kingdom, France, Sweden, the United States, Turkey, China, Spain and Romania. Successively more complete versions of this Esperanto agenda would be published. It was a useful tool for correspondence between people from different countries, who often achieved some local popularity. Exhibitions of letters and postcards from the most diverse places were common, a practice that would continue until the arrival of the internet.

Once the usefulness of Esperanto for international correspondence was established, a wide range of options opened up, such as travelling. The first Esperanto traveller was probably the Swedish Valdemar Langlet, who in 1895 began a series of long horseback crossings through Russia, Turkey, Romania, Austro-Hungary and Germany. Esperanto allowed him to meet Lev Tolstoy, whom he visited on several occasions at his residence in Yásnaia Poliana. Langlet described these trips in several books (see Langlet 2004 and 1935), but also in *Lingvo Internacia*, the most important magazine of the Esperanto movement until 1914, published monthly in Odessa – then in the Russian Empire and now in Ukraine.

The reading of these texts revealed fraternal contacts through the international language and encouraged other people to cross borders and meet their correspondents. For most of them, it was the first time that they practised Esperanto in a spoken way and they too wanted to write about their own experiences in *Lingvo Internacia* and in other publications. These writings are emotional and enthusiastic, halfway between surprise and admiration. Even those who visited the land of their ancestral enemies (Russians/Swedes, French/Germans, etc.) often pointed out that they had been treated with affection and generosity, understanding each other superbly through Esperanto. With an anthropological curiosity, they showed the customs of their hosts and highlighted the attractions of the places visited.

On another front, Langlet was a pioneer in another type of internationalism of a more intimate nature. In 1899, he married the Finnish Esperantist Signe Blomberg, thus forming the first international marriage between Esperanto speakers. The wedding trip was to the exotic Samarkand, combining again Esperanto and adventure. After Signe's death, in 1925 Langlet married another Esperantist, Nina Borovko, the daughter of his Ukrainian friends Nikolai and Antonina Szalko-Czajkovska. Nikolai had learned the language in Siberia as a soldier in exile and had subsequently met Antonina at the Yalta Esperanto club. As far as Antonina was concerned, she had been the Esperanto guide in Crimea for Langlet and his colleague Erik Etzel, beginning a friendship that would last a lifetime.

Meanwhile, Esperanto flourished in Paris. The local association, with more than 1,000 members, was divided into different sections, and groups existed in all the districts of the city. Every year more than a hundred courses took place, and every day it was possible to attend an Esperanto evening, in which foreign visitors often participated. In 1911, one of the usual comrades was the Russian Vasilij Nikolajevič Devjatnin, who was then living in Paris. In the summer of 1912, Devjatnin would achieve notoriety by walking nearly 2,000 kilometres with Romano, a Turkish fellow-Esperantist, to participate in the Esperanto congress in Krakow. His experiences during these forty-two days of the journey were published shortly afterwards in *Propaganda piedvojaĝo al la Oka Internacia Esperantista Kongreso*, a book that also included photos of the author with the Esperantists he met along the way. As the title indicated, the purpose of the trip was to promote the international language. For this reason, Devjatnin and Romano gave conferences in the cities they visited, and also held interviews with the local press. After the congress, Devjatnin stayed in Germany working on different Esperanto projects. However, in 1914 he became an enemy overnight and he would spend the entire war as a prisoner of war near Leipzig, where he taught the Zamenhof language to German officers, earning a salary for it.

Other famous travellers at this time were the Dutch Abraham Mossel and Gerard Perfors. They were young socialists, pacifists, vegetarians, atheists and radical teetotallers. With light luggage and great ideals they intended to travel the world for eight years, learning about different cultures from a humanistic perspective. In Amsterdam, they enrolled in an Esperanto course, the instrument that would allow them to carry out their plan. Inspired by their enthusiasm, the teacher of the course, Frans van der Hoorn, decided to sign up for the trip also. All three departed in July 1911, with great public attention. After crossing the Alps, they were joined in Vienna

by Marie, Gerard's fiancée. In 1912, the Balkan War surprised them, but they continued their way. They crossed into Egypt and walked through the Ottoman Empire until they reached Palestine. There they worked in the Jewish colonies and continued to explore the Middle East. When the Great War broke out, Gerard and Marie Perfors decided to return to the Netherlands. Meanwhile, Mossel continued to walk through Egypt and Sudan to the border with Eritrea. Back in Amsterdam, he published two books: one about his trip through Europe and the other about his time in the Jewish colonies in Palestine, in which he anticipated the tensions that would end up leading to the current Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Van der Hoorn remained in Palestine, where he created a family.⁵

