

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 29

“Die Waffen Nieder!”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

On August 24, 1898, the world of international relations was struck by a bombshell. The ruler of one of the great powers in Europe had sent a plea to his fellow emperors, kings and presidents, proposing an international conference to discuss arms limitations and the settling of disputes through negotiation and arbitration rather than by armed conflict and war.

The world of 1898 considers itself infinitely more advanced and sophisticated than earlier eras. The suggestion has already been made that war is obsolete, and it is time for the nations of the world to find more civilized ways of settling their differences. But now, for the first time, a world leader is saying it, and is proposing a conference to begin the process of making this dream into a reality.

Would you believe it if I told you that the world leader making this brave proposal is the Russian Emperor, Nikolai II?

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 29. Die Waffen Nieder!

Bertha Felicitas Sophie, the Countess Kinský, was born in Prague in what was then Austria in 1843. Her mother, Sophie Wilhelmine von Körner, was the 20-something daughter of a cavalry officer. Her husband was an Austrian general officer, *Feldmarschall-Leutnant* Franz Michael de Paula Josef Graf Kinský. He was 74 years old when young Bertha was born (you devil). The Kinskýs were a Bohemian aristocratic family that had risen to prominence after supporting the Holy Roman Emperor during the Thirty Years' War. But, 200 years later, the family's fortunes had fallen. In fact, I should have said Bertha's father *would have been* 74 when she was born, had he not died two months earlier. Her father's pedigree was impeccable, but he was dead, and her mother came from a merely minor aristocratic family, so, in the Austrian way (rigid, silly and anachronistic), this means that Bertha didn't count as a real aristocrat. She was a member of that class of people that Europe had in abundance in the late 19th and early 20th centuries: Someone who was nominally an aristocrat and bears a title, but has nothing in the way of money or power to back it up.

I say this not to pick on Bertha, who's not responsible for her circumstances, of course. To the contrary, while a lot of aristocrats in her position, especially the men, compensated for their lack of power and prestige by becoming military officers, antisemites, right-wing political agitators – you know the type – Bertha took advantage of what money and connections her mother could provide to improve herself. She studied. She read great literature. She learned foreign languages. She was a talented singer and pianist. And she became a published author while still in her teens.

Her family found her a suitable husband, and by “suitable” I mean of course that he had a lot of money, but Bertha was not content to spend her life with some creepy dude that was three times her age just because he had a lot of money, so she refused to go through with it. She tried to make a career as an opera singer, but she suffered from stage fright. She sang well enough in practice, but in front of an audience, her throat would tighten up with fear, and the beautiful sounds just wouldn't come out.

At the age of 29, still single, still without money, and aging past the point where snagging a rich husband was still an option, she secured a position as a tutor to the Suttner family. The Suttners were a well-to-do aristocratic Austrian family, and they had four teenage daughters who became Bertha's charges. The girls called her “Boulotte”, which is French for “chubby”, for reasons I don't have to explain. Living in the Suttner household for a few years, Bertha eventually caught the eye of the girls' older brother, the 23-year-old Arthur. He was seven years her junior, and he was heir to the von Suttner name. In time, he proposed marriage, and Bertha accepted. I doubt you'll be surprised when I tell you that his parents did not approve. They thought it best if Bertha would leave. Although they were nice about it, they didn't just put her out on the sidewalk. They kept her on until she could find something else, and they even helped her look for a new position. Eventually, Bertha found a newspaper advertisement placed on behalf of a wealthy gentleman of advanced years living in Paris, who was seeking a mature and educated single lady to be his secretary and assistant. This sounded like just the thing.

Arthur was devastated. When the time came to see her off, he knelt at her feet, kissed the hem of her dress, and said: “Matchless, royally generous-hearted woman, your love has taught me to know that happiness which shall consecrate my life. Farewell.” Which proves that aristocracy is good for something. And so, Bertha moved to Paris. This mysterious, wealthy gentleman of advanced years turned out to be the 43-year-old Alfred Nobel, the guy who invented dynamite, gelignite, and that smokeless powder that's been responsible for the bloody and horrifying deaths of so many soldiers in episodes 11 and 15 of this podcast, not to mention millions more to come. Nobel never married, and he had no children. And he felt terribly guilty about episodes 11 and 15, and he told his new employee: “I wish I could produce a substance or a machine of such frightful efficacy for wholesale destruction that wars would thereby become altogether impossible.” Yeah, right, Alfred, why don't you get back to me when we get to 1945 and we'll discuss how that worked out?

