

Together for Europe

A centenary of the end of the First World War: Remembrance for a future

“For whoever would love life
and see good days,
... they must seek peace
and pursue it.” (1 Peter 3:10)

The Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (GEKE) gathered together from 13 to 18 September in Basle to conduct its 8th General Assembly under the banner “liberated – connected – committed”. The Gospel’s promise of freedom, forgiveness and reconciliation enables us to look back self-critically and learn from the past for the sake of a shared future in Europe. The General Assembly commemorated the end of the First World War in 1918 in terms of this promise.

One hundred years ago, after a series of ceasefire agreements, on 11 November 1918, the First World War officially ended with the signing of the Armistice between the German Empire and the Allies in the woods of Compiègne to the north-east of Paris.

It was not only the outcome of the war that showed a hitherto unknown degree of destruction and terror. Virtually all the major and colonial powers and smaller states sent almost 70 million people into the first global and total war in history, killing more than 17 million – known at the time and until the Second World War as the “Great War”. The First World War not only spelled the end for the world order that existed at the end of the 19th century in Europe. As former, multi-ethnic major empires collapsed and new states emerged, the power balance in the Middle east was also completely overturned (San Remo conference in 1920). The different peace agreements between 1919 and 1923 created new states, but also far-reaching territorial changes and borders that caused injustices and fuelled thoughts of revenge and revision. As the First World War and its dire consequences caused confusion and upheaval in all spheres of life, in the private and public realm, at national and international level, it is collectively remembered and recorded in history by many of the nationalities involved – particularly the western and central powers of that time, as the great seminal catastrophe of the 20th century.

The repercussions of the war persist subliminally and indirectly to this day, as generations of descendants of the vanquished continue to mourn their lost cultural heritage, national pride and territories. The descendants of the victors and those who found themselves on the winning side consider the situation and territorial gains laid down in the peace accord as the status quo and continue to nurture the national pride gained through this victory as a key aspect of their collective identity in their own remembrance culture. In reality, all those involved and their descendants are actually losers, as the repercussions and consequences of the accords in the wake of the First World War and the course of the 20th century have shown in dramatic fashion that they failed to achieve peace.

Nonetheless, the Protestant Churches in Europe gratefully recall the start of the ecumenical movement in the profound turmoil of that time, with its explicit commitment

to peace. After all, the post-war wish “to form a cross-border Christian commitment to peace led to the foundation Life and Work Movement, which became one of the three driving forces that would lead into the current-day ecumenical movement” (CPCE Council Statement, June 2014). Theological discussions at that time focused on overcoming nationalism as a task for the Christian message and a requirement for lasting peace.¹

The heavy legacy of the First World War presents the Protestant churches and European societies with questions and challenges that have emerged again and again during the past 100 years but have hardly been resolved.

Protestant Churches in Europe are conscious of the multifarious repercussions and effects of the First World War and **reflect upon...**

a) ...***the question of guilt.*** In every war and after each war, the question arises as to who bears the guilt. Public debate and a recollection policy steered by one side seeks to simplify things and apply mono-causal interpretations. Thanks to historical research, we now know that a local conflict escalated into a global catastrophe because several major powers viewed the war as a way out of their own crises. A constellation of global and economic factors enabled things to escalate this way. In the light of the Gospel, it is curative for every individual, but also for a society, to examine the question of guilt, without overlooking the complex historical circumstances. This is precisely how things can be turned around and new beginnings achieved.

However, it is even more true in the light of the Gospel that no nationality and no nation can or should may be eternally ascribed the role of perpetrator or victim.

