

A life for peace

100th anniversary of Bertha von Suttner's Nobel Peace Prize

“Lay Down Your Arms!” – The title of Bertha von Suttner's most famous novel was also the ambition and goal in life of this remarkable woman. The 100th anniversary of her award of the Nobel Peace Prize is an excellent opportunity to remind us of her work and cause and to allow us to reflect upon it.

Bertha von Suttner was not only the first woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize, she also inspired her friend and benefactor Alfred Nobel to create the Nobel Peace Prize.

As a writer and lecturer, Bertha von Suttner was the figurehead of a world-wide peace movement. Opposing the tides of the time, she relentlessly fought nationalist fanaticism, aggressive militarism, hate-breeding and anti-Semitism. She recognized the destructive potential of these ideologies and prophesied: “The next war will be more horrible than any of its predecessors”.

Bertha von Suttner did not live to witness the destructive world wars of the 20th century. We, who know of the horrible experience of these conflicts, have a duty to remember and continue her life's work.

Austrian foreign policy will continue to act in the spirit of Bertha von Suttner and work to promote peace and human rights in the whole world. Lasting peace and security is only possible if human rights are guaranteed.

Dr. Ursula Plassnik
Federal Minister for Foreign Affairs
of the Republic of Austria

1 Biography

9 June 1843: Bertha Sophia Felicita Countess Kinsky von Chinitz und Tettau born in the Kinsky Palace on the Altstädter Ring in Prague, childhood with her mother Sophie in Brünn (Brno)

1856 to 1873: Move to Vienna, later to Klosterneuburg near Vienna.

Visits to Wiesbaden, Paris, Baden-Baden, Venice and Bad Homburg
Summer 1864: Meeting with Ekaterina Dadiani, Princess of Mingrelia, in Bad Homburg

1873 to 1875: Governess to the four daughters of Baron von Suttner in Vienna and Harmannsdorf, Lower Austria. Secret relationship with his son Arthur

Autumn 1875 to Summer 1876: Secretary to Alfred Nobel in Paris

12 June 1876: Secret marriage to Arthur von Suttner in St. Ägyd's Church in Vienna-Gumpendorf

Summer 1876 to Spring 1885: The Suttners in Georgia.

Periods in Tiflis, Kutais and Zugdidi

May 1885: Return to Austria

October 1885: Visit to the Writers' Congress in Berlin

Winter 1886/1887: Stay in Paris. First contacts with the peace movement

1889: "Lay down your arms!" published

Winter 1890/1891: Stay in Venice. Contact with representatives of the "Interparliamentary Conferences"

1891: First great public appearance at the 3rd World Peace Congress in Rome. Founding of the "Austrian Peace Society"

1892: Founding of the "Society for Protection against Anti-Semitism", Journeys to Berlin, Berne and Zurich

10 December 1896: Death of Alfred Nobel

1899: First Peace Conference at The Hague

10 December 1902: Death of Arthur von Suttner

1903: Opening of the "Institut international de la Paix" in Monaco

1904: First trip to America. World Peace Conference in Boston.

Reception with President Theodore Roosevelt in Washington

December 1905: Suttner awarded the Nobel Peace Prize

Spring 1906: Received the Nobel Peace Prize in Christiania.

Lecture tour through Scandinavia

1907: Second Peace Conference at The Hague

1912: Second trip to America

21 June 1914: Death of Bertha von Suttner in Vienna.

Her body cremated at her own request. The urn is in Gotha

2 Childhood and Youth

Bertha Sophia Felicita Countess Kinsky von Chinitz und Tettau was born on the 9th of June 1843 in Prague (the capital of today's Czech Republic). Although born as a countess, Bertha was never accepted by "high society". Her mother, Sophie, was born into a bourgeois family. Her husband's family shunned her after his death.

3 Governess at the Suttners´

Three engagements but no marriage:
Baron Gustav von Heine-Geldern,
an English swindler (name unknown),
Prince Adolf zu Sayn-Wittgenstein-Hohenstein

Bertha refused to sell herself to a wealthy man. As governess to the daughters of Baron Suttner, she confidently earned her own money. She fell in love with one of the sons: Arthur von Suttner, who later married her.

