The Significance of International Relations and Cooperation in the Works of Alice Salomon

by Adriane Feustel

It is not hard to find evidence of international relations and cooperation in Alice Salomon’s works, one of the leading exponents of the international women’s movement. She was on the board of the International Council of Women from 1909 until her death in 1948, since 1946 as honorary president, and one of the founders of the International Committee of Schools of Social Work in 1929, being its first president until 1939 and subsequently honorary president after the Second World War finished. The importance of international relations in the life and work of Alice Salomon can be neither overlooked nor valued enough.  

It’s not just her position as international figure-head alone that measures the value of international relations in her work, and so it pays to delve into her writings to search for this, seeing as they go far back and branch into all her activities.

Topics and Questions

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Women’s Movement in India’ – 1931), ‘Vierzig Jahre Londoner Sozialgeschichte’ (‘Forty Years of Social History in London’ – 1931), and, finally, ‘Education for Social Work. A Sociological Interpretation Based on an International Survey’ (1937). This is just a token sample from 120 publications that have an international flavour – in the broadest sense – in their title; approximately a fifth of Alice Salomon’s complete writings. The eleven examples also show the many differing subject matters she touched upon: Social reform, the women’s movement, social work and social work education, the role of women in society, and international politics – basically an examination of legal, historical, sociological, economical, pedagogical and political questions.

Why did Alice Salomon discourse on international topics so profusely, as though she was a foreign-affairs correspondent? In some sense she was. The newspaper Vossische Zeitung serialized her American travel letters and published other pieces, and she wrote for the newspaper Berliner Tageblatt, for Die Nation, the Soziale Praxis, the Neuen Bahnen, Die Frau and many other women’s magazines and scientific periodicals. Without doubt her motive was to inform and enlighten – she thought of herself as some kind of international freelance contributor (“internationale freie Mitarbeiterin” as she herself put it), especially in the period after the First World War when international confidence in Germany was at an all time low. But this role developed later and was a result of her multi-facetted activities abroad and her unquestionable loyalty to things international. What, however, was the path that took her there and how did this tie in with her commitment to welfare and the professionalization of social work, as yet in its infancy? To answer these questions and to clarify why international relations were so important in the works of Alice Salomon, I would like to engage the reader with some of her earliest texts.

English and American Models

I wish to start by looking at a short article, although its title has no hint of international content matter. In this piece, she wrote: “Whereas we only need to support and consolidate existing methods in the education of nurses, something new will have to be formulated in the education of welfare workers for the poor. To do this we should look at English and American models, where ‘settlements’ together with courses in theory are achieving the best results.”

Alice Salomon made this prognosis in 1896 in what is presumed to be her first, and until recently unknown, published article. She was only 24, and for the last two and a half years had been a member of the Mädchen- und Frauengruppen für soziale
Hilfsarbeit (Women’s Groups for Social Welfare Work) founded in Berlin in 1893. The article was a report on the 5th Conference of the Central Committee for the Workers’ Welfare Agencies (5. Konferenz der Zentralstelle für Arbeiterwohlfahrtseinrichtungen), to which she had been invited with Jeannette Schwerin and Helene Lange. There was heated discussion at the conference on whether women were suited to work in poor-relief and, if so, in what capacity. This was a highly sensitive controversy, as Alice Salomon made sure to highlight in the closing sentence of her article: “If the debates have any obvious result – other than perhaps arousing interest in wider circles – it is to show the kind of prejudices that those women who were present still have to combat.” Specifically that “women are deprived of the right to contribute in the efforts to improve the nation’s well-being.”

These few words make apparent the extreme tension from which social work as a modern profession has evolved. For almost 30 years women had been unsuccessfully demanding admittance to public care of the poor. In the course of the rapid industrial development, particularly after the formation of the German Reich in 1871, which was accompanied by growing poverty and an intensified class struggle, poor-relief found its greatest challenges. These were increasing even for the volunteer poor-relief workers, who, working part-time and unpaid as titular civic officials, found it impossible to meet growing demands. Confronted by this state of affairs, which offered opportunities to women – despite intensifying gender conflict and thus pressure on the female sex, Alice Salomon referred in her report to successful precedents in other countries.

