

Ludwig Quidde: The Central Office for International Law (1916)

Abstract

Ludwig Quidde (1858–1941), a historian by training, was one of the most active critics of Wilhelmine society. Well known for *Caligula*, his satirical portrait of the Kaiser, Quidde became active in the German peace movement in the years leading up to the war. He was interested in a rapprochement between Germany and France and supervised the organization of the World Peace Congress of 1907 in Munich. He became president of the *Deutsche Friedensgesellschaft* [German Peace Society] in 1914, a position he held for fifteen years. He received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1927. When World War I broke out, Quidde attempted to maintain ties with English and French peace groups. The attempt failed, and when Quidde returned to Germany he was charged with treason, though the charges were later dropped. This 1916 essay stresses one of the basic beliefs of the peace movement: the essential role of international law in conflict resolution.

Source

“After the German National Committee [*Deutsche Nationalausschuss*] and the Independent Committee for a German Peace [*Unabhängige Ausschuß für einen deutschen Frieden*] have decided that this is an appropriate time to go public with declarations of their war aims, German men and women who strive for a long-term peace on the basis of national self-determination and a new policy of reconciliation have joined together to form a central German organization, called the ‘Central Office for International Law,’ in order to promote long-term peace.

“In the view of the new Central Office, the peace that ends this war should of course secure the freedom of the German people, the independence of the German empire, the inviolability of German territory, the protection of German interests abroad, and the preservation of the German people’s potential for economic development. However, the peace should also contain every guarantee of its own durability. To this end, it is necessary that the peace be accepted by all signatories as a satisfactory system of international relations, that it not compel defeated nations to prepare wars of reprisal because of annexations obtained by force, by infringements of their right to self-determination, or by other intolerable stipulations. The peace should at the same time create effective institutions for peacefully settling international disputes in the future, by means of orderly mediation or juridical decisions, and in this way it should put an end to the arms race as a threat to peace. The real effectiveness of such a peace requires that a new spirit animate our national and international political life. The German Central Office for International Law is convinced that the necessary preconditions for this new policy are present in the German nation, as well as in all other civilized peoples, and that such a peace alone represents a ‘German peace’ in the best sense of the word.

Local branches of the German Central Office for International Law have been or are being formed in all parts of Germany. As soon as freedom is granted to discuss aims for war and peace, the Central Office will issue public declarations. In the meantime, statements of support should be sent to the branch office in Charlottenburg, Kantstrasse 159, Gartenhaus III.”

The newly formed organization immediately sent a petition to the Reichstag, which convened on September 28. In this petition the Center for International Law asked that the Reichstag, “announce its desire and the desire of the German people that the peace that ends this war not only secure, as a matter

of course, the basic interests of the German people, its independent political existence, the inviolability of its territory, and the freedom of its economic development, but also that the peace include every practical guarantee of its own durability. Therefore, the Reichstag should declare in particular that: 1. In order to avoid the seeds of future wars, the coming peace shall impose no intolerable conditions on any nation; in particular, it shall provide for no annexations that violate the free will of a population or infringe on the autonomy of previously independent states. 2. In order to represent a lasting peace, however, the coming peace shall also lay new foundations for international law, by creating an international organization to guarantee the peaceful settlement of future international disputes, by means of orderly, amicable mediation or juridical decision." These demands were accompanied by a detailed explanation, which stated that the new political organization of the civilized world would, among other things, "put an end to secret diplomacy and eliminate the dangerous system of secret treaties and alliances." The organization would also establish an environment for limiting armaments by treaty." "It would as well fulfill in the domain of international law two demands that have been often been cited as German war aims [...] the open door policy in all colonies and imperial protectorates, as well as freedom of the seas guaranteed by international law." The petition further provided: the new international organization "be accompanied by a wholesale rejuvenation of public life." Irresponsible, extravagant declarations have awakened the impression that "the German people, alone among the nations of the world, is opposed to securing peace through the rule of law and desires instead to secure peace by the force of German might." In this way, "other nations justify continuing this war until Germany is defeated

[...] Therefore," (the statement concludes) "it is necessary to create clarity and to declare to the entire world that the overwhelming majority of the German people wants nothing more than a peace that secures its basic interests, is founded on law and equity, and is based on the rule of law."

The petition was signed by no fewer than 179 people.

Source: Ludwig Quidde, *Der deutsche Pazifismus während des Weltkrieges 1914–1918*. Karl Holl, ed. Boppard am Rhein, 1979, pp. 114–15.

Translation: Jeffrey Verhey and Roger Chickering

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