

German Resistance to World War One

Speech by Dr. Guido Grünewald (German Peace Society-United War Resisters = DFG-VK and European Bureau for Conscientious Objection = EBCO) on 15 October 2016 at the Peace History Conference 2016 in Leeds "Conscience and Conscription: Resistance to War 1916-2016"

When World War One started female and male pacifists as well as socialist war opponents were shocked during the first days and even weeks, they were partially paralyzed. Despite all their warnings of militarism and the arms race pacifists had overvalued those factors which were at work strengthening international cooperation. They hadn't imagined that the Great War really would happen. Socialists had believed in the international solidarity of the working class and the Socialist International as obstacles to war. Only gradually pacifist and socialist war opponents became active.

At the start of WWI the executive power had been transferred to the military. The legal base were article 68 of the imperial constitution (declaration of the state of war) and the law on the state of siege from 1851. The military commanders in the various districts were in charge and civil authorities had to follow their instructions. Pacifist and socialist war opponents were subject to severe repressions which escalated in the autumn of 1915 when a first unrest among the population became visible due to insufficient food supply and agitation by annexationist forces increased. Repressive measures included censorship and finally a ban of print media, censorship and ban of correspondence, the prohibition to reside in a particular area or to travel, a ban to meet or provisions to hold meetings only under police surveillance, house searches, so-called protective custody and conscription into the army for men. In Berlin the German Peace Society (Deutsche Friedensgesellschaft = DFG) was not even allowed to hold non-public meetings. The municipal authorities of Schweinfurt wrote individually to the members of the DFG and in reference to alleged treacherous aspirations of the society threatened them with a ban of correspondence. Socialist war opponents additionally were subject to repressions by the party apparatus which tried to silence them.

Since time is limited I can only deal with the opposition of the various parts of the peace movement. I must leave out the anti-war activities and strategies of the workers movement. But I will talk briefly about the development of conscientious objection in WWI in the final section.

German Peace Society

The German Peace Society was founded in 1892 at the initiative of Bertha von Suttner and Alfred Hermann Fried. Up to 1914 it was the organisation where pacifists came together. During the war the membership decreased by half to 5.000 members

but the DFG remained the largest peace organisation in Germany. For a long time the leadership of the society was convinced that Germany was waging a defensive war against Russia. In its second war leaflet from 15 August 1914 the DFG emphasized accordingly that the pacifists would fulfil their patriotic duties. With this clear commitment the leadership hoped to shake off the social isolation of the pacifists. In the same leaflet the Peace Society opposed however the demonization of the enemies and aimed at a peace agreement which was based on “a lasting community of peace and law among the European civilized nations”.

With this strategy of the diagonal – pacifist internationalism and pacifist patriotism as two elements of the same ethos – the leadership of the Peace Society tried to preserve the organisation through the war, to continue pacifist work as far as possible and to keep contact with the international peace movement to the greatest possible extent. But since autumn 1915 the society was capable to act only in a very limited way due to bans and repressions. An attempt to create a seemingly harmless substitute organisation failed. The Central Office for International Law (Zentralstelle Völkerrecht) was founded in December 1916 but already in January 1917 it was forbidden to advertise or to make public declarations. Pacifists focussed their work to fight demands for excessive annexations which were aggressively put forward by nationalist forces, large business associations and the military. But the pacifists tried in vain to be heard by the government or the Foreign Office by submitting memoranda and letters. The Peace Society saw the war in Western Europe as a cultural catastrophe und advocated a negotiated peace which included the restoration of Belgian sovereignty but for Alsace-Lorraine until 1918 only autonomy in a German federal state. In contrast the war in the East was regarded to be a defense against a reactionary regime and as a war of liberation for the peoples which were oppressed by Russian imperialism. After the February revolution in Russia the Peace Society consistently changed its position and advocated a negotiated peace also with Russia; it strongly protested against the dictate of Brest Litowsk.

The German pacifists failed to have a sincere and productive dialogue with pacifists in the hostile states during WWI apart from some contacts with English pacifists. The Foreign Office allowed some German pacifists to participate in a few international meetings, for example in the conference early April 1915 in the Hague which was organized by the Nederlandsche Anti-Oorlog –Raad (Dutch Anti War Council) and which adopted a minimal program for a lasting peace. But it were mostly pacifists from neutral states and from the central powers who participated in such meetings. Especially the French pacifists refused any discussion with their German counterparts during the war. On the one hand the reason were some comments by Ludwig Quidde, chairman of the Peace Society, who as a parliamentarian was isolated in his liberal Free People’s Party (Freie Volkspartei) and especially towards the outside world sometimes made tactical national remarks. On the other hand French pacifists took increasingly a jusqaboutinist position regarding the defeat of Prussian-German militarism as a precondition for a just peace settlement.

It was only in 1917 that the Peace Society changed major views. Instead to demand reductions in armament the slogan was now "immediate universal radical disarmament". States were asked to renounce parts of their sovereign rights in favour of the League of Nations which had to be created. For the first time the Peace Society explicitly addressed the relationship between domestic and foreign policy. It demanded the democratisation of the political institutions including women's suffrage, ministerial responsibility to the parliament and parliamentary control of the foreign policy. Moreover the DFG denounced war profits and advocated public control of the arms industry. After the war it also demanded protection for workers and an international social legislation in order to combat economic and social inequality.