She would probably have heard about the settlements in one of the lectures given during her first year as a member of the Women’s Groups for Social Welfare Work between 1893-1894, namely on ‘Soziale Hilfstätigkeit (besonders d. Frauen) in England und Amerika’ (Social Welfare Work (Especially by Women) in England and America). Possibly in response to the conference she undertook her first study trip to England in 1896, and, although little is known of her time there, she very likely took the opportunity to visit settlements. Later on she persistently wrote about the settlements, often in connection with the Women’s Groups for Social Welfare Work, which she had taken over from Jeannette Schwerin after Schwerin’s early death in 1899 (a job which also included responsibility for education in social work). Alice Salomon adopted the rudiments enthusiastically, as found, for example, in her article ‘Der Volkspalast in Ost-London’ (The People’s Palace in East London), wherein she conveyed, using concrete facts – a quality characteristic of all her written work – the inspirational vigour of the settlement and infects the reader with her fascination. As a
precondition to discussing the question of transferability, she would connect a
description of the settlement with that of the prevalent socio-cultural background.9

Alice Salomon’s first article points at yet a further mark signalling the significance of
international relations in the roots of social work. The article was published in the
magazine _Ethische Kultur_ (Ethical Culture), the mouthpiece of the _Deutsche
Gesellschaft für ethische Kultur_ (German Association for Ethical Culture). This
organization understood itself to be a branch of an international ethics movement that
came into being in the USA in the 1880s. Alice Salomon had connections with the
inquiry bureau for welfare agencies of the German Association for Ethical Culture. Its
founder Jeannette Schwerin involved Alice Salomon in its development. The inquiry
bureau was the ‘executive arm’ of the German Association for Ethical Culture, and
concerned itself with the reform of aimless and unchecked private welfare by trying to
match people in need of help with private offers of help. It was supposed to provide a
tangible contribution to the development of an ethical culture, understood as a
“sharing and coupling, irrespective of differences in circumstances of living, as well
as religious and political views” aimed at bringing about a “condition […] in which
justice and truth, humanity and mutual respect reign.”10

Ethical societies in Germany engaged in the so-called ‘soziale Frage’ (‘social
question’) – a term used to describe the devastating effect of poverty and ignorance
on a large part of the German people by the industrial revolution), the equality of
women and youth education. They also opposed militarism and supported efforts to
establish peace between nations.11 Bertha von Suttner was one of the contributors to
the magazine, as were Lily von Gizycki (aka Lily Braun), Marie Stritt, Minna Cauer,
Franziska Tiburtius, Helene Simon, Friedrich Wilhelm Förster, Paul Natorp, and
Ferdinand Tönnies, to name just a few.12 At the inquiry bureau of the German
Association for Ethical Culture which later became the ‘Zentrale für private Fürsorge’
(‘Head Office for Private Welfare’), Alice Salomon accumulated her first experiences
and acquired – through the intercession of Jeannette Schwerin – fundamental
orientations.

Although Alice Salomon never understood herself to be a mouthpiece of the German
Association for Ethical Culture, some of the ideas promoted by the association can
be found in her writings: Inter alia, the question of personal motives for doing social
work, ethical fundamentals, the search for commonalities to bridge differences, inter-
denominational relationships, and not at least an international perspective.
In 1899, three years after the publication of her first magazine article, Alice Salomon began to publish regularly and more frequently. I would like to elaborate on two articles she wrote in this year after Jeannette Schwerin’s death and after she took on the chair of the Women’s Groups for Social Welfare Work. They deal with the rights of children and female workers, a subject about which she had said in 1896 that any “efforts toward the rights of female workers” were lacking.\(^\text{13}\) International relations again played an important role in both articles. In *Kinderarbeit in Fabriken* (‘Child Labour in Factories’ - October 1899), she used the depiction of a female American factory inspector discerning the reasons for the increase of child labour despite laws restricting this practice to point out the importance of committed and competent factory inspections by women. Apart from a few tentative cases, such attempts did not exist in Germany at that time. She also succeeded in explaining on the basis of the inspector's report what it really meant for children to have to work in a factory. The factory inspector Alzina Stevens herself had had to work in a factory as a child.\(^\text{14}\) Unlike in Wilhelminian Germany, it was possible for a female worker in the United States to ‘better’ herself and become a social worker.

