

# Bertha von Suttner

by Peter E. Lewis



Bertha von Suttner in 1906. (Wikimedia Commons)

The Peace Palace in The Hague. (Wikimedia Commons).

ON 21<sup>st</sup> June this year it will be exactly 100 years since the death of Bertha von Suttner. She was an amazing woman and on the 21<sup>st</sup> June everyone should pause for a moment to remember her. The first woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize and only the second woman (after Marie Curie) to receive a Nobel Prize, she should be an inspiration for everyone, but unfortunately, although many coins and stamps have been issued in her honour, few people today have ever heard of her. This is a pity in view of the



Bertha von Suttner on a 10-euro coin issued in 2005 to celebrate 100 years since her Nobel Peace Prize.



Bertha von Suttner on a 2-euro coin issued in 2002. The 2014 coin is similar except for the date.

present interest in commemorating World War I, which started for Britain and Australia on 4<sup>th</sup> August 1914, only six weeks after Bertha's death. The German government ignored the ultimatum of the British government that all German troops be withdrawn from Belgium by 11 p.m. on 4<sup>th</sup> August, and so the terrible "war to end all wars" began.

Bertha was born in Prague into an aristocratic family on 9<sup>th</sup> June 1843. Her father was much older than her mother and he died before she was born. He was

a field marshal and Bertha was a countess. Her mother's father was a cavalry captain, and the militaristic environment of the first thirty years of Bertha's life probably influenced her later attitude.

Bertha's mother gambled her money away and the family was impoverished. In 1873 Bertha found employment as governess for the four daughters of Baron von Suttner in Vienna. She was thirty years old and pictures of her as a young woman show her as a striking beauty. This was too much for the baron's 23-year



A German stamp celebrating 100 years since Bertha von Suttner's Nobel Peace Prize. In the middle is an image of her book, and in the top right, an image of Alfred Nobel.

old son, Arthur, who fell madly in love with her.

Arthur's parents disapproved of him marrying Bertha, but a solution to their problem presented itself when an advertisement appeared in the WANTED section of a Viennese newspaper in 1876. It read, "A very wealthy, cultured elderly gentleman, living in Paris, desires to find a lady also of mature years, familiar with languages, as secretary and manager of his household." Actually the gentleman was not elderly, being only 43 years old, but he certainly was very wealthy. His name was Alfred Nobel. He was a Swedish chemist who manufactured dynamite and other explosives as well as the detonators to set them off. Originally intended for civil use in mining and canal construc-

tion, they were not used in munitions until the 1880s.

So Bertha went to Paris to work for Alfred Nobel. He was very impressed with this beautiful, intelligent woman; but she stayed in Paris for only about a week because she received a telegram from Arthur saying, "I cannot live without you." Bertha also realized that she could not live without Arthur, and she returned to Vienna. She and Alfred wrote letters to each other until he died in 1896. Bertha and Arthur married secretly and moved to the Caucasus region in Russia, where for nine years he eked out a living teaching German and giving riding lessons. She began to write articles and novels in which she criticized the social conditions in Europe.



Stamp of Palau issued in 2005 showing Bertha von Suttner and Henry Dunant.

Eventually they were reconciled with his family and they returned to Vienna. In 1887, when she was 44, she was awakened to the whole idea of an international peace movement. Purely by chance she came across a record of a meeting of the International Arbitration and Peace Association, which had been founded in London in 1880. She later wrote that this chance encounter "gave the initial occasion for all that I have endeavoured to do as a helper in the peace movement." She was surprised that such an association existed: "What? Such a league existed? – The idea of justice between nations, the struggle to do away with war had assumed life? The news electrified me."

In 1889 her novel, *Die Waffen nieder!* (Lay Down Your Arms!) was published. It was the heart-rending story of a young noblewoman who experiences the tragic consequences of war. In one episode in the book the heroine goes searching for her husband and sees for herself the horrible suffering of the wounded soldiers after a battle between Austria-Hungary and Prussia. The novel was a great success and very influential in promoting the cause of the peace movement. It was translated into several languages. Its effect was similar to that of Henry Dunant's book, *Un Souvenir de Solferino* (A Memory of Solferino), which was published in 1862 and led to the formation of the Red Cross. It made European society aware of the stark realities of war.

Bertha's talent was as a lobbyist. She was very effective in organizing pacifist groups and publicizing their causes. Among her many activities she founded the Austrian Peace Society and she edited the journal of the German Peace Society, which had been founded by Alfred Fried, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1911. The journal was called *De Waffen nieder!* after her book. The German Peace Society became the focus of the pacifist movement in Germany before 1914.

Bertha wrote numerous letters and petitions to the rich and powerful persuading them to support her work. The most important of her correspondents was, of course, her old friend, Alfred Nobel. It was probably because of her influence that when he died he left part of his huge fortune to endow a prize for peace. Many expected Bertha to be the first recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1901 but that honour went to Henry Dunant, the founder of the Red Cross. The prize is awarded impartially, and unlike the other Nobel Prizes it is decided by a vote of the Norwegian Parliament. Bertha was awarded the prize in 1905.