In 1888, Alfred's brother Ludwig died in France, and some French newspapers mistakenly believed that the deceased was Alfred himself. One newspaper printed his obituary under the headline: "The Merchant of Death is Dead". Because the French are really, really, really holding a grudge over the Franco-Prussian War thing. Now, it's not every man who gets to read his own obituary. And if Alfred Nobel was worried about the consequences of his inventions before those obituaries came out, he must have been really thinking hard about it afterward. He began turning up at peace conferences, often incognito. He foresaw a future that would degenerate into wars of incomprehensible violence and destruction if someone didn't do... something. He discussed with Bertha the possibility of disposing of his fortune by creating some kind of prize to be awarded every five years from 1895 to 1925, to the person who had done the most to contribute to peace in Europe. Initially, he conceived of an end date of 1925, because he figured that "if in 30 years society cannot be reformed, we shall inevitably lapse into barbarism."

As you already know, Alfred Nobel did indeed dedicate his fortune to creating a prize, although in the end, he decided to make the prize annual, and in four categories: Physics, chemistry, medicine, and peace, rather than just peace. And he also decided to give the human race more than 30 years to clean up its act, and so he ditched the expiration date. But it is likely that we owe a lot to Bertha that the Nobel Peace Prize is even a thing.

But her influence on Alfred Nobel was exercised mostly through letters and occasional meetings at peace conferences, because, funny story, Bertha actually only worked as his secretary for a couple of weeks. Then she suddenly packed her bags, rushed back to Vienna, and eloped with Arthur. Nobody knows exactly why this happened, but the best guess is that after she left town, Arthur finally screwed up the courage to defy his parents and wrote Bertha a letter. The newlyweds fled to Georgia (that's Georgia as in the Caucasus, not Georgia as in "On My Mind"). Arthur had some connections there, and so they lived there for 9 years, safe from the stern disapproval of Arthur's parents. They supported themselves by writing, tutoring and translating.

In 1885, Arthur's parents relented, and the couple returned to Austria. Bertha continued her writing career. She published several novels. She started to become involved in the international peace movement. She wrote a nonfiction book, *Das Maschinenzeitalter* (*The Machine Age* in English), an investigation of the times in which she lived, and in which she criticized rising nationalism and arms buildups. But her masterwork was the 1889 publication of *Die Waffen Nieder!*, or in English, as it's usually translated, *Lay Down Your Arms!*. *Lay Down Your Arms!* is the fictional autobiography of an Austrian woman who lives roughly the same times as Bertha, enduring war with Italy in 1859, the war in Schleswig-Holstein, the Austro-Prussian War, and then happens to be in Paris during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. In the course of all these wars, she endures a catalogue of tragedies intrinsic to war, and carefully researched by Bertha: Poverty, epidemics, misery, death, including the losses of two husbands. *Lay Down Your Arms!* was described as doing for the antiwar movement what *Uncle Tom's Cabin* did for the antislavery movement. And the guy who said that was Leo Tolstoy. What a cover blurb that would have made if they had had paperbacks back then.

The book was an international sensation. It was translated into a dozen languages, and Bertha von Suttner became known as the poet of the international peace movement. She founded peace organizations, gave speeches, attended conferences, and lobbied world leaders ferociously for disarmament.

[music: Beethoven, Piano Sonata No. 14]

And now that I've introduced you to the poet of the international peace movement, allow me to introduce you to its accountant. His name is Jan Bloch. He was a Polish Jew, or maybe I should say a Jewish Pole, I'm never quite sure how to say that. Either way, he was born in 1836 in the city of Radom in what was then the Russian Empire. He got involved in banking, railroad construction, and ultimately became a sort of freelance financial analyst. It was not a good thing to be Jewish in Russia at this time, as we have already seen. Bloch converted to Christianity early in his life, but he chose the Calvinist form of the faith rather than Catholicism or Orthodoxy. Since you can count the number of Presbyterians in Russia on the fingers of one hand and have enough fingers left over to take a shot of vodka, one might reasonably wonder if Bloch's real purpose was to evade Russia's cruel and repressive restrictions on the activities of Jews. If so, more power to him. His conversion made it possible for him to do work in St. Petersburg, the imperial capital, and by the late 19th century, he was a leader in Russian business and government.

Bloch had to have been one of the world's great number-crunchers, and his approach to every problem was the same: Spend years researching and analyzing it, and then publish a five-volume monograph of excruciating exactitude. He published his first work in 1864. That was a study of railroad construction problems, with an emphasis on the most efficient and cost-effective way of building railroads under Russian conditions. He helped organize and modernize Russian pension funds, and in 1876 published a detailed study of the breeding and sale of cattle in Russia.