Remembrance provides the churches occasion to ask where they observed the enthusiasm for war uncritically during the various conflicts of the 20th century, or even supported or helped incite it? Where might they have been so bound up in the political, social, economic and nationalistic spirit of the day that they were able to legitimise a political system ideologically and theologically (whether in military conflict, or in peace – for example, mobilisation in the German Empire, the Church in socialism, blessing weapons during the Balkan crisis)? Where did the Church and theology fail to or desist from analysing current affairs or political and social processes, reflect upon them in theological terms and speak out on behalf of the disenfranchised? “The church and theologians often failed their charge of being in the world but not of the world. (John 17:11-14) This bitter experience reminds us still today of the need for continuous self-criticism within the church and theology.” (CPCE Council Statement, June 2014)

We are therefore grateful for the wide range of theological work conducted with regard to peace and the associated rethinking processes in our churches and the broad ecumenical community. We recall the Xth General Assembly of the WCC in Busan, the Republic of Korea, with its declaration on the pathway to just peace and invitation to a pilgrimage of the justice and peace. Education in our churches and church associations

¹ “The Christian mission is by its very nature supranational, a spiritual entity that addresses people as human beings and not as speakers of given languages and members of given races and nationalities.” From Nathan Söderblom’s address at the awarding of the Nobel Prize in 1930 “The role of the Church in promoting peace”, with reference to the Ecumenical conference in Uppsala, Sweden, in summer 1917, (accessed 15.08.2018). https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1930/soderblom-lecture.html.

towards peace and non-violent conflict resolution is also part of this turnaround prompted by painful lessons learned in those times.

b) ... ***the question of minority rights.*** The newly established world order turned hundreds of thousands of members of ethnic groups into minorities in their own homeland. This was particularly the case in the countries and societies in Central, Eastern and South-eastern Europe. Although the victorious or winning countries had committed themselves to respecting the collective rights of these minorities and these were also supposed to be upheld by the League of Nations, history has shown that these rights were often wilfully and tendentiously ignored in these countries. Ethnic groups in diaspora situations are still fighting to this day for their rights to be recognised and for the ability to exercise and maintain their linguistic, religious and cultural identity not only in private, but also collectively.² Diaspora Protestant Churches have often also taken on the task of nurturing and maintaining their members' cultural as well as confessional identity. The CPCE's churches are well acquainted with this historical experience.³ In pondering a relational understanding of the "theology of diaspora", the CPCE promotes churches and congregations perceiving themselves as a bridging place "linking separated elements without eliminating their difference".⁴ This inevitably has a public dimension that helps shape how people really live together locally and regionally and aids reconciliation, such as in the "Healing of Memories" project that helps people to process wartime and discriminatory experiences.⁵

c) ... ***the question of exile and migration.*** An estimated 9.5 million people were forced into exile and relocated throughout Europe during the First World War and as a result of the consequences until 1926.⁶ In historical terms, streams of refugees and mass migration are by no means foreign to Christianity in Europe, particularly to Protestantism. Expulsion, displacement and ethnic cleansing sent millions of people in search of refuge and new homes in the wake of both World Wars, but also during the Cold War and the Balkan crisis.

The current refugee crisis is certainly an epochal event stemming from a complex pattern of historical and social circumstances around the globe. Although not the sole reason, in this case as well war is causing people to flee to European countries close-by or they are being forcibly displaced. In recent years, the CPCE has teamed up with other international ecumenical organisations to examine this development more carefully, based on respecting the dignity of every individual.⁷ We are grateful for the figureheads on the European political stage who strive for a common European policy based on the values of the conventions on human rights and refugees and for churches and congregations who act to preserve the dignity of refugees and migrants and to protect them in accordance with the message delivered in the New Testament of the Bible, urging those empowered by faith to give refuge to strangers (Matthew 25:35).

² e.g. the language that lessons are taught in at state schools in Ukraine.

³ See Leuenberg Documents 7, Church–People–State–Nation, ed. by W. Hüffmeier, Frankfurt. A.M., 2002.

⁴ Draft for the CPCE's 2018 General Assembly in Basle, Theology of Diaspora, study document of the CPCE to determine the situation of the Protestant Churches in pluralist Europe, p. 53.

⁵ Ibid., p.61f.

⁶ Marie-Janine Calic, Südosteuropa, Weltgeschichte einer Region, Munich 2016, p. 450.

