

Pioneers of internationalism

by [Javier Alcalde](#) | Mar 5, 2021 | [\[ENGLISH\]](#), [History](#) | [3 comments](#)



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 have 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 Scienca 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 lawyers from different countries in contact.

Meanwhile, different religious groups were also interested in the possibilities offered by an international language. Following an ecumenical perspective well advanced for 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 Ostwald (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 por la 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 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 they learn Esperanto.

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.

Javier Alcalde teaches political science at Autonomous University of Barcelono, the Toulouse Business School and the Open University of Catalonia, Spain; he is a member of the The Centre on Social Movement Studies, Florence, Italy, and for the 'Institut Convergences Migrations', Paris, France.

This text is an extract of a chapter with the same name which is to soon appear in the book 'Multilingual Environments in the Great War', ed. Julian Walker and Christoph Declercq (Bloomsbury 2021).

Ĉi tiu artikolo estas ankaŭ [disponebla en Esperanto](#).

3 Comments



Paul Joseph Desailly on 2021-04-16 at 11:33

Speaking of the various Esperanto-speaking Nobel Laureates over the years and of Dr. L. L. Zamenhof's Legion of Honour award, I'm shocked at how few of my coreligionists in the Baha'i faith are even peripherally aware of Esperanto nowadays. I'm not so sure that the two million strong diaspora of Esperantists in 100 plus countries realize how famous LLZ was prior to the Great War:

1905: Fr. Legion of Honour

1909: Commander of Order of
Isabella the Catholic

1910: Nobel Peace Prize Nom (IPB wins)

1910: Attends World E-congress, D.C.

2017: UNESCO nominee.

Reply



Ksaverio on 2021-03-08 at 14:43

It is interesting to learn that Esperanto was such an essential part of internationalism. I did not know that Esperanto specialized associations were created in absence of other international associations for railway workers, vegetarians, Freemasons, scouts, lawyers... They truly were pioneers of internationalism!

Reply



Humphrey Tonkin on 2021-03-05 at 23:43

Fascinating information — and there's a lot more where that came from. Many of the organizations mentioned in the blog are still in existence, some of them in a very different form.

Reply