No less significant is the international aspect in Alice Salomon’s discussion on the topic ‘Protection of Woman and Home’ (‘*Der Schutz der Frau und des Hauses*’), a slogan used by the *Zentrumspartei* (a leading conservative party) to promote the prohibition of women labour in manufacturing industry. In an article of the same name published in December 1899, Alice Salomon laid bare the cynicism of conservative arguments that banning women from factories would protect women, by explaining that women actually depended on wages and that they and their families would suffer from such a ban as a consequence. Instead she demanded an improvement of female workers’ rights in factories and an extension of rights to encompass cottage industry and work done from home.\(^\text{15}\) She puts emphasis on her claim by evoking and citing the heated altercations she experienced in 1897 at the International Congress for Workers’ Rights (*Internationale Kongreß für Arbeiter-schutz*) in Zurich. She was one of few women delegates – including Jeannette Schwerin, Helene Simon, Lily Braun, and Clara Zetkin – who participated at the congress, at which Socialists, Social Christians and ‘neutral’ scientists from 16 countries gathered for the first time to put their heads together.\(^\text{16}\) The retrospection of the international congress not only put emphasis on her argument, but gave the reader an impression of how emotional the conflict was and, lying behind it, the genuine plight, neglect and degeneration that reigned in those families depending on working from home. Moreover, the international nature and amplitude of this union of “men and women, workers and scholars, producers and consumers, and women of all parties and bents”\(^\text{17}\) made a change of circumstances seem possible, and helped to bring the horrible conditions into greater public conscience.
Besides from the political controversy which arose from her article ‘Protection of Woman and Home’, the article also touched upon another surprising aspect in the discussion on the international perspective of social work – something I would like to follow as my final example. The motive for the article was a dispute about the methods and reliability of government commissioned surveys by factory inspectors on the cause and effect of women working in factories. The deficiencies of these official inquiries (or so-called *Enquêten* in German) were pointed out in detail by Alice Salomon.

She discussed this question again three months later in a report titled ‘The Art of Making Official Inquiries’ (‘*Die Kunst Enquêten zu machen*’ - April/May 1900), which focused on Charles Booth’s extensive and empirical survey ‘Life and Labour of the People in London’, a tract which to this day is thought of as the foundation stone of empirical social research. Alice Salomon’s report was more than just an interesting analysis. She wanted to help to fill in some gap in Germany and draw attention to the lack of scientific publications concerning proper methods of empirical investigation. She recommended that her readers should study the methodical literature coming from England, in order that they should gather the kind of indispensable information in their own surveys needed for social reform. Her commentary is not at all dry to read, and sketches a fascinating, downright detective-like picture of committed research.

Where, how, and through whom Alice Salomon became aware of the surveys cannot be answered. Possibly there is a connection with her début in July 1899 at the 2nd International Women’s Congress (2. *Internationaler Frauenkongress*), where she met Beatrice Webb. Both of them lectured – as a matter of fact very controversially – on the subject of ‘Special Labour Legislation for Women’. Beatrice Webb did not only take part in Charles Booth’s survey, but also was one of the founders of the London School of Economics, at which the first lecture on ‘Methods of Investigation’ was held in 1899.

With her appearance at the 2nd International Women’s Congress, Alice Salomon for the first time actively participated in an international debate, and it became the starting point of her efforts in the international women’s movement. Her intention was to bring about a greater commitment and effectiveness, more structured work, and a more continuous exchange in the women’s movement – an effort that was closely tied to the social sector.
After the pressure of the First World War forced international networks to break and caused everyone’s attention to turn to their respective homelands, Alice Salomon was one of the first in Germany in 1919 to promote a reactivation of international cooperation. This cost her her position in the German women’s movement, and caused her to look for other ways to re-establish international relations and to work for understanding. One was the attempt of international co-operation in social work and education, which became one of the focus points of her life.

The Idea of Menschheit – Humanity

Why did Alice Salomon make continual use of international instances in her early articles? One can, in fact, find such references in almost every one of her early texts. It almost seems as if she couldn’t manage without one. One cannot assume, however, that she was already part of a continuous international context in this early period. Committed networks of this kind didn’t existent yet around 1900, although attempts towards this were made in various areas. Therefore it is not surprising that we cannot find anything detailed on the matter in her autobiographical texts and have to rely on her articles for enlightenment. These conjure an impression of someone who appears to have collected examples by keeping an eye on whatever crossed her path – a snippet from someone’s lecture, conversations at a congress, news from a personal contact, a discourse, impressions and materials from a trip – but each time, the illustration attains special significance.

