

PEN International Charter

Where does the Charter come from?

The Charter of PEN International has guided, unified and inspired its members for over 60 years. Its principles were implicit at the organisation's founding in 1921. However, like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the PEN Charter was forged amidst the harsh realities of World War II. The final version was approved at the 1948 PEN Congress in Copenhagen.

Galsworthy's inspiration

PEN's first president, the British novelist and playwright John Galsworthy, wrote the first three articles of the Charter after the 1926 Congress in Berlin. Tensions had arisen then among the assembled writers, and debate had flared over the political versus non-political nature of PEN. Back in London, Galsworthy installed himself in the drawing room of PEN's founder, CA Dawson Scott, to work on a formal statement to 'serve as a touchstone of PEN action'. Galsworthy's resolution passed easily at the 1927 Congress in Brussels, and these articles remain part of the PEN Charter.

The onset of war

PEN was tested by the rise of Nazism in Germany, especially at the 1933 Congress in Dubrovnik. A few months earlier, in bonfires across Germany, the Nazi Party had burned many thousands of books it deemed 'impure' – that is, inconsistent with, or hostile to its ideology. At the Dubrovnik Congress, led by PEN International President H.G. Wells, the Assembly of Delegates reaffirmed the Galsworthy resolution as a response to these events. The following day, the German delegation attempted to prevent Ernst Toller, an exiled Jewish-German playwright, from speaking. While some members supported this effort, an overwhelming majority rejected the German position and reaffirmed the principles on which they had just voted. The German delegation walked out of the Congress – and, essentially, out of PEN until after World War II.

At the first Congress after the war, in Stockholm in 1946, PEN American Center – backed by English PEN – presented two more resolutions. One urged PEN members 'to champion the ideals of one humanity living at peace in one world'; the other addressed the issue of censorship. Debate on the wording and scope of the resolution continued at the 1947 Congress in Zurich, but eventually delegates came to an agreement. The resolution became the foundation of the fourth article of the PEN Charter.

From 1948 to the present day

Finally, at the 1948 Congress, the Assembly of Delegates approved the Charter of PEN in its entirety. Its principles continue to guide and unify our PEN Centres, now in more than 100 countries around the world.

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The PEN Charter is based on resolutions passed at its International Congresses and is as follows:

PEN affirms that:

1. Literature knows no frontiers and must remain common currency among people in spite of political or international upheavals.
2. In all circumstances, and particularly in time of war, works of art, the patrimony of humanity at large, should be left untouched by national or political passion.
3. Members of PEN should at all times use what influence they have in favour of good understanding and mutual respect between nations and people; they pledge themselves to do their utmost to dispel all hatreds and to champion the ideal of one humanity living in peace and equality in one world.
4. PEN stands for the principle of unhampered transmission of thought within each nation and between all nations, and members pledge themselves to oppose any form of suppression of freedom of expression in the country and community to which they belong, as well as throughout the world wherever this is possible. PEN declares for a free press and opposes arbitrary censorship in time of peace. It believes that the necessary advance of the world towards a more highly organized political and economic order renders a free criticism of governments, administrations and institutions imperative. And since freedom implies voluntary restraint, members pledge themselves to oppose such evils of a free press as mendacious publication, deliberate falsehood and distortion of facts for political and personal ends.

Membership of PEN is open to all qualified writers, editors and translators who subscribe to these aims, without regard to nationality, ethnic origin, language, colour or religion.

Signed by:

Date, (PEN Syria Centre)

PEN International promotes literature and freedom of expression and is governed by the PEN Charter and the principles it embodies: unhampered transmission of thought within each nation and between all nations. Founded in 1921, PEN International connects an international community of writers from its Secretariat in London. It is a forum where writers meet freely to discuss their work; it is also a voice speaking out for writers silenced in their own countries.

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