League New Fatherland

In November 1914 the League New Fatherland (Bund Neues Vaterland = BNV) was founded in Berlin, it later became the German League for Human Rights. The League was not aiming at mass propaganda but saw itself as a small but active circle of like-minded people who could exert influence because of their scientific contributions, their social status and their personal reputation. Within a short time the League succeeded in gaining members among pacifists, diplomats, natural scientists, sociologists, writers and liberal democratic politicians. About 30 of its members came from the Peace Society, overall membership was not more than 150 during the war, among them Albert Einstein, Kurt Eisner, Hellmuth von Gerlach and the co-founder Otto Lehmann-Russbüldt. In contrast to the Peace Society the League addressed democratic shortcomings and social problems from the beginning. It regarded a fundamental transformation of the political system and of social policy as a necessary precondition for a change of German foreign policy. During the November Revolution of 1918 the League called for a democratic socialist republic. The democratization of Germany was also early demanded by German pacifists who had gone into exile to Switzerland.

It was clear to the League that a reorientation of the German policy would not be possible without the collaboration of the Social Democrats. During the last years before 1914 there had been a cautious rapprochement between pacifists on the one hand and the revisionist wing and the centre of the Social Democratic Party on the other hand. The League succeeded in establishing contacts to all social democratic war opponents including the right wing of the party and the circle around Karl Liebknecht. Most convergence of views existed with left-wing socialists who founded the Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD) in 1917. In contrast the revolutionary left insisted that the socialist revolution was a precondition for peace. Nevertheless some wealthy members of the League paid largely for 8 leaflets by which the Spartakus group in late January 1918 supported the political strike of 400.000 workers in Berlin alone – about one million all over Germany - calling for a quick peace settlement without annexations. But also the League since 1915 was capable to act only in a very limited way due to repressive measures; its two female secretaries were both imprisoned for weeks.

National Committee of Women for Permanent Peace, German Section

In Germany too, an independent women's peace movement developed during WWI. Key drivers were dissatisfaction with the hesitant attitude of the Peace Society and the international women's peace conference in the Hague 28 April to 01 May 1915. From this conference originated the International Committee of Women for Permanent Peace and national committees in various countries. Even though most conference participants came from neutral countries and the Central Powers in contrast to men pacifist women from the countries at war succeeded to keep some contacts based on common abhorrence of the mass murdering and on the rejection of stirred-up feelings of hatred. The conference demanded inter alia equal rights for women, the democratization of political institutions, universal disarmament and a fast end to the war by means of a mediating conference of neutral states. The meeting sent two missions to leading politicians from neutral countries and countries at war. In most cases the women had longer talks with the target persons but couldn't achieve a lasting effect.

With this international initiative and with their activities in Germany the pacifist women – who were combated by the mainstream women's organizations – acted more radical and courageous than many male pacifists. They mostly stopped to give consideration to national interests and demanded a quick end of the war with reference to their role as mothers. In particular Anita Augspurg and Lida Gustava Heyman stood for a gender-based pacifism: war was the product of male insanity, peace an issue for women. Others like Minna Cauer or Helene Stöcker refused to regard peace as a gender issue. Before 1914 there had been numerous controversies with female socialist war opponents around Clara Zetkin and Rosa Luxemburg. During the war a rapprochement took place without either side giving up their basic position. Anyway also the pacifist women could act only in a very limited way. They succeeded to build a network consisting of small groups or individual women in more than 20 towns. Due to this loose structure it was not possible to formally forbid the women's committee. But the authorities effectively suspended its activities by bans and repressions against the leading women.

In late spring 1917 protests of Catholic priests against the war began particularly in Bavaria which increased after the papal peace note from 01 August 1917. From this beginnings the German Catholic's Peace Association (FDK = Friedensbund Deutscher Katholiken) developed after the war.

Conscientious Objection in Germany during WWI

Mainstream pacifism in Germany rejected conscientious objection until far into WWI. The Peace Society took it for granted that the fatherland had to be defended with arms when attacked. In the military penal code of 1872 conscientious objection is not even mentioned too inconceivable seemed to be the idea alone. Objectors therefore could only be condemned for absence without leave or insubordination.

There have been only a few cases of conscientious objection in Germany during WWI. Most objectors had religious motivations. While we do not know of any catholic or protestant objector about 30 came from the reformation movement of the Seventh-Day-Adventists – a separation from the mainstream Adventists during WWI as the leadership of the latter supported the war. Some 40 objectors were Jehova's Witnesses who doubted the then neutral position of their church. There were also a few anarchists and anarcho-syndicalists from the "Free Association of German Trade Unions" (FVDG = Freie Vereinigung Deutscher Gewerkschaften) as well as 3 known conscientious objectors from pacifist organisations. The reaction of the military was different: Some objectors were silently moved to an army unit where they were not compelled to bear arms, some received lenient sentences, others were hospitalized in sanatoria or were sentenced to long prison terms. Several objectors died in prison or shortly afterwards due to harsh conditions.

In conclusion it can be noted that German anti-war opponents had a rather limited impact during the war. They tried to be heard by many ways and quite a few of them took considerable personal risks. But only late in the war when discontent among the population and the soldiers at the front had grown pacifist arguments and especially socialist anti-war agitation did find resonance. Looking at other wars one conclusion seems clear to me: Once a war has started pacifist and other anti-war opponents have no chance to reach a broader public, only later in a protracted war. Wars must be avoided before they begin, mainly by political struggle and preventive and peace-promoting measures.