We can experience some of Alice Salomon’s masterful descriptive power in these formative texts. But we can also learn something of the importance that the International had around 1900.

It is the use of international instance that give Alice Salomon’s texts the charisma to emanate fascination. They give imagination wings, let the unreachable seem reachable, and give small laborious steps the aura of a great goal. There was something visionary about them, bringing other ‘bourgeois escapist activities’ to mind which gripped so many around 1900. Those searching for new values in the face of an overwhelming industrial and material expansion, the fast-paced growth of cities, the social tensions, and the cracks in the patriarchal structures. Like those who joined the Jugendbewegung (Youth Movement) and roamed the countryside, or the Lebensreformer (Life-reformers) who took refuge in nature and experimented with forms like the Monte Verità, or painters like Paul Gauguin, who looked for simplicity and primitiveness amongst the natives of the South Sea. In common they shared a critique of civilization, and the search for a new self and for new references led to
their flight from civilization into the arms of nature, a place where they believed they
would find the models of that which they were seeking.22

Alice Salomon’s emphatic depictions of precedents from other countries contributed
to this movement, but without losing or relinquishing an explicit hold on reality. She
did not look to illustrate her work by examples from places ‘untouched’ by civilization,
not because she did not share a criticism of civilization – the superficiality of life,
materialism, the emptiness of an ideological vacuum – and not because she had not
suffered from it and was seeking to live differently.23 On the contrary, she looked for
examples within the strongholds of civilization, in England, America and France,24
nations which, especially England, had been blamed for the downfall of the West
(‘Untergang des Abendlands’ as Spengler put it).25 Alice Salomon did not let herself
be irritated by nationalistic resentments.

But we must not take for granted the positive exemplary references she made to
these countries in Wilhelminian Germany, that was struggling to attain a leading
position on the world market through competition with the old world powers and the
rising USA. The fact that Internationalism had, above all, a politically socialist slant
did not make things easier. The International around 1900, as carried across in Alice
Salomon’s texts, was somewhat utopian. In contrast to the National and emphasis on
separation and differences, the International appeared as something connected,
something shared, as the idea of Menschheit.

1 See also Adriane Feustel’s overview: ‘Internationale Zusammenarbeit. Der Beitrag von Alice
72-84;
About the life and works of Alice Salomon: Idem (ed.): ‘Alice Salomon: Frauenemanzipation und
soziale Verantwortung. Ausgewählte Schriften in drei Bänden’, Neuwied/München; vol. 1: 1896-1908,
pp. 587-630; Joachim Wieler: ‘Erinnerung eines zerstörten Lebensabends. Alice Salomon während
Salomons zur internationalen Rezeption sozialarbeiterischer Konzepte’, in: Franz Hamburger (ed.):
Salomon. Ihr Lebenswerk als Beitrag zur Entwicklung der Theorie und Praxis sozialer Arbeit’,
Weinheim (2000); Anja Schüller: ‘Frauenbewegung und soziale Reform: Jane Addams und Alice
Salomon im transatlantischen Dialog 1889-1933’, Stuttgart (2004). About international aspects in
Europäischen Geschichte. Vom Mittelalter bis zur Gegenwart’, München (2000); English edition:
2 For a complete bibliography please refer to: Adriane Feustel (ed.): ’Die Schriften Alice Salomons.

4 »Bedarf es in der Ausbildung zur Krankenpflege nur der weiter en Förderung und Vertiefung der bestehenden Richtungen, so wird für die Ausbildung zur Armenpflege wohl Neues geschaffen werden müssen. Vorbildlich dürften dann englische und amerikanische Verhältnisse sein, wo «settlements» in Verbindung mit theoretischen Kursen die besten Erfolge erzielen.« (Quote translated into English by Swantje Siepmann); Alice Salomon: ‘Die 5. Konferenz der Zentralstelle für Arbeiter-Wohlfahrtsinrichtungen’, in: ‘Ethische Kultur’, vol. 4, No. 22, May 23rd 1896, pp. 173-174, here p. 174. The semi-official Central Committee, founded in 1891, amongst other things collected and spread information, and also supported legislature. Alice Salomon was elected to the executive committee in 1907 – settlements were communities composed of university members and an increasing number of active (female) citizens in the workers’ and poorer quarters of cities, who studied the population’s living conditions and offered gratis their knowledge and skills. The first settlement, Toynbee-Hall, was founded in London in 1885; amongst the most important were the Hull House Settlement in Chicago (founded in 1893) and the Henry Street Settlement in New York (founded in 1895).