The Great War (1914–18)

The nationalist rise of the European powers on the one hand and the need for the internationalization of scientific research on the other had placed the debate about the auxiliary language among the main issues on the international agenda. It was linked to the intellectual dilemmas of the time, ranging from technological to spiritual issues, from ethnic identities to the so-called Jewish problem and, above all, to the possibility of peace in international relations. Therefore, if there was something that characterized a large part of a social movement as diverse and plural as the Esperanto movement, it was its pacifist vocation. In this sense, it has been argued that, if it had taken place, the World Congress in Paris – scheduled for 2–9 August 1914 – would have been the largest concentration of pacifists in all of history (see Alcalde 2015). But the war broke out and the Esperantists had to adapt to the new situation (Alcalde and Salguero 2018).

There were numerous supporters of the international language among the leaders of the main pacifist currents: scientific pacifism, feminist pacifism, religious pacifism and workers' internationalism. Moreover, anti-war associations such as the International League of Women for Peace and Freedom or the International Office for Peace supported the use of Esperanto for their correspondence and international meetings. In addition, the German priest Josef Metzger created in 1916 the World League for Peace of the White Cross, an international Catholic association that used Esperanto as its working language.

Zamenhof's language was also widely spread among conscientious objectors. For this reason, prominent promoters of the language spent the years of war behind bars, such as the Slovak doctor and writer Albert Škarvan, follower and friend of Lev Tolstoy. For his opposition to military service, Škarvan was arrested several times, the last time in 1915; he would remain in prison until the end of the war. These periods of captivity were conducive to the spread of Esperanto, because this language allowed people who did not have a common language to understand each other in a very short period of time. There were even Esperanto magazines published in prison camps, such as in Rennbahn, Germany. Among those who learned the language as prisoners in Siberia, there were two Hungarians who would play a fundamental role in Esperanto literature: Tivadar Soros – father of the financier George Soros – and Julio Baghy.

Due to the war, many Esperanto periodicals ran into difficulties and some stopped publication. Those that were published, often (although not always) reported events from positions close to pacifism. In 1915, Zamenhof published his 'After the Great War: Appeal to the Diplomats' in *The British Esperantist*.⁶ In this text, the initiator of Esperanto proposed the creation of something similar to a United States of Europe, as well as a Permanent European Court established by agreement between all the states. Meanwhile, *Internacia Bulteno* was a bulletin born in November 1914 to report on the war from the official perspective of the German government. Its objective was to counter English, French and Russian propaganda about the cruelty of the Germans and, using their own propaganda, to criticize the enemy.⁷

At another type of frontline, the humanitarian action carried out by UEA is worth mentioning.⁸ At that time, it was based in Geneva and from neutral Switzerland reported on the dead Esperanto speakers or prisoners on both sides. In this role as a mediator between citizens of competing countries, UEA collected hundreds of letters daily through their network of local representatives and forwarded them to their recipients. Moreover, in collaboration with the International Red Cross, they tracked people whose whereabouts were unknown, distributed food, clothing and medicine, and helped to repatriate prisoners of war. It is estimated that the total number of this

Internacia Bulteno

Duonmonata informilo pri la milito

La Bulteno estas senpage sendata al interesuloj kaj gazetoj en ekstergermanaj landoj. En Germanujo kaj Aŭstrio-Hungarujo ĝi estas abonebla por 4 M (24 numeroj); unu numero kostas 20 Pf.

Zur Vermeidung der Herausgabe in mehreren Sprachen erscheint dieses Blatt nur in der neutralen Welthilfssprache Esperanto. Dolmetscher für diese Sprache gibt es in jedem größeren Orte aller Kulturländer.

To avoid the edition in different languages, this bulletin appears only in the neutral universal auxiliary language of »Esperanto«. There are interpreters for this language in every place of any importance in the whole civilized world.

