

Quaker Activism and The International Arms Trade: A Reflection from Munster

The bombed and destroyed city scape of Aleppo, seems a harsh subject for the Irish painter Brian Maguire, whose most recent works are to be seen in the exhibition *War Changes It's Address: The Aleppo Paintings* at the Irish Museum of Modern Art until May. I and my friend Margaret Haugh attended the opening on January 25th and heard Brian speak of his journey of witness to the ruined and devastated city where on every side is to be seen the ravages of war and the flattened buildings and homes which were the points of delivery for the bombs and weapons that the trillion dollar industrial complex, the international arms trade, produces. When he referred to the Quakers who had stayed in his studio in Paris while attending peaceful vigils against the international arms trade at the Eurosatory "Defence and Security" exhibition, and who brought back catalogues, to him, we sat straighter in our seats as we knew he was speaking of us. Brian and his wife Jenny Haughton, had generously offered accommodation to us in 2014 and 2016 which greatly facilitated our attendance. I hope to attend again this year when the Eurosatory takes place from June 11th -15th.

Some Figures

One of the largest arms trade fairs,(its hard to link the word "fair" with "arms trade"), the Eurosatory "showcases" all the manufacturers of rockets, weaponry, land and sea equipment, aircraft, tanks, gases, armoury, automatic guns, hand guns, helicopters, bombs of varying sizes, drones, remote technologies, component parts for telecommunication (**some made in Ireland**), surveillance technology, heat sensing technology and so much more including all the is needed to care for wounded soldiers, robotic stretchers (yes!) and other robotic technologies, field hospital equipment etc. Interestingly, all of the Information on the companies and maps, catalogues and all the brochures and associated marketing strategies of an trade fair of the dimensions of Eurosatory (circa six acres) can be found on their website.

In 2016, the world's military spending amounted to 1.69 trillion U.S. dollars, compared to 1.1 trillion U.S. dollars in 2001. That figure has increased significantly and a consideration of the number of wars currently being fought suggests to me that the reasons for those wars may well have an economic basis with the lives of millions of people and families of little or no account. As of September 2017 there were 67 countries involved in wars with the number of militia guerrillas, and terrorist-separatist-anarchic groups listed at 769.

When I Met Yvonne Cressman at France Yearly Meeting in 2004 and heard of Arms trade fairs for the first time, I remember being horrified and amazed that such fairs existed in the world. she spoke of her witness for peace, in Paris and how few Friends were present then. She invited me to think of joining her and sadly it was not until after her death that I did so in 2014. I have never regretted my decision to join with other Quakers and others from peace churches all over Europe who meet now every two years to be a presence for peace and alternatives to war outside The Eurosatory.

For the thousands of people entering the trade grounds from the train station at Villepinte near Charles De Gaulle airport, on their way to sell, buy or work in some capacity, it must be strange to meet the smiling friendly faces of people who choose to stand for peace. Many stop to talk to them or to take away some information about the alternative projects that could be funded by a fraction of the costs of war and information about peace building too. I know from my own experience that many who stop are surprised at the friendliness and lack of judgement that meets them from Friends and are encouraged to stop and think about the consequences of their labour within the arms

trade; Work that while supporting many families in the northern hemisphere, Destroys the lives of countless others.

In 2016 a Dutch Friend, Erik Dries, a talented cartoonist, had made a series of five postcards which people wanted to collect and stopped on their way to and from the exhibition area to pick them up. Each card had information on the back as well as a humorous cartoon on the front. Humour and joy, friendliness and welcoming greetings often “disarming “ and gently challenging of the perceptions held of those who stand for peace and non violence, those who are anti war.

The size of this and the other big arms trade show in London last September, standing between the suited thousands and the trade fair grounds and feeling the enormity of this industry of death is not for everyone and it takes courage and conviction to do so. In London Many young Friends from Britain Yearly Meeting had been involved in preparations for the DSEI Arms trade fair there. many Quakers came to be arrested in order to draw media attention to the trade fair and worked hard in their efforts to stop or slow down the entry of trucks carrying the weapons in to the exhibition area in the week prior to the opening. over one hundred were indeed arrested (not all Quakers) and the following week there was an article in the Guardian but other than that very little media coverage of the event. This Friend chose the quieter and peaceful ways but I understood the validity of actions to promote awareness too. Perhaps another time?

However there is also a kind of grace that is given by the Spirit which increases and expands all who participate for peaceful ways and I suspect that the transformative power of meeting people who do **not** see the international arms trade and these trade shows as “normal” even if they are described as being about security and defence, and who are aware that they are the business of death and destruction, may allow those who pass by, the possibility of seeing truths that while being uncomfortable for many, offer a ray of hope and sanity to others. Speaking to other Friends who attended this vigil and hearing their reasons for being there has indeed strengthened and affirmed my own conviction of the value of witnessing for peace and has allowed me to put my own faith into action and apply the peace testimony in my own life. I believe that it has also allowed me to speak of the experience and let people I meet in everyday life know about the international arms trade. Through 2017/2018 I have been able to speak at Ireland Yearly Meeting and at Limerick, Cork and Rathfarnham Meetings and at each meeting there were those who were completely unaware of the international arms trade and its spread around the northern hemisphere.

I am planning to go to Paris again this summer. The Eurosatory will take place from June 11th -15th. The Quaker group, **Stop Fuelling War** will again organise a preparation for the Vigil workshop on Sunday 10th of June and I believe there will be a protest in the central Paris on the 9th June. if there are some Friends who may be thinking of going and want to talk about what is involved, I would be happy to speak with them and I can be contacted via Quaker House.

Some websites of interest:

<https://stopfuellingwar.org/eurosatory>

<https://www.caat.org.uk/>

Campaign against the arms trade (CAAT)

<http://www.allianceforpeacebuilding.org/>

<http://wilpf.org>

(Women's international league for peace and freedom)

<https://www.pana.ie/index.html> Peace and Neutrality Alliance

<http://www.shannonwatch.org/blogs/shannonwatch>

<http://www.qcea.org/>

<http://www.quno.org> Quaker United Nations Office

www.quakerservice.com Quaker Cottage Belfast