



The German League - 100 years for Human Rights, against War and State Despotism

The history of the German League for Human Rights can be subdivided into three periods:

The first and initial period (1914-1922)

Radical pacifists - Albert Einstein, Kurt Tucholsky and Count of Arco among them - founded the Bund Neues Vaterland (BNV - Engl. "League for a New Fatherland") in November 16th 1914, after Germany had declared war on Belgium and France in August of the same year.

In view of the widespread bewilderment within the German peace movement after the beginning of the First World War, the founders of the BNV were committed - first and above of all - to an unconditioned truce, to the immediate end of the war, and ultimately to a lasting peace in Europe. The BNV foresaw already at that time, that a lasting peace in Europe would depend on social, economic, political, and cultural interrelationships between the European States. Hence its members went in for a perspective of the "United States of Europe", which they regarded as a preliminary stage of a "World League of Nations". This open-minded approach of the BNV, aimed at international understanding and a lasting peace was remarkable at that time, since the mainstream in Germany tended to nationalism, chauvinism and revanchism.

All publications of the BNV were censored from the very beginning of its engagement. In 1916 the BNV was altogether forbidden any activism until the end of the World War I. Courageous members carried on supporting a truce and disseminated pacifistic and anti-nationalistic pamphlets from the underground. In 1918 the ban on the BNV was lifted. From then onwards the League members went in for the acceptance of the Peace Treaty of Versailles without annexations, for the accession of Germany to the "World League of Nations", as well as for good relationships with the neighboring states like France, Netherlands, Poland or Russia that had been regarded to be "arch enemies" of Germany since the 19th century. It goes without saying, that quite a number of well-known German socialists and democrats involved with the abolishment of the German Empire and its replacement by the democratic "Weimar Republic" based on rule of law instead of royal despotism, belonged to the BNV as members.

The second period (1922-1933)

Relying on its conviction and political agenda the BNV did everything possible to visibly foster the idea of friendly relationships with the neighboring states, particularly France. In 1922 a delegation of the BNV's board demonstratively crossed the "ditch" and went to Paris, in order to find like-minded activists. The BNV delegation attended the board meeting of the "French League of Human Rights". Both organizations succeeded in establishing the "International League for Human Rights", i. e. the predecessor of today's FIDH. Furthermore, a shared public appeal to the "Democracies of Germany and France" had been published. It called for a normalization of the relationships between the two nations and presented in detail the respective conditions for such a perspective. The Belgian League of Human Rights and other European organizations soon joined.

When the delegation returned from France the BNV was renamed to "German League of Human Rights" (GLHR), in reference to the "French League of Human Rights".

The GLHR was an integral part of the European and international peace and human rights movements and continued to act for a "United States of Europe" with a socialistic agenda.

Domestically the league's members were mainly involved in actively defending and promoting the development of German democracy against its alleged guardians of law in the justice department, the police and reactionary parties like the NSDAP, that already had been founded in 1921. A substantial number of GLHR members were persecuted and murdered for their democratic engagement against restoring monarchy, as well as, for their opposition to all

nationalistic and militaristic forces during the twenties. Many were charged with treason or even espionage and sentenced by right-wing judges because of their active engagement for democracy, human rights, peace and justice.

One of the internationally well-known GLHR peace activists was Carl von Ossietzky. As editor of the German weekly magazine "Die Weltbühne" he agreed to the publication of an article, that exposed, the rebuilding of an air force in violation of the Treaty of Versailles, that had forbidden Germany any military restoration. Carl von Ossietzky was convicted of high treason and espionage and sentenced to 18 months imprisonment in 1931. In fact the article's author Walter Kreiser and the Weltbühne editor Carl von Ossietzky acted as what we call presently "Whistleblowers". In contrast to the author of the respective "military top secrets" who went into exile to France after the court's sentence, Carl von Ossietzky stayed with "his people" in Germany. In May 1932 he went to prison. Only seven months later he succeeded in being set free in the course of a governmental Christmas amnesty in December 1932.

The GLHR continued nevertheless to constantly work against militarism and Nazism in Germany, when in January 30th, 1933 Adolf Hitler was appointed chancellor and the Nazi party began to pave the way for its dictatorship. In February the GLHR was warned by friends serving as government officials, that there were decisive efforts in the interior ministry to smash the organization and that all the board members were listed to be persecuted by the Nazis. The GLHR's board decided to pre-empt these attempts by announcing the dissolution of the League. The membership registers and all other specific organizational information were thrown into the Berliner Spree river.

Ten days later the Reichstag was set on fire on February 27th 1933. The search for all unwanted opponents and particularly the GLHR board members began. Most members succeeded in fleeing the country to exile. However, Carl von Ossietzky preferred to stay with the German people. The Nazis took him away from his home at 3 am and arrested him. A torturous and painful journey through the darkness of prisons and concentration camps began for him. Despite of continuing sadistic torture and humiliation by the Nazis, Ossietzky held up his dignity and courage, and his conviction for the defense of human rights, peace and justice.

The GLHR members abroad launched an international campaign for his freedom and his nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize. Suffering from serious tuberculosis, injected to him by the Nazis in the concentration camp, he was awarded the 1935 Nobel Peace Prize in 1936. The Nazis refused to allow him to travel to Oslo to receive the prize. Carl von Ossietzky died on May 4, 1938 from the consequences of the abuse, that he had suffered in the KZ.

During the German occupation of France and other European nations the "Human Rights Internationale" was forbidden by the Nazis, as well. However, GLHR members were able to set up a League abroad. Even then the Nazis prohibited the function of the organization and were successful in stopping its activities.

The Third Period of the League's History (1949-present)

The International League of Human Rights was reestablished quickly in 1945 and renamed to, "Fédération Internationale of the Leagues des Droits de l'Homme". In 1949 the occupation forces allowed the League's members, who had returned to Germany, to rebuild their organization. Due to political divergences of opinion the present "International League for Human Rights (ILMR)" was founded by a group of dissidents in 1959.

Since then the League fosters the implementation and expansion of human rights and fights nationally and internationally with other NGOs and grassroot organizations against armament and war as well as against any kind of governmental violence and arbitrary force.

The campaigns, activities and publications during these last 65 years have been numerous and influential. Since 1962 the League has donated the Carl-von-Ossietzky-Medal, bestowed to individuals or groups for moral courage and outstanding dedication to human rights.

The Carl-von-Ossietzky-Medal will be given for the 51st time around the International Day of Human Rights on December 14th 2014 in Berlin (see "Carl von Ossietzky" attached).

The ILMR has been co-founder and member of the FIDH ever since 1922. In 2001 the ILMR participated in and contributed to establishing the European umbrella organization "Association Européenne pour la defense des droits de l'Homme (European Association for the Defense of Human Rights)" and has been its active member ever since.

For further information see www.ilmr.de, www.aedh.eu and www.fidh.org