Pour éviter l'édition dans plusieurs langues, ce bulletin ne paraît qu'en «Espéranto», langue auxiliaire universelle neutre. Des interprètes de cette langue se trouvent dans toutes les places de quelque importance de tous les pays civilisés.

Per evitare l'edizione in più lingue, questo giornale verrà pubblicato nei paesi neutrali in lingua »Esperanto«. Interpreti per questa lingua si trovano facilmente nelle città di qualcuno importanza dei paesi civili.

Con et fin de extender la publicación en mudros idiomos aparece esta hoja solamente en los países neutrales en el nuevo lenguaje »Esperanto«. En todas las ciudades de alguien importancia de los países cultos, hay interpretes para este idioma.

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Enhavo: Kion ni volas — La radikoj de la milito — Anglujo deziris la militon — Anglujo kiel protektanto de neutralaj ŝtatoj — La germana imperiestro al prezidanto Wilson — La imperia kancelero von Bethmann-Hollweg al Ameriko — La stato de Belujo komence de Septembro — La tragedio de Loewen — La vero pri Loewen — La kanonpafadon sur la katedralon de Reims — La katedralo kiel artileria apogilo — „Times“ kontraŭ „Times“ — Milita kroniko — Diversajoj — Diversaj bildoj intermetitaj

Figure 4.1 *Internacia Bulteno* was an Esperanto-language periodical published in Berlin between November 1914 and January 1919, which reported on the war from the official perspective of the German government and was sent internationally free of charge.



Figure 4.2 Postcard sent to an Italian POW at Theresienstadt, December 1917.

type of services could have exceeded 100,000 annually. Meanwhile, the Red Cross distributed thousands of copies of a detailed vocabulary with a translation into the international language of the main health lexicon in different languages, designed for those who in times of war had to give or receive help in ambulances and hospitals. The YMCA Christian youth association also distributed thousands of books for learning Esperanto among the imprisoned soldiers of both sides.

Among all the human losses suffered during the war, Zamenhof's death, on 14 April, 1917, stands out for obvious reasons. Affected by the consequences of a militaristic evolution that touched him very closely – a few months earlier his younger brother Alexander had died at the front – he would not live to see most of his descendants perish in the Holocaust.

What if there had been no war?

By studying the evolution of the Esperanto movement, it is possible to imagine situations that could have changed the course of history. What would have happened if the First World War had not broken out? Up until the summer of 1914, Esperanto had gained in relevance and its future looked promising. The scheduled Paris congress had more than 3,500 registered participants, and this was not the only Esperanto project that was cut short by the war. Another one was a micro-state located between Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands.

Following Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo, the European powers met in Vienna in 1815 to redraw the borders more aligned with the new distribution of power. One of the hot spots was a valuable zinc mine between the Netherlands and Prussia. Failing to

reach an agreement, they decided that Neutral Moresnet would be a neutral territory jointly administered by both kingdoms, and, since the independence of Belgium in 1830, by Prussia and Belgium. When the mine was exhausted in 1885, various initiatives were presented to revitalize it. The most successful one came from the mine doctor, Wilhelm Molly, inspired by the French Esperantist Gustave Roy. They wanted to create *Amikejo*, the first Esperanto state. Both being Freemasons, the proposal had humanistic roots, close to pacifism and the search for international brotherhood. As a consequence, the language began to gain support among the 4,000 inhabitants of Neutral Moresnet, the number of 135 speakers was soon reached, the press echoed the idea, and the creation of the Esperanto micro-state was considered imminent. Finally, in August 1908 the birth of *Amikejo* was proclaimed. However, neither Belgium nor Prussia renounced their rights and both refused to recognize the new state. Despite this, its promoters continued to defend its existence. During the war, Germany invaded Belgium and the neutral territory was annexed. Subsequently, the Treaty of Versailles decided that it belonged to Belgium, and it has been this way since then, with the exception of a brief period during the Second World War, in which Germany annexed the territory again.

