

Laudatory speech by Karoline Linnert

This year's Bremen International Peace Award of the *schwelle* Foundation goes to Maria Biedrawa for her tireless personal commitment to peace on the African continent and to the organisation Connection e.V. for its international commitment to the right to conscientious objection. Bremen's former mayor Karoline Linnert will give the laudatory speech as patron of the Peace Prize.



Dear award winner Mrs Biedrawa, dear award winners from Connection e.V., dear guests, Two years ago, I had the honour of speaking to you here on the occasion of the presentation of the last Peace Award and, as before, I would like to begin by thanking the people who support the *schwelle* Foundation. This is the 11th time that this prize has been awarded, which in itself speaks for a particular tenacity and persuasiveness. The prize is recognised and respected beyond Bremen. It helps to encourage the award winner, supports their work, gives them a sign of the appreciation they deserve and creates space for discussion. Bremen can be proud of you and grateful for your commitment to civil society. It is always an honour for me to be able to speak to you at the award ceremony and I draw new thoughts and hope from it – which we all particularly need right now.

Two years ago, the award ceremony took place shortly after the Russian invasion of Ukraine and many discussions were characterised by bewilderment. Until then, war had somehow seemed far away and people had the impression that the global community could somehow get a grip on local wars – only a few of them in Europe. This misconception preoccupies many people and we have to admit that there is probably only a fine line between believing in the good and not wanting to see it.

Today, we are watching the war in Ukraine continue without any realistic idea of how a ceasefire could at least be achieved. More than 80,000 Russian and Ukrainian soldiers have been killed, three times that number wounded and over 11,000 Ukrainian civilians have died in this war, including many children, and there is no end in sight. Grief, anger and

helplessness about this are understandable reactions and, in my view, better than the self-assured insistence on the delivery of certain types of weapons, on immediate negotiations or relativising the question of who attacked whom.

It is undeniable that this war will only be ended through negotiations. But Ukraine is not our colony, just as it does not want to become one of Russia. However, nothing should stop German civil society from thinking about what role Russia could play in a post-war order, what co-operation and economic relations could look like. In any case, a permanently cultivated enemy image cannot and will not bring a good future.

As if that were not enough, the Israel-Gaza war broke out with the Hamas raid on three Israeli kibbutzim and a large rave party on 7 October 2023, killing over 1,200 civilians and taking 200 hostages, with over 30,000 now dead. Since then, images of the now completely destroyed Gaza Strip have dominated the news. I don't think you can seriously deny that Israeli warfare can no longer convincingly demonstrate that revenge and delaying new elections is not also a motive. What is supposed to thrive on this? If Hamas cynically turns its own civilian population into hostages, the slim chance of a ceasefire lies precisely in not going along with this strategy, which only ever generates new hatred.

Global military spending is rising to a new high, as are the shares of the major arms manufacturers, while the ban on exports to non-democratic countries is in retreat. This is weakening national economies: in any case, this money is not being channelled into education, healthcare, infrastructure and climate protection, all of which are necessary for development and the prevention of violence.

The Peace Award seems more necessary than ever, on the other hand almost anachronistic, and it is precisely from this that it gains its strength: if Putin and Netanyahu do not listen to us, our convictions remain and they also bear fruit. Many people will not be deterred in their quest for more justice. The Peace Award is above all an "encouragement".

The *schwelle* 2024 Peace Award in the category "Pioneering Peace Work" goes to you, Mrs Maria Biedrawa, for your tireless peace work in Central Africa, in countries such as Congo, Togo, Burundi, South Sudan, the Central African Republic and others.

Mrs Biedrawa was born in Austria and lives in France. She is a social pedagogue and logotherapist and has undergone further training in non-violent conflict counselling. She has been on the board of "Church and Peace" since 2018 and runs a training institute for social work in Paris. Mrs Biedrawa has been working for 20 years in various African countries in the areas of trauma counselling, offers training in the principles and methods of non-violence and is an initiator and part of interreligious encounters. The prerequisite is that they are invited by local initiatives, which are often church institutions. Against the background of her Christian world view with respect and interreligious sensitivity, Mrs Biedrawa attaches particular importance to involving the local population and communicating peace work in the teams formed. The cultural roots are respected and it is avoided to impose something on the people with a colonial view of the dominant culture.

