

Speech by Dr. Guido Grünewald (German Peace Society-United War Resisters = DFG-VK and European Bureau for Conscientious Objection = EBCO) on 15 May 2016 at the commemoration event at the Peace Plaque, Bonn Square, Oxford, UK on occasion of the International Conscientious Objectors Day

When World War I started in 1914 general conscription had been in place in Germany for 100 years, first in Prussia, later in the German Empire. Public awareness was shaped by the fact that national unity had been achieved by war. The military and militaristic values played a prominent role in German society and dominated public life. National interests were defined in terms of power politics and were to be enforced by means of military strength. This attitude became even stronger when the phase of global outreach started with emperor Wilhelm II.

It is no coincidence that a lasting peace organisation emerged in Germany only in 1892. It's also no coincidence that the German Peace Society was founded at the initiative of two Austrian citizens, Bertha von Suttner and Alfred Hermann Fried, both of whom were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize later. In 1914 the Peace Society numbered about 10.000 members but they remained outsiders. In mainstream society the pacifists were mocked at best but often they were actively fought. It didn't help that the Peace Society adopted a patriotic attitude – for example towards the question of Alsace-Lorraine -, that it supported the defense of the fatherland and that it rejected conscientious objection categorically.

The fact that conscientious objection is not even mentioned in the military penal code of 1872 shows how strange and almost unconceivable the idea of an open rejection to perform military service was to the prevailing opinion. Conscientious objectors therefore could only be condemned for absence without leave or insubordination. Correspondingly there have been only a few cases of conscientious objection in Germany during WWI.

Most objectors had a religious motivation but this didn't originate from the mainstream churches. We don't know of any catholic or protestant conscientious objector in Germany during WWI, both large churches blessed the weapons instead. Those who objected in larger numbers were members of the reformation movement of the Seventh-Day-Adventists. This movement separated from the mainstream adventists during WWI as the leadership of the latter supported the war. About 30 reformation adventists avoided military service as itinerant preachers while about 20 were sentenced to prison. Five of them died in prison or shortly afterwards due to the harsh conditions. The following names are known: Wieck, Czutka, Redomski (a man of Polish origin who died in prison), and Johannes Rauser. Rauser had been on the run from January 1917 to August 1918 – „I didn't comply with the induction order since I wanted to obey God's commandments according to the Scriptures“ (quote). After his arrest he was sentenced to five months of imprisonment in a fortress. It was

a remarkable lenient sentence as the military prosecutor had respected the religious motives of Johannes Rauser and argued for second-degree absence without leave.

The second larger group of conscientious objectors in Germany originated from the Jehovah's Witnesses. Until 1914 the teaching of the founder C.T. Russell applied which stipulated that the Bible Students should obey governments but stay neutral and avoid to become a part of the world. The Witnesses rejected to kill fellow human beings but conceded at that time that governments were entitled to raise an army and to draft their subjects. In the course of the war several Bible students doubted increasingly whether they should swear a military oath and perform military service. For example Konrad Mörtter reported later; „Without having been influenced by either side it became evident for me from the words of God that a Christian must not kill. Therefore I refused to perform military service and to swear a military oath... Then I was taken to a court martial. Thanks to the understanding of my captain I was not imprisoned in a fortress but was transferred to a medical unit.“ (quote) Other Jehovah's Witnesses also found understanding. Johannes Rauthe for example was moved to a railway unit where he was not compelled to use his rifle directly. Other Witnesses were sentenced to several years of imprisonment, some were hospitalized in a sanatorium. So far we have indications that about 40 German Witnesses refused to perform armed military service in WWI. Two thirds of them are said to have become total objectors in the course of the war refusing any kind of military service.

There were some but very few German conscientious objectors during WWI which were not religiously motivated. In contrast to the Netherlands for example the call by Tolstoj to resist military service didn't find much response in the anarchist movement in Germany which anyhow was very small. We know two objectors with anarchist roots: Hans Schreier from Hamburg died in the prison of Berlin-Spandau in 1916. S. Fried refused to swear a military oath and to perform armed military service. He was arrested several times, spent three months in a sanatorium but also escaped several times, for the last time in September 1917. Fried succeeded to hide afterwards till the war was finished.