Among the Esperanto projects of these years, worth mentioning is *Parkurbo Esperanto*, a garden city near Munich. The aim was to harmonize the urban world and nature, following the ideas of the English urban planner and musician Ebenezer Howard, who himself was an advocate of Esperanto. As a reaction to the poor quality of life and high rental prices in industrial cities, the proposal was to create small cities, structured around neighbourhoods surrounded by countryside, close enough to each other to enjoy a wide range of services and with affordable prices for all social classes. Each neighbourhood would be economically self-sufficient and governed by its own inhabitants. In addition, it would protect itself from speculation by non-construction land of communal property. In different periods, Howard's ideas would be put into practice and some garden cities were created, most of them as suburbs or administrative districts added to existing cities. But the case at hand never came to fruition.

According to its promoters, *Parkurbo Esperanto* would have a library, school, theatre, casino, business centre, church, restaurant, summer residence, youth centre for the teaching of Esperanto, a monument to Zamenhof, and many green spaces. It would be a cosmopolitan and innovative city that would go beyond racial, national, religious, political and socio-economic conditions, in which everyone would have the same rights and in which Esperanto would play a structuring role. Thus, in each family there should be at least one Esperanto speaker. Behind the project were lawyers, architects, doctors and even nobles, but also teachers, such as Vasilij Devjatnin – who worked in Munich after his Paris-Warsaw walking journey – and workers such as Leopold Schlaf, founder of the German Labor Party Esperanto-Association. In 1912, the banker Bernhard Wilhelm Schuler financed the purchase of land similar in size to hundred soccer fields. Soon after, forty houses had already been sold. The plan was to use an international lottery to complete the financing. However, when Schuler's brother (and partner) died in 1914, Schuler decided not to continue his economic activities. Furthermore, enmities between nations made international transactions increasingly difficult. And the project collapsed.

On another front, the economic potential of the language had become evident and Esperanto was taught in many chambers of commerce. In this context, an international currency was created: the *speso*. Proposed in 1907 by Genevan mathematician René de Saussure,⁹ it was intentionally designed small to avoid the use of fractions. 1,000 *spesoj* (or 1 *spesmilo*) was equivalent to 0.5 dollars, 2 shillings, 1 rouble, 2.5 francs and 2.5 pesetas. Payments were made by cheque. Two banks that issued international cheques with their value indicated in this currency were the banking group *Schweizerische Bankverein* (Society of Swiss Banks) and the Genevan bank Pictet.¹⁰ Similarly, postcards printed by UEA stated that the shipping costs were four *spesdekoj*. Also the catalogues of the specialized bookstores, the subscription to the magazines and the price of membership of the Esperanto associations were priced in *spesmiloj*. During international conferences, these cheques were paid, including restaurant bills. The main supporter of this currency was the *Ĉekbanko Esperantista*, founded in London by Herbert F. Hoveler, an Esperantist patron of German origin, known for having published in a score of languages a pocket edition of the keys or *ŝlosiloj* of Esperanto grammar. On 30 April 1914, this bank had 730 clients in 320 cities in 43 countries. However, the war made its activities impossible and in 1918, after Höveler's death, the bank stopped trading. All the creditors were repaid, but the *speso*, *spesdeko*, *spescento* and *spesmilo* stopped being used.

Summary and conclusions

At the turn of the twentieth century, debates surrounding the possibility of an auxiliary language were a main topic of international discussion, including the support of various Nobel Prize winners. Esperanto became an essential part of internationalism. In the absence of other types of transnational associations, Esperantists provided direct contact to different groups. Railway workers, doctors, vegetarians, Freemasons, Catholics, scientists, scouts, lawyers and pacifists of different nations took advantage of the Esperanto congresses to meet and debate. Their dimension as pioneers is highlighted by the fact that in some cases they created associations in absence of any other means of international contact between them. Moreover, encouraged by the possibilities offered by the neutral language, audacious individuals decided to embark on adventurous trips on foot, on horseback or by bicycle.

Esperanto's expansion finished because of the war, a traumatic experience for all ideals of brotherhood and solidarity. Mostly pacifists, Esperantists had to adapt to the new context. They performed humanitarian acts in collaboration with the Red Cross, and they carried out information services via Esperanto publications. But what would have happened if there had been no war? Would diplomatic relations have been fraternized? Would a network of friendly cities have spread? Could a more humane economic system have been achieved?

Violence shakes consciences and new projects can also emerge from the ashes of destruction. In fact, the interwar years were a golden age for the supporters of the international language, which spread among the elites (e.g. in the League of Nations), but also in the labour movement in countries such as Germany, Russia and Spain. Then

came the persecutions by dictatorships under a different sign, but this is another story, which will be told another time.