Bloch may have converted to Christianity, at least officially, but he never forgot the Jews. He responded to antisemitic violence in Russia by writing a study demonstrating that Russia's all-too-frequent pogroms were only possible because of the tacit approval of Russian authorities, in contrast to the official position of the Russian government, which was that the pogroms were spontaneous outbreaks of retaliatory violence by outraged Russian citizens fed up with the endless depredations of the Jews.

The Russian government regularly justified its discrimination against Jews by citing statistics showing that Russian communities with significant Jewish populations had higher rates of crime, alcohol abuse, poverty, and prostitution. Jewish communities, the authorities argued, were dens of vice, laziness and criminality, and they were a bad influence on upright Orthodox Russians, which was the justification for restricting where Jews could live and ordering mass relocations.

Well, you don't go throwing bogus statistics around in front of Jan Bloch unless you're looking to get owned. Bloch produced a five-volume statistical analysis comparing regions of Russia with large Jewish populations against regions of Russia with no Jewish population. His analysis showed that rates of prostitution and crime in general were substantially lower in the Jewish community. There was one Jewish criminal out of every 2,170 Jews, versus one out of every 715 gentiles. He also showed that all gentile communities in Russia were more likely to be delinquent on their taxes than communities with Jews in them, that rates of alcohol consumption and abuse were lower in communities with Jews in them, that land values were higher in communities with Jews in them, and that Jews on average worked longer hours for lower pay than did their gentile compatriots.

With regard to the pogroms, Bloch showed that they were more common in densely populated communities where there was a large police presence than there were in small rural communities where there was little or no police presence, suggesting that, contrary to the official claim that pogroms were spontaneous outbreaks of violence by ordinary people, they were in fact being orchestrated by the government. In other words, he pretty much shredded every argument in the antisemitic arsenal.

I'm going to pause here for a moment to make the observation that, for all the information I've collected on Bloch's mad number-crunching skills, I can't tell you anything about his family, when or if he was married, or whether he had any children. Hmm.

But Bloch's most famous work, and the one for which he is best remembered, was called *The Future of War*, a six-volume monograph published in 1898 after 14 years of research. Bloch laid out how modern infantry rifles with their smokeless powder were firing more and more rapidly, more and more accurately, and over longer and longer distances. He calculated that one soldier armed with a modern rifle in an entrenched position was a match for four soldiers attacking that position over open ground. Therefore, Bloch reasoned, if a modern state went to war, it would need to raise the largest possible armies to have any hope of victory.

Modern conscription, record-keeping, planning, and above all, railroads, made it possible for a state to muster a very large army and deliver it to where it was needed with unprecedented speed. But those very same technologies made it equally possible for the defending state to mobilize just as rapidly. So, having mustered its huge army, the attacking state could not hope for a quick and decisive victory. Modern weapons made decisive victories, or more to the point, decisive defeat, impossible. Any resulting battle would inevitably be a long and bloody slog.

Whereas European wars in the past saw armies in the tens of thousands maneuvering across open ground, commanded by generals searching for advantageous terrain, perhaps forcing battle, perhaps avoiding it depending on the circumstances, modern weapons made single-day battles and quick victories impossible. Modern wars would be fought with armies in the millions, arrayed across battlefronts hundreds of miles wide. Nations on both sides would be forced to pour out their treasure and sacrifice their young men's lives on a scale never before imagined, not over days and weeks, but over months and years. Victory would come not to the country with superior strategies and tactics, but to the country that managed to forestall social collapse and economic ruin a little bit longer than its opponent could.

And in an increasingly interdependent world, where the finances, trade and business relationships of the advanced countries of the world were so tightly interwoven, what hope would the battered but still-standing victor have to rebuild when her former business partners lie dead at her feet? None. To win such a war would only be slightly less devastating than to lose it. Political upheaval and social revolution would become endemic. Governments would be overthrown. In short, a modern nation declaring war is committing suicide.

Incredibly, this Polish-Jewish-Russian bean counter, who never wore a uniform a day in his life, had, in his spare time, put his finger on the fundamental fact of early 20th century warfare, a fact that dozens of career military officials working in the general staffs of ten major powers, who studied this stuff for a living, had overlooked.