The German anarcho-syndicalists were organized in the „Free Association of German Trade Unions“. They combatted militarism in principle and rejected every kind of militarily organized forces, but they were too small to resist effectively during the war. Dozens of activists were arrested and partially stayed in protective custody for more than a year. We know the names of three objectors: Wilhelm Wehner was sentenced to five months in prison, Fritz Oerter and Franz Barwich were sentenced to 15 months and five years imprisonment in a fortress respectively. The Free Association of German Trade Unions provided financial support for their families .

Only two conscientious objectors are known in WWI to have come from the German pacifist movement. Already serving in the army Karl Ley refused in 1918 to continue military service. He was sentenced to one year imprisonment and consented finally to serve in a medical unit. His father Karl Ley had founded the local group of the

German Peace Society in the town of Siegen in 1894. Erwin Cuntz from Waldkirch near Freiburg was a lawyer and a member of the Peace Society. He was influenced by the thinking of Tolstoj whom he had visited personally in Yasnaja Polyana. In 1915 he didn't comply with the induction order and wrote an appeal from which I quote in part: „Like rabid dogs you sank your teeth in each other, like predators you were attacking each other. Stop it now, each of you! I mean you, yes you who is just reading this appeal, shout it into their faces loudly: *I will not join in!* I will not allow to demean myself to become a murderer.“ Cuntz was hospitalized in a sanatorium two times. Finally he was released when the director of the second sanatorium had classified him as a follower of Tolstoj, a classification he felt to be satisfying. The military authorities left Cuntz alone afterwards.

The question of conscientious objection gained more importance in Germany only after WWI. The mass murder during the war and the news about the movement of conscientious objectors in England lead to the foundation of a radical pacifist organisation called Federation of War Resisters which later joined the War Resisters' International. Moderate pacifists now also supported an individual right to conscientious objection. In the German Peace Society a new wing emerged which called itself militant pacifists; these activists even discussed conscientious objection by masses as a political strategy. It was, however, a theoretical discussion since the German army was restricted to 100.000 soldiers by the treaty of Versailles and conscription had been abolished in 1920.

How illusive the debates had been during the 1920s became evident when the Nazis took power. They took extremely brutal action against all people who were not willing to participate in the military build-up and the war machinery later. Only few people – probably between 300 and 400 persons – openly refused to serve in the German army during WWII. Most of them were Jehova's Witnesses as the new leadership of this denomination had decided after WWI that military service had to be refused in principle. So far we know 331 death sentences against Jehova's Witnesses 270 of which were executed. Many Bible Students refused to work for arms production in the concentration camps. As long as they were imprisoned there they were not subject to military justice. The SS maltreated them severely but finally gave in since they were dependent on the work discipline of the Witnesses. About 30 objectors originated from the reformation movement of the Seventh-Day-Adventist, the Quakers and – without any support by the church leadership – from the catholic and protestant churches. We also know 17 conscientious objectors who were motivated by pacifist reasons, by national-political considerations (for example as Austrians or men from Luxemburg) or who acted for reasons unknown.

In the Federal Republic of Germany conscientious objection in 1949 became a fundamental right and part of the constitution. Conscientious objection gained more importance at the end of the 1960s influenced by the youth and student revolt. The numbers of conscientious objectors increased tremendously in the 1970s and 1980s. From the 1990s onwards until the suspension of conscription in 2010 the alternative civilian service was as much valued by public opinion as the military service.

I draw the following conclusions from the development and effects of conscientious objection in Germany: Conscientious objection is an important personal witness. It points to dangerous and problematic developments and shows that there are alternatives. A high number of conscientious objectors can influence public opinion and can have a civilising effect. In my opinion it's partly due to the high number of conscientious objectors and their argument with the military that German public opinion rejects foreign military interventions by the majority so far. What conscientious objection can't achieve, however, is to prevent war. All corresponding strategies have proven illusive. Once a war has started opposing forces hardly have any chance. Wars must be avoided before they begin, mainly by political struggle and preventive and peace-promoting measures.