4 Alfred Nobel

“I want to create a substance or machine of such tremendous destructive power that all wars would become impossible.” (A. Nobel)

Alfred Nobel earned millions by inventing dynamite. After years of travel, he settled in Paris and advertised for a private secretary in the newspapers. Bertha answered and was instantly hired.

5 Years in the Caucasus

In 1876 Bertha left Paris out of love for Arthur von Suttner. After their secret wedding, they moved to Georgia. Because of great financial problems, Bertha taught music and languages.

6 Back in Europe – Paris

After years in the Caucasus, the couple returned to Europe. In Paris Bertha von Suttner learned of the existence of an organised peace movement. She thus found her vocation in life.

7 Lay Down Your Arms!

“Lay Down Your Arms!” (1889) is a passionate appeal for peace. Its realistic descriptions of the horrors of war leave the reader distraught. Suttner became the leader of the peace movement and founded the Austrian Peace Society almost on her own in 1891.

8 The fight against anti-Semitism

There is only one honest way of protecting the persecuted from persecution – to stand by them. (B. v. Suttner)

Prominent members of the “Anti-Verein”:
Ludwig Ganghofer, author;
Hermann Nothnagel, doctor of medicine;
Johann Strauß Sohn, composer;
Carl von Hasenauer, architect;
Peter Rosegger, author;
Richard von Krafft-Ebing, psychiatrist

The Suttners firmly opposed the growing anti-Semitism. In 1891, Arthur founded the “Society to Combat Anti-Semitism”. Bertha supported him passionately. Nationalists, clericals and anti-Semites now opposed them viciously.

9 International Congresses

Alfred Nobel remains sceptical of Suttner’s endeavours:
“My factories may eventually end war sooner than your congresses. On the day when two armies may obliterate each other in a second, all civilized nations will recoil and dismiss their troops. ”

As a world-famous woman, Bertha von Suttner created a network of contacts at numerous peace congresses and tirelessly worked for the international peace movement.

10 The “Peace Tsar”

In 1894 Suttner put great hope in the new Tsar Nikolai II. Indeed, the Tsar decreed a “peace manifesto”, asking for disarmament and an international peace conference. His policy in Finland and Manchuria revealed his lies. Suttner continued to defend him for a long time and estranged many of her partners.

11 The peace conferences at The Hague

“Europe, hasten to fraternize, to end war between the nations, or the next incident may destroy you.”

A peace conference was held in 1899 in The Hague, following an appeal by the Tsar. However, only diplomats, politicians and military men took part. The pacifists were not involved. Discussions on disarmament and laws of warfare yielded next to no results.

12 Albert of Monaco

Prince Albert of Monaco joined the European peace movement through Suttner’s influence. However, she did not manage to win him as a financier for her cause.

13 America

Suttner had her greatest successes in the USA. She was perceived as an idol by the feminists. Despite her old age, she travelled to the United States in 1904 and 1912, seeking to recruit sponsors for the peace movement.

14 The Nobel Prize

Without Suttner, there would be no Nobel Peace Prize, as she was well aware. Being ignored in the first years came as a great disappointment to her. She needed the money desperately, both for the peace movement and for herself.

15 Before the Great War

“People don’t understand what is happening ... Why don’t you do something, you, young people? This concerns especially you! Defend yourselves, unite! Don’t leave the work to be done to old women to whom no one listens.”
(Suttner to Stefan Zweig)

All states engaged in a hectic military buildup. Suttner desperately warned of a Great War– and was ridiculed. One week after her death, on the 21st of June 1914, the Austrian heir to the throne, Franz Ferdinand, was shot in Sarajevo. One month later, the Austro-Hungarian Empire declared war on Serbia: World War One began ...

16 Suttner and the Nobel Prize

The friendship between Bertha von Suttner and Alfred Nobel lasted 20 years. She tried repeatedly to win him over to give a large sum to the peace movement. Only a week before his death in 1896, she wrote to him: “And for this I implore you: do not ever withdraw your support – never, not even beyond the grave, which awaits us all.” At the time, she knew nothing of his testament.