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Was Einstein Really a Pacifist? Einstein's Independent, Forward-Thinking, Flexible, and Self-Defined Pacifism
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Perhaps motivated by an admiration for Einstein and a desire to identify with him, combined with a majority world-view in opposition to pacifism, skeptics may often question whether Einstein was really a pacifist. They might point to the fact that his dramatic contributions to the field of physics at the beginning of the twentieth century made nuclear weapons possible, as well as his 1939 letter to President Franklin D. Roosevelt urging him to develop such weapons before the Nazis would, as examples of at least an inconsistent stance on pacifism across time on Einstein's part. However, as this paper will show, Einstein's pacifism began early in his life, was a deep-seated conviction that he expressed repeatedly across the years, and was an independent pacifism that flowed from his own responses to events around him and contained some original and impressively forward-thinking elements. Moreover, in calling himself a pacifist, as Einstein did, he defined pacifism in his own terms, not according to the standards of others, and this self-defined pacifism included the flexibility to designate the Nazis as a special case that had to be opposed through the use of military violence, in his view. As early as during his childhood, Einstein already disliked competitive games, because of the necessity of winners and losers, and disliked military discipline. In his late thirties, living in Germany during the First World War with a prestigious academic position in Berlin, yet retaining his identity as a Swiss citizen, Einstein joined a small group of four intellectuals who signed the pacifist "Appeal to the Europeans" in response to the militarist "Manifesto to the Civilized World" signed by 93 German intellectuals. In private, throughout that War, Einstein repeatedly expressed his disgust and sense of alienation at the "war-enthusiasm" sentiment of the majority. In the aftermath of the War, Einstein was involved in a German private commission to investigate German war crimes and the publication that it produced, and throughout the Weimar period of 1918 to 1933 Einstein continued to take public and private stances as a pacifist. As did many pacifists, Einstein also linked his advocacy for peace with a concern for social justice, which included opposition to antisemitism and advocacy for Zionism, and in 1929, after violent clashes between Jews and Arabs in Palestine, in which hundreds died on both sides, Einstein made some impressively forward-thinking statements about Jewish-Arab conciliation, and even published in an Arab newspaper his own proposal to set up a joint Jewish-Arab council for purposes of conflict resolution. But Einstein's pacifism was not forever obliterated by the Nazi era and the Holocaust, despite his well-known encouragement to Roosevelt to develop the bomb. In the United States, where he lived from 1933 on, in the first ten years after World War II, also the last decade of his life, Einstein inspired American pacifists with his strong stances against war and nuclear weapons.