5 Ibid., p. 175.


10 »Das Gemeinsame und Verbindende, unabhängig von allen Verschiedenheiten der Lebensverhältnisse sowie der religiösen und politischen Anschauungen« mit dem Ziel »einen Zustand« zu verwirklichen, »in welchem Gerechtigkeit und Wahrhaftigkeit, Menschlichkeit und gegenseitige Achtung walten.« (Quote translated into English by Swantje Siepmann); ‘Ethische Kultur’, 1st year of publication, No. 1, (1893), p. 1. Founder and editor of the magazine was Georg von Gизыcki, professor of ethics at Berlin University, with whom Lily Braun was married and whose lectures »Vorlesungen über soziale Ethik« (Lectures about Social Ethics) she published in 1895 after his death. He had translated the fundamental writings of American moral philosophers like Felix Adler (New York) and William Mackintire Salter (Chicago) into German.

11 Cf. the programme of the (international) Ethical Union (Ethischer Bund): Friedrich Wilhelm Foerster (ed.): ‘Bericht über die Ethische Bewegung’, [No. 1], Zürich (1897), p. 8ff. F.W. Foerster was amongst Alice Salomon’s patrons – she made references to his pacifistic writings especially in the First World War.

12 Bertha von Suttner (1843-1914), Austrian pacifist and writer, came to world fame with her novel ‘Die Waffen nieder’ (1892) and was the first woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize in 1907. Her books were burnt by the Nazis in 1933. – Lily Braun (1865-1916), born a von Kretschmann and widowed von Gизыcki, writer and women’s rights’ activist, joined the SPD (the Social Democrats) in 1896, keeping her contacts to the left wing of the bourgeois women’s movement at the same time. – Marie Stritt, born into the Bacon family (1855-1928), successful actress and women’s rights’ activist, founded the first legal protection union for women in 1894 and was inter alia the chair woman of the Bund deutscher Frauenvereine (Union of German Women’s Associations). – Minna Cauer, born Schelle (1841-1922), prominent left wing representative of the bourgeois women’s movement, was amongst the founders of the Mädchen- und Frauengruppen für soziale Hilfsarbeit (Women’s Groups for Social Welfare Work) in 1893, and published the magazine ‘Die Frauenbewegung’ between 1895-1919 amongst other things. – Franziska Tiburtius (1843-1927), the first practising female doctor in Germany (from 1877) and women’s rights’ activist, opened a women’s outpatient’s department ‘Chirurgische Klinik weiblicher Ärzte’ in a workers’ quarter of Berlin in 1908. – Helene Simon (1862-1947), political economist and women’s rights’ activist, studied in London (1895-97) and Berlin and worked in journalism and social politics; she joined the SPD in 1919 and received an honorary doctorate from Heidelberg University in 1922. She emigrated to London in 1938.
– Friedrich Wilhelm Förster (1869-1966), pedagogue and leading advocate of the international ethical movement, faced strong hostility in Germany because of his political-pacifistic activities; he fled to Paris in the spring of 1933 and to the USA in 1940. – Paul Natorp (1854-1924), philosopher and pedagogue, co-founder of Neukantianismus (New Kantianism), is thought of as one of the classical scholars of social pedagogics. – Ferdinand Tönnies (1855-1936), sociologist and philosopher, is considered one of the founders of sociology alongside Georg Simmel and Max Weber.

13 »Bemühungen für Arbeiterinnenschutz« (quote translated into English by Swantje Siepmann).


19 Beatrice Webb, born Potter (1858-1943), one of England’s leading sociologists and social reformers, founded the London School of Economics in 1895 together with her husband Sidney Webb (1859-1947) and published a large number of fundamental writings opposed to the classical political economy. This included amongst others: Sidney Webb / Beatrice Webb: ‘Das Problem der Armut’ (1912), Jena (1912).


24 In the following years, Alice Salomon took inspiration from further countries: female workers’ protection from New Zealand and Australia, maternity insurance from Italy, a woman’s right to vote from Scandinavia, to name just a few examples.
