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by Irwin Abrams

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SUTTNER, Bertha Sophia Felicita Kinsky, Baroness von (9 June 1843, Prague, Bohemia, Austria [now Czechoslovakia]—21 June 1914, Vienna). *Education*: privately tutored. *Career*: founder and president, Austrian Peace Society, 1891; editor, *Die Waffen Nieder*, 1892-1902; pacifist journalist, author, and organizer.

Baroness Bertha von Suttner influenced *Alfred Nobel, for whom she worked briefly as a secretary in Paris in 1876, to establish the peace prize. But when the Nobel Committee awarded her the prize in 1905 it was in recognition of her many services to the cause of peace. She was the authoress of the most important antiwar novel of the period, *Die Waffen Nieder* (*Lay Down Your Arms*), published in 1889. Her commentaries on world politics from the peace point of view were widely read; she was, in fact, the first woman political journalist in the German language. She campaigned for peace in person as well as by her prolific pen and her lecture tours took her throughout Europe and to the United States. As an aristocrat, she used her position in society to conduct "unofficial diplomacy" with government leaders and representatives. She urged arbitration and peace policies in audiences with European monarchs and American presidents, and she headed the lobby of pacifist leaders at The Hague Conferences in 1899 and 1907. She established and became president of the Austrian Peace Society in Vienna in 1891, and she helped establish other peace societies and branches of the Interparliamentary Union throughout central Europe. She took a leading role in international peace congresses as a highly respected advisor and conciliator. As vice-president, she was prominent in the work of the International Peace Bureau in Berne. Other peace leaders referred to her as "our commander-in-chief." In world public opinion, Bertha von Suttner symbolized the peace movement, and she was one of the best known women of her day.

Nothing in her early life seemed to presage her role as peace movement leader. Born Countess Kinsky, the daughter of an Austrian field marshal of a distinguished aristocratic family, she was educated to live the fashionable life of the aristocracy, learning foreign languages and all the social graces and spending much time abroad. When financial difficulties arose, the beautiful young countess took the unusual course of setting out to earn her own living, becoming governess to the daughters of Baron von Suttner in 1873. She and Arthur, the son, fell in love and in the face of family disapproval eloped and went off to live with

Bertha von Suttner had already published eight books when she decided to write a novel revealing the anachronistic nature of the institution of war in an age of progress and scientific enlightenment. *Die Waffen Nieder* told the story of a young woman whose happiness was destroyed by the wars between 1859 and 1871. It vividly portrayed the horrors of the battlefield and the case against war formed the content of much of the dialogue. Although not a great work of literary art, it proved to be a very effective work of propaganda. It struck a responsive chord in a multitude of readers, who identified themselves with the heroine and her sorrows, were shocked by the realistic scenes of war's brutality, and moved by the sincerity of the authoress. By 1914 it had appeared in 40 editions and had been translated into 16 languages. It was considered the *Uncle Tom's Cabin* of the peace movement.

For Bertha von Suttner the novel meant more than an international reputation; it gave her a new mission in life. She had conceived of the novel when she first heard of the organized peace movement that was emerging in Europe and wanted to do it a service. But in the writing she became a committed advocate and began to work for peace not just with her pen, "but with my whole being." Bertha von Suttner was 56 years of age when the novel was published; she worked tirelessly for peace during the next 25 years until her death, despite the crushing blow of her husband's death in 1902 and the weakening of her powers as she grew older.

The foundation of her plea for peace was an empowering ethical conviction. The formulation of theories of "scientific pacifism" was left to others, notably *Alfred H. Fried, who was brought to the peace movement by reading her novel and became her closest collaborator. But the Baroness was no mere emotional advocate. Her well-informed political commentaries were satirical and witty, sometimes sarcastic, but reasonable rather than vehement. In her public addresses she was no spell-binding orator. What moved her audiences so deeply was the dominant force of her personality: before them stood a great lady, speaking with calm confidence about the future, evidently inspired by an abiding faith in humanity. The opponents of peace were not villains but misguided ones who could be brought to reason.

Bertha von Suttner assumed this role upon the world's stage at a time and

ready acceptance of the sovereign state and its rulers. She believed in wars of defense, and she insisted that peace societies take no political stands, since the cause of peace was above politics. She had a cause, but she was no rebel. She did not challenge the established order of society; what she did attack, relentlessly, was the assumption that war was part of that order.

Her most tangible influence upon international relations was the result of the lobby of peace leaders that she led at the First Hague Conference in 1899. *Tzar Nicholas' original call for this conference had proposed an international agreement for disarmament. The Baroness and many of her colleagues recognized that disarmament was more likely to come as the consequence of the establishment of machinery to settle international conflicts, and they worked hard to promote the cause of arbitration. The most important outcome of the Conference, aside from the precedent it set of states coming together to make peace rather than to end a war, was indeed the creation of an international court of arbitration. This was far less than the federation of Europe that the Baroness felt would be the best way to prevent war between the Great Powers, but the establishment of The Hague Court was a significant landmark on the way to international organization.

The Court was not designed, however, to arbitrate the kind of conflict of national interests that led to war in 1914. Bertha von Suttner died in June and was spared the agony of experiencing what happened when her perceptive warnings about the dangers of international conflicts in the Balkans came true. Her last words were, "Lay down your arms. Say it to many, to many." The international peace congress of 1914, in the planning for many months, was to have been held in Vienna, to honor her. One of the major events was to have been the showing of the Danish film based upon her novel. But it was not to be.

As Bertha von Suttner had been the living symbol of the peace movement, her death was followed a few months later by the collapse of that movement in the First World War. Did this mean that all her efforts had been in vain? In an age of imperialism and power politics was her quest for peace an impossible

B. Irwin Abrams, "Bertha von Suttner and the Nobel Peace Prize," *Journal of Central European Affairs*, 22 (October, 1962), 286-307; Beatrix Kempf, *Bertha von Suttner. Das Leben einer grossen Frau* (Vienna, 1964; English trans., with complete bibliography of Suttner's writings, *Woman for Peace: The Life of Bertha von Suttner*, Park Ridge, NJ, 1973); Emil Lengyel, *And All Her Paths Were Peace: The Life of Bertha von Suttner* (Nashville and New York, 1975); Carolene E. Playne, *Bertha von Suttner and the Struggle to Avert the World War* (London, 1936).

C. Bertha von Suttner Papers, Suttner-Fried Correspondence, United Nations Library, Geneva.

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