During the Napoleonic Wars of a century ago, musketeers might fire 20 or 30 shots in the course of one battle. By the beginning of the 20th century, infantrymen were carrying 200 rounds into battle, not because that was the amount they needed, but because that was all one man could carry; he might well need to be resupplied before the battle is over. During the American Civil War, Richard Gatling had invented the Gatling gun, capable of firing several rounds a second. In 1883, the American-born British inventor Sir Hiram Maxim invented the Maxim gun, capable of firing 10 rounds a second. A team of six men operating one Maxim gun could lay down fire at a rate that previously required an entire regiment.

At the Battle of Waterloo, the French had had more cannon than their opponents, but the ground was muddy, and the recoil would drive the wheels of the gun carriage so deeply into the mud that a team of soldiers would have to struggle to push the cannon back into position and realign it for the next shot, which negated the French advantage. At the beginning of the 20th century, France was producing the world's first recoilless cannons, which were ready to reload two seconds after firing without any need to reposition or realign the gun. Instead of one or two shots per minute, these guns can fire 15-30 shots per minute, and fire them 5 times farther.

These new weapons were revolutionary. They were also much more expensive than their predecessors. Even worse, the rate of advance in weapon design was such that armies now needed to reequip themselves every decade or so, even if they had fought no war. Cutting-edge technology comes with a price, both in money and in rapid obsolescence. Anyone who owns a smartphone knows exactly what I'm talking about.

Even some of the great powers were struggling to keep up. Countries like Turkey and Austria and Russia did not have the budgets to buy every shiny new artillery piece that hit the market. So, at about the same time that Jan Bloch was putting together his dissertation on modern warfare and showing up the great military minds of Europe, General Alexei Kuropatkin, the Russian Minister of War and one of the more... pedestrian military minds of Europe, was doing some bean counting of his own. Kuropatkin had heard that Austria, one of the countries that Russian military planners regarded as the most likely that they would be facing in a war, was buying some of these amazing new French artillery pieces. Now this was bad news for Russia, because the Russian government didn't have very much money, and Kuropatkin knew that the Russian Finance Minister, Sergei Witte, whose obsession was modernizing the Russian economy, would begrudge every kopek Kuropatkin would ask for to match the Austrian artillery upgrade. Witte had once written, "It is my conviction that the burden of armaments without limitations may become more irksome than war itself".

The thing is, Austria didn't have very much money, either. And from the seed of this thought grew an idea in Kuropatkin's mind. It was not a brilliant idea, but it was simple enough that you didn't have to be brilliant to grasp it. What if Russia and Austria entered into a mutual agreement that neither country would upgrade their artillery pieces for ten years? Both countries would save a lot of money, which could be used for more constructive purposes, and if there were a war in the meantime, both countries would be equally disadvantaged with equally obsolete cannons, meaning that nobody would really be disadvantaged at all. So there was no downside.

When the idea was brought before Witte, he immediately saw the problem. In the event this proposal were seriously made, the Austrians would at once either A, assume that the Russian economy was on the brink of collapse and perhaps start wondering if they were the ones to give it a final push; or more likely, B, take it for a trick and figure it was a not-very-subtle plot to get them to forgo the new French artillery.

But, Witte thought, what if the Austrians could be induced to not buy the new artillery pieces as part of a larger program of disarmament? Witte said:

I often think that the unexampled prosperity of the United States of America is a direct effect of its immunity from militarism. Suppose each of the States there were independent as are those of Europe. Would the revenue of North America exceed its expenditure as it does today? Would trade and industry flourish there as they now do? On the other hand, suppose if Europe could contrive to dispose of a bulk of their land forces, do with a mere nominal army, and confine her defenses to warships, would she not thrive in an unprecedented way?

And so the idea was brought before the emperor. He liked it. His government arranged a meeting between the emperor and Bloch, where Bloch explained the thesis of his monograph. And so it was, to the amazement of the rest of the world, that on August 24, 1898, the Russian Foreign Minister handed a note to the ambassadors of every foreign government in St. Petersburg that read, in part:

The intellectual and physical strength of the nations, labor and capital, are for the major part diverted from their natural application, and unproductively consumed. Hundreds of millions are devoted to acquiring terrible engines of destruction, which, though today regarded as the last word of science, are destined tomorrow to lose all value in consequence of some fresh discovery in the same field.

To put an end to these incessant armaments and to seek the means of warding off the calamities which are threatening the whole world – such is the supreme duty which is today imposed on all States.

Filled with this idea, His Majesty has been pleased to order me to propose to all the Governments whose representatives are accredited to the Imperial Court, the meeting of a conference which would have to occupy itself with this grave problem.

