

Who was Agnes Karll?

I'll be honest: Until recently, I had never heard the name Agnes Karll. It was only when the subject of the new 95-cent charity postage stamp was announced that I wanted to find out who the woman depicted in traditional nursing attire was. "Reformer of German nursing" — that meant nothing to me. So I started reading up on her. And in doing so, I came across a truly fascinating life story.



Agnes Karll was born in 1868 on an estate in the Lüneburg Heath; after her parents separated, she grew up near Schwerin. Even as a confirmand, she wanted to pursue a profession that would benefit people. As a woman in the German Empire, however, she was not yet allowed to attend university. And there was no money for studying abroad. After a period working as a governess, Agnes Karll turned to nursing.

She experienced firsthand how the minimally trained “sisters” of the time were worn down and exploited in their professional lives. There were no regulations on working hours or social security provisions. “Christian charity” and “God’s reward” were watchwords not only for Catholic nuns or Protestant deaconesses. Red Cross nurses and “independent sisters” also had hardly any social protections and very little say in patient care. Doctors were in charge. Nurses carried out orders—even when, based on their experience, they might have made very different decisions.

As a result of her experiences in hospitals and private nursing, Agnes Karll soon joined forces with other nurses. Supported by the women’s associations of the time, they called for state-regulated training for nursing staff. In the nursing association she founded, health insurance and pension insurance were taken for granted.

Although the “Professional Organization of Nurses in Germany” deliberately organized itself as non-denominational, Agnes Karll always placed great value on the title “Sister.” She did so even when she was chairwoman of the association, and even when, in 1909, she became president of the International Council of Nurses. She wore the Lazarus cross on her brooch with confidence. Her association’s journal, *Under the Lazarus Cross – Bulletin of the Professional Organization of Nurses in Germany*, was first published in 1906.

Working closely with existing organizations, she developed structures and curricula for nursing education, networked with similar associations in Europe and overseas, translated professional literature into German, and, as a confident working woman, campaigned for women's access to university education and for their full active and passive voting rights.

The First World War destroyed much of what Agnes Karll and others had built. During the war, the majority of the association's nurses served in Austria-Hungary, primarily in epidemic prevention. As head of the organization, Agnes Karll visited the nurses working in various camps several times a year. In the economically difficult years of the interwar period, she used her international contacts in the interests of the nurses. After 1933, the National Socialists even banned the organization. She did not live to see this, however; she died in Berlin in 1927.

Yet in a democratic society there was no going back behind the standards for which Agnes Karll had fought all her life: nursing had become a recognized profession with structured training and reliable social protections.



The postage meter impressions shown here were kindly provided to us by Dr. med. Klaus Peter Holzhauser. They clearly demonstrate that Agnes Karll had been honored long before the release of the current stamp—for example, through hospitals and streets being named after her. The newly issued stamp thus represents a logical and visible continuation of this recognition.