Last but not least, we saw that scholars such as Garvía or Gordin provided groundbreaking findings about events that happened more than a hundred years ago. Paradoxically, this has only been possible because other researchers overlooked the relevance of Esperanto in particular moments of history. Arguably, we are faced with a case of presentism. That is, as a common perception today is that the language and its community play a marginal role in the current society, many historians have projected such perception into the past, neglecting in this way its relevance in multiple dimensions of social, cultural and intellectual history. To a certain extent, this chapter also has benefited from such academic myopia.

Notes

- 1 A similar perspective is followed in other academic environments, such as the Special Chair of Interlinguistics and Esperanto at the University of Amsterdam, the post-graduate programme in Interlinguistic Studies at the University of Poznan (which came into being at the Institute of Linguistics), the *Gesellschaft für Interlinguistik* or Society for Interlinguistics in Germany, and the Interlinguistics' section of the peer-reviewed journal *Language Problems and Language Planning*.
- 2 Eco (1995).
- 3 More recent Nobel recipients who spoke Esperanto include Linus Pauling (chemistry and peace), Daniel Bovet (medicine), Isaac Bashevis Singer (literature) and Reinhard Selten (economics).
- 4 After the war, teachers and professors founded *Tutmonda Asocio de Geinstruistoj Esperantistaj*, and blind people created *Universala Asocio de Blindaj Esperantistoj*, the first international association to put them in contact with each other. Both associations were born in 1924 during the Vienna Esperanto congress. Also in 1924 the *Internacia Radio-Asocio* was founded, which dealt with radio applications and reached a high level of popularity, since it allowed people to exploit the potential of Esperanto as a remote communication tool.
- 5 After the war, Esperanto travellers proliferated again. Some examples are as follows: the Belgian libertarian Gassy Marin, who travelled the world for ten years; the French Lucien Péraire, who travelled the Eurasian continent by bicycle for four years; the Swiss-American Joseph R. Scherer, who visited forty-one countries in three years; the Frisian-Dutchman Sipke Stuit, who travelled on foot throughout Europe with his wagon; the Indian Sinha Laksmiswar, who taught the international language in Sweden, Estonia, Latvia and Poland. All of them described their experiences in a number of books. Meanwhile, the talented blind violinist and writer Vassili Eroshenko spent a decade in India, China and Japan, where he met the American Agnes B. Alexander, who was promoting Esperanto and Bahá'ism in Eastern Asia. It is precisely these two passions that Lidia Zamenhof, the youngest daughter of the creator of Esperanto, would foster in her travels through Europe and the United States.
- 6 vol. 11 (123): 51–5.
- 7 There were also multilingual war documents, such as *Germany's first crime in France, before the declaration of war. The Joncherey Affair (Belfort territory) of Sunday, August*

Second 1914. Written by Julien Mauveaux, secretary of the Committee for the Erection to the monument of Corporal Peugeot, it was published in Latin, French, English, Esperanto and Ido. I thank Julian Walker, who kindly sent me a copy of this valuable document.

- 8 Apart from UEA, other Esperanto associations participated in humanitarian work. One example is *Itala Katedro de Esperanto* (IKE), who edited postcards to be sent to prisoners of war, such as the one reproduced here, which was sent to an inmate in Therezienstadt in December 1917. IKE had been founded in 1912 by Achille Tellini, a naturalist, geologist and linguist from Udine, and it was the first body officially dedicated to promoting the teaching of Esperanto in Italy. With the entry of Italy into the war, the Italian Esperanto movement underwent a strong downsizing. In 1915, *Federazione esperantista italiana* (FEI) was established temporarily at the Bologna headquarters of IKE. Thus began a strong collaboration between the two associations. Meanwhile, during the war Tellini made numerous propaganda speeches in Venice and Emilia-Romagna, as well as organized dozens of fast Esperanto courses.
- 9 René de Saussure, brother of the linguist Ferdinand, was a fundamental figure in the Esperanto movement. Among other contributions, he offered the basic principles of creating Esperanto words: necessity and sufficiency.
- 10 The first has been part of USB, a Swiss financial services company based in Zurich, since 1998. The second also continues to exist today, as a major private bank.

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