This conference should be, by the help of God, a happy presage for the century which is about to open. It would converge in one powerful focus the efforts of all States which are sincerely seeking to make the great idea of universal peace triumph over the elements of trouble and discord.

It would, at the same time, confirm their agreement by the solemn establishment of the principles of justice and right, upon which repose the security of States and the welfare of peoples.

Public reaction around the world was overwhelmingly positive. The Emperor of Russia was hailed as having brought about a new era. He would go down in history as Nicholas the Pacific.

[music: Holst, *Venus, the Bringer of Peace*]

But not everyone was thrilled. Some Americans wondered if the timing of this proposal, coming as it did just two weeks after the U.S. and Spain had agreed to an armistice in their war, suggested that Russia was trying to restrain the United States. One French newspaper's comment on the proposal was: "What about Alsace-Lorraine?"

But Rudyard Kipling's response to Emperor Nikolai is in a class by itself. He published a poem entitled "The Truce of the Bear", an allegorical tale of a hunter who, when the bear he was hunting rears up on its hind legs and puts its paws together as if begging for mercy, is touched with pity and does not shoot. And then the bear rips his face off – literally.

*When he stands up as pleading, in wavering, man-brute guise,
When he veils the hate and cunning of his little, swinish eyes;*

*When he shows as seeking quarter, with paws like hands in prayer
That is the time of peril -- the time of the Truce of the Bear!*

Not the subtlest piece of political commentary.

Sir Charles Scott, the British ambassador in St. Petersburg, told the foreign minister: "It would be difficult to remain insensible to the noble sentiments which had inspired this remarkable document." The U.S. State Department instructed its ambassador to accept its invitation to the conference immediately. In the end, every government invited to the conference accepted, the British being the last, after two months of waiting. The British government was distinctly cool towards this proposal. The Prince of Wales, Empress Alexandra's uncle, privately called it "the greatest nonsense of rubbish I have ever heard of". But the British also didn't want to be seen as the country that had quashed universal peace.

In a follow-up proposal, the Russian government listed 8 topics for discussion. These included: First, a freezing of military budgets worldwide; second, a ban on the introduction of any newer, even more powerful powders and explosives along the lines of the stuff Alfred Nobel had already invented; third, limitations on new powders and explosives already existing, including a ban on "the throwing of projectiles or explosives of any kind from balloons or by similar means" – because the world of 1898 doesn't have a word yet for what we today call "bombing". Fourth, a ban on new, experimental underwater torpedo boats – submarines. The other topics revolved around the laws of war, such as further ratifying and expanding the Geneva Conventions, and finally the use of arbitration as an alternative to armed conflict in the resolution of disputes between nations.

This last point was the most radical, and the most exciting to the international peace organizations and movements that existed in the world of 1898. The logic of arbitration goes like this: In the ancient past, disputes between individual human beings were typically resolved with violence. Even in 1898, duels are not entirely a thing of the past. But over time, law courts substituted for hand-to-hand combat, and in the modern world, their use is compulsory. If someone sues you, you don't have the option of ignoring the summons and going for the hand-to-hand combat instead, and if you tried to do that, the whole of society will gang up on you and put you in jail. So by analogy, shouldn't there be binding arbitration between nations? Should not nations be compelled to bring their disputes before an impartial tribunal to be resolved by reason and argument, and should nations that refuse to submit to arbitration be treated as enemies of the entire international community? This was considered pretty pie-in-the-sky in 1898, but there were movements in support of these ideals. Some of the more radical political movements of the socialist left went even further and imagined a permanent standing organization overseeing international affairs – a league of nations, so to speak.

The Russians also proposed that the conference be held in a neutral location, and so The Hague, in the Netherlands, became the venue for the international peace conference.

We'll have to stop there for today, but I hope you'll join me next week for *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we look at the Hague Conference, and examine the European balance of power in the early 20th century. That's next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. Bertha von Suttner's advocacy for peace earned her the 1905 Nobel Peace Prize, funded by the endowment of her former employer. This made her the first Austrian, and the second woman after Marie Curie, to win a Nobel Prize. Bertha von Suttner would die on June 21, 1914, just days before the death of her compatriot, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, would plunge Europe into the catastrophe she had dedicated her life to preventing. In 1995, the Czech astronomical observatory at Klet' would discover an asteroid, number 12799, and name it von Suttner after their peace-loving countrywoman.

Jan Bloch was nominated for a Nobel Prize in 1901, but he did not win, and no asteroid has even been named after him, because everybody loves poets, and no one likes accountants.

[music: Closing Theme]