Bertha encouraged Andrew Carnegie, an extremely rich industrialist to support the peace movement. In 1901 he sold



Austrian banknote issued in 1966 showing Bertha von Suttner.  
(Image courtesy of Comptoir des Monnaies, Lille, France)

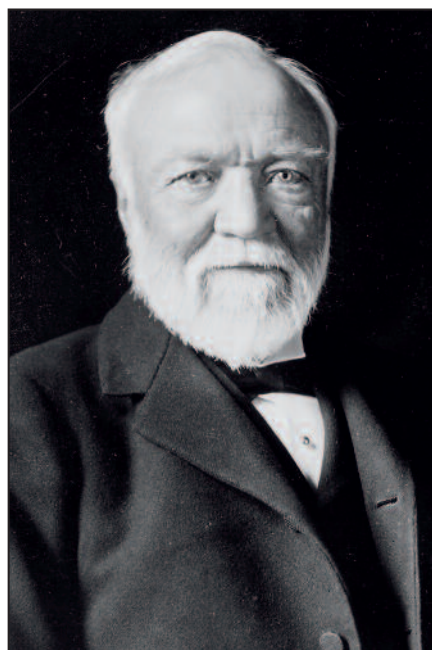
his steel company to J. Pierpont Morgan for \$250,000,000 and devoted himself to philanthropy. One of his charitable foundations was the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, founded in 1910; and in 1911 Bertha became a member of the advisory council. He also endowed the impressive Peace Palace in The Hague, which was completed in 1913. The International Court of Justice, which is the primary judicial branch of the United Nations, is based in the Peace Palace. On 31<sup>st</sup> March this year the court found that Japan's whaling program in the Antarctic was not in accordance with the International Convention.

There is an excellent website devoted to Bertha: *BerthavonSuttner.com*. It is a production of the Bertha von Suttner Project. A lot of information is recorded there about her, including copies of her articles and speeches. There is even a virtual tour of the Peace Palace, where a bronze bust of Bertha is displayed. Also on the website you can watch for free a black-and-white film, *No Greater Love*, which was made in Germany in 1952. It is a dramatized version of Bertha's life. The dialogue has been dubbed into English, and it lasts for about 90 minutes. It is a great movie.

When Bertha died in 1914 an obituary in the American Journal of International Law compared Bertha's achievement to that of Harriet Beecher Stowe whose novel was instrumental in ending slavery in the United States. It stated: "The peace movement has had its Harriet Beecher Stowe; and the Baroness Bertha von Suttner's novel, *Die Waffen Nieder* (Lay Down your Arms), published in 1889, can properly be compared with *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. It has been translated into many languages. It has shown the horrors of war just as its prototype showed the horrors of slavery. Both reached the heart and, through the heart, the conscience. . . This is the service which this high-minded and gifted woman rendered to the cause of man-

kind." According to Margaret MacMillan, who wrote a book published in 2013 entitled *The War That Ended Peace*, Bertha "was very much a product of the nineteenth century with its trust in science, rationality and progress. Surely, she thought, Europeans could be made to see how pointless and stupid war was."

Sadly, Bertha's confidence was misplaced. Despite all her efforts, the Great War began and millions of soldiers and civilians were killed or wounded. There was unimaginable suffering and destruction, and it planted the seeds for the next world war. People did not listen to Bertha. The peace movement was just something that governments paid lip-service to, while preparing all the time for war. In her insightful book Margaret MacMillan wrote that the Great War was a puzzle: "How could Europe have done this to itself and to the world? There are many possible explanations; indeed, so many that it is difficult to choose among them." According to Professor MacMillan, mil-



Andrew Carnegie  
(Image courtesy Library of Congress)

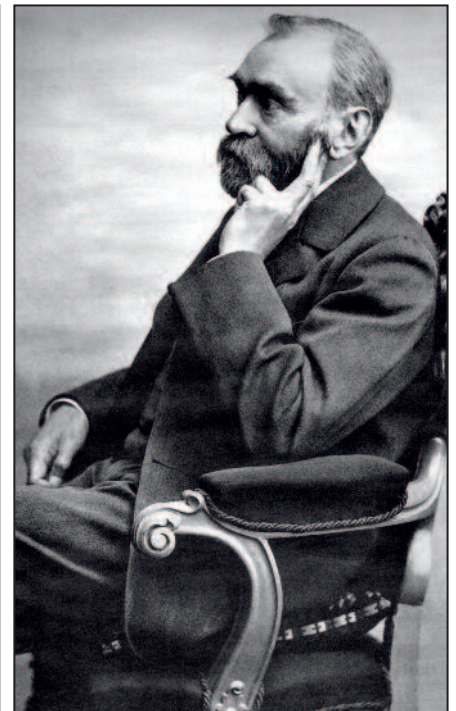


Figure 9 – Alfred Nobel (Wikimedia Commons)

itarism "reflected contemporary fears about degeneracy and it also showed the strong influence of older pre-modern ideas about honor. Europeans were preparing themselves psychologically for war before 1914; some also found the prospect exciting. . . To the dismay of anti-war liberals, war was glamorous."

In Australia there was jubilant enthusiasm at the outbreak of hostilities. Australian men rushed to join up, and recruitment campaigns were unnecessary. In fact, within six months more than 60,000 men had joined the armed services. On 5<sup>th</sup> August 1914 an Australian newspaper reported, "Certainly in Melbourne nationalist sentiment is running high with eyewitness reports of wild enthusiasm and patriotic song taken up by crowds in the streets." It was the same in Europe. Just as well Bertha did not live to see it. It would have broken her heart.

Bertha believed that inevitably there would be evolution towards a better, more peaceful society. She was certain that "in the course of centuries the warlike spirit will witness a progressive decline." Let's hope that she is right. On the 13<sup>th</sup> June, watch the movie about her and give thanks for the life of Baroness Bertha von Suttner.

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