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Esperanto, a tool for peace

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Historically, we have committed an injustice by not including Esperanto and its founder, Ludwig Lazarus Zamenhof, in most of the courses, seminars and anthologists on the theorists of nonviolence. Because he should be included, in a central role.

His ideas emerged in a context of imperialist struggles and in the absence of any institution for international governance or the resolution of conflicts between nations. The ethical and global project in which Zamenhof included Esperanto as a basic tool for communication also contains a series of basic and universal principles, with rules for behaviour that could be considered the forerunners of human rights. It is these ideas that are an effective complement to Tolstoy's nonviolence and which within the Esperanto movement are embodied above all by its creator Zamenhof, who as a Russian writer was interested in linking the more commercial aspects of language and the idea of a peaceful bridge between peoples.

It is no coincidence that Esperanto reached its zenith of popularity and influence in the inter-war period, when there were serious attempts to make it into a universal second language in the new international political framework that emerged after the Great War. It was thought at the time - and there is nothing to suggest otherwise today - that the use of Esperanto in the League of Nations would facilitate communication between nations to the extent that it would have prevented the Second World War. Esperantists advocated the creation of new laws on the relationships between states, as well as a spirit of mutual understanding.

Events suggested that they were right. With thousands of people learning the universal auxiliary language, the idea of a more just society was really considered possible. The Catholic International was established, which also used Esperanto in an attempt to unite Catholicism and pacifisms.

One of the main contributions of the Esperanto movement to the ideal of nonviolence is the need for a practical application of philosophy for peace, which has historically found it very difficult to define or establish an idea as abstract as peace. From the perspective of Esperanto, this idea is much more specific and involves achieving mutual understanding and empathy based on a common auxiliary language for everyone that is easy to learn. The utopian brotherhood of Esperanto will therefore be achieved by means of communication.

How can these ideals be put into practice? There are some very inspiring examples, such as the Japanese Esperantists who translated the first-hand accounts of the tragedies of Hiroshima and Nagasaki into Esperanto, which helped European Esperantists to translate them into vernacular languages and thereby made it possible for civil society in other countries to become aware of the sufferings experienced by victims of the atomic bombs.

During the second world war, there were Esperantists who taught the language in concentration camps, others who hid Jews and others who were saved because the soldier hunting them realised that they were believers in the same cause. Similar events took place in other conflicts, such as the war in Bosnia, albeit on a smaller scale. Other well-known examples are the bridges between the eastern and western blocs built by Esperantists, and in other cases of censorship and even under dictatorships.

It was in Esperanto that the earliest research into peace took place, which looked at the social and economic roots of conflict. In fact, many of the leading pacifists of the last century were also Esperantists. At that time, pacifism and Esperantism were almost synonymous, as can be seen by the work of intellectuals such as Edmond Privat, a friend of Mahatma Gandhi, and Romain Rolland, one of the prime movers in the development of Esperanto after the death of Zamenhof, and a nonviolent pacifist who campaigned for Polish and Indian independence.

But Esperanto's contribution goes further than creating understanding between states, as it facilitates peaceful coexistence between individuals and peoples. UNESCO, which has acknowledged the value of Esperanto in several resolutions, says in its preamble that "it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed". It is at this point where Zamenhof's ideas are brought to bear. Rather than in official communication channels and abstract declarations on international co-operation, it is at the level of personal contacts where it has an impact.

The Polish doctor's thought evolved, as did his movement. In his later years, Zamenhof advocated the creation of a European Tribunal to regulate conflicts and a United States of Europe, and the Universal Esperanto Association shifted its emphasis from utopian ideals to practical internationalism, and was one of the first international organisations to declare its agreement with the objectives of the United Nations. Considering the problem of an absence of an international language as well as other social problems, the future of Esperanto appears to be linked to the fate of the movement for the establishment of a more peaceful and just international order. Today, as the agendas of social movements converge, pioneering Esperantists are at the heart of the anti-globalisation nonviolent actions by activists for international solidarity seeking a new, fairer and more peaceful international order.

The feasibility of Esperanto as a language today is open to debate (many see it as the solution to many of the problems in the European Parliament), but what is undeniable is Zamenhof's contribution to the theory of nonviolence. His legacy should be recovered as a matter of urgency.

To find out more, see the book by Ulrich Lins "The work of the Universal Esperanto Association for a more peaceful world". Rotterdam 2000. Esperanto Documents 45 A..