⁷ Cf. the statement issued by the Council of the CPCE: "Shelter and welcome refugees – strengthen a common EU-refugee policy. To whom do I become a neighbour?", Brussels, 11 October 2015.

Experiencing love and affection is dependent upon acts of human interaction, but without attempting to deny the real fears that exist.

However, in Europe, and particularly in its economically robust northern and western parts, we cannot ignore the issue of how our economic, trade and even agricultural policies have played a role in provoking the present migration from other regions and parts of the world. Anyone wishing to stem the tide will have to fundamentally readdress these contributory factors, including in Europe.

d) ... ***the question of reconciliation.*** The injustice, suffering and repression that is suffered and dealt out or an awareness of the reality of guilt and sin throughout history and in the lives of individuals and groups lead the Protestant Churches to provide people with the space and opportunity to recount their life stories, reflect upon the suffering and injustice that they have endured and talk aloud about the pain they have suffered (e.g. by rekindling the “Healing of Memories” project). Protestant Churches in Europe must sustain the longing for peace and reconciliation in the different post-conflict societies, also under the current economic, social and political circumstances, wherever they are perceived as unjust. At the same time, they are aware that reconciliation is not an ideal condition or a singular act, but rather a process that needs to be initiated or maintained. Reconciliation requires willing participants and the kind of structural measures that serve this aim. This explains why the Protestant Churches in Europe welcomed the process of European integration as an act of peace and reconciliation. The Reformation Churches in Europe should raise their voices at any attempts to instrumentalise relationships with the past, while also continuing to develop their own language and empathy for facilitating reconciliation processes between individuals and groups. Reconciliation can exert a revitalising force in our societies and social reality in Europe.

e) ... ***the question of democratic culture and civil society.*** The end of the First World War was initially followed by a flourish of new or reinstated democracies and Republican state structures in Europe. However, a range of massive national and international troubles very quickly turned many societies into undemocratic systems and dictatorships, partly through democratically organised elections. Protestant theology and Churches were also not staunch proponents of the democratic state during these years. We are currently once again seeing parliamentary democracy and the rule of law come under pressure in European countries. In contrast to the years following 1918, the Protestant Churches in Europe are now standing up for these democratic structures and principles and efforts to reinforce them at various state levels throughout Europe. These correspond with the dignity, freedom and equality of all people awarded by God’s creation. By dividing, limiting and checking the sources of power, they take account of human fallibility and sin. Institutions based on the rule of law protect and enable the freedom of each and every individual and the coexistence of all. “Protestantism considers [democratic] participation and active involvement in decision-making processes as the absolute prerequisite for good neighbourly relations and peaceful co-operation within Europe.”⁸ However, besides the institutions there also

⁸ “Free for the Future – Responsibility for Europe,” Statement by the 7th General Assembly of the CPCE in Florence, 2012.

needs to be a politically active civil society, with us citizens defending the accomplishments of democracy and the rule of law. Churches and congregations are places where people participate and are actively involved, which thus contribute to the democratic culture of a society. We do not want to relinquish this and lose or squander them again. Protestant Churches in Europe should therefore revitalise their theological heritage and their experiences throughout history to help steer societies in the direction of sovereignty, self-government, efforts towards greater economic and political justice and fair participation, sustaining creation and respecting the dignity of our fellow humans.

The global political situation is very different now from 100 years ago. Nonetheless, certain ruptures and upheavals in regions of Europe, between its western and eastern and northern and southern parts, and between the “minor” and “major” states are still directly related to the divides caused by the events at that time. The sorrowful experiences made 100 years ago and thereafter lead the Protestant Churches to reflect critically upon the path that they followed in history, to analyse current social, economic and political processes, and to grasp the opportunity to put their theological and church experiences toward helping establish fair structures – at both national and international level. Further inspiration and analysis will be required to flesh out the details, depending on each church’s local circumstances. But our input to this process should follow the prophetic advice: “**Seek the welfare of the city**”. (Jeremiah 29:7)