Ms Biedrawa points out that the increase in violence in Central African states is the result of continuing colonialism and that the wealth of raw materials is at the heart of it. "Genocides,

war crimes and crimes against humanity do not start with a machete, they start in the clean offices of the military, politicians and industrialists". According to your statement, the democratisation process in Africa has fallen behind by 30 years in recent years. You boldly name the role played by the major powers USA, Russia, China and the former (?) colonial power France.

I was particularly impressed by the testimony of young people from South Sudan, who explained that they cannot relate to concepts such as peace or justice "because nobody has seen that here, neither we nor our parents' or grandparents' generation". Peace workers are often persecuted and risk their own lives. It's hard to imagine the feeling of being subjected to arbitrariness, violence and a lack of rule of law for generations. Despite these experiences, Mrs Biedrawa, you have clearly succeeded in awakening a longing for peace and justice and turning it into action.

The work in groups is non-violent and unarmed; it is also the aim that the perpetrators ask for forgiveness in order to interrupt the spiral of violence. For the victims, it is about "surviving conflicts, physically, mentally and emotionally". For Mrs Biedrawa, in the spirit of Mahatma Gandhi, peace is not the goal, but the path. I look forward to hearing more from you about your work and what we can do to support you.

The Award of the Donors for Encouraging Initiatives goes to the organisation Connection, which clearly opposes military violence as a political tool. Connection has been campaigning internationally since 1993 to ensure that the human right to conscientious objection is enforced worldwide and supports deserters from warring countries such as the former Yugoslavia, Turkey, Israel, the USA and now, as part of the "ObjectWarCampaign", from Russia, Belarus and Ukraine. This involves counselling, protection from prosecution and safeguarding the right to asylum.

In 1987, the United Nations General Assembly declared conscientious objection to military service to be a universal human right – albeit without legal obligation. In 2011, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that conscientious objection to military service is covered by the European Convention on Human Rights if it is based on a "deep-rooted and sincere" conviction. Many member states do not comply with this. Ukraine has suspended the right to conscientious objection.

250,000 men have fled Russia since February 2022, 22,000 from Belarus and over 200,000 men of conscription age from Ukraine. Chancellor Scholz has promised Russian men protection in Germany. 100,000 Ukrainian men have temporary legal protection in Germany - but this does not provide security. A statement by the scientific service of the German Bundestag from 16 November 2023 indicates that the right to asylum could apply more to Russian conscientious objectors, as they can be forced to commit acts against the civilian population and acts contrary to international law in the army. This may be a pragmatic approach, but it is not the recognition of a fundamental right to conscientious objection.

For me, it is an irresolvable contradiction: on the one hand, experience shows that the self-determination of peoples, the right to defence, freedom and fundamental rights too often go hand in hand with the use of armed force. As a German who owes the end of Nazi rule

and a life of great security and prosperity to the deaths of many Allied soldiers, I do not want to forget this.

On the other hand, it is right that state power, including that of democratic states, must stop short of the conscientious decisions of citizens. This must also apply when the state is attacked – as is now the case in Ukraine.

Your approach is radical. You see conscientious objection as part of national defence and you are making a big leap by showing a future in which warmongers can no longer rely on finding enough people willing to sacrifice themselves for their madness. Your approach is also radically humanitarian, in that you do not want to wait until the last people have realised that wars make some rich and many dead before enforcing the right to conscientious objection and desertion. And your approach is radical because you don't get involved in the question of the reasons for war, whether a war in this situation is legitimate, just, sensible, necessary or whatever, but instead emphasise the right of the individual to decide whether they want to take part in it themselves.

You have helped many people who have left their homes to avoid having to shoot other people, who live with social ostracism and the fear of having to return. And you help us all to see the people in the wars, who are by no means all shouting Hurrah, but have internal conflicts themselves or legitimately just want to get on with their lives.

Congratulations to Mrs Biedrawa and Connection for winning the *schwelle* Foundation's Peace Award. I look forward to hearing more from you in a moment.

