

Remember – Differentiate – Resist

Presidium of the Communion of Protestant Churches in Europe on the end of the Second World War 80 years ago

“But take care and watch yourself closely, so as neither to forget the things that your eyes have seen nor to let them slip from your mind all the days of your life.”

Deuteronomy 4:9

8 May 1945 saw the capitulation – after 2077 days of war – of the barbaric nationalist Nazi regime in Germany, which had led to an unprecedented breach of civilisation. 60 to 75 million people, about 3.5 percent of the then world population, paid for the “all-out war” with their lives. Six million Jews were most cruelly murdered in the Holocaust. Poland, which was worst affected by the war, lost a sixth of its population, every second victim being a person of Jewish origin. The Soviet Union had the highest war-related death toll, 27 million people.

At the same time, the end of the war meant liberation and the start of a new European epoch of violence: divisions, expulsions, countless refugees and displaced persons, new occupations, and - particularly on the territory of the Soviet Union and in eastern Europe - new annexations and ethnic cleansing, other ideologies, and again subjection to an external power and oppression. The continent was not freed from violence but reordered with the use of force. The long end of the Second World War extended to the Berlin air-lift in 1948, the founding of the European Coal and Steel Community in 1952, the Budapest uprising in 1956, the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961, the Prague Spring in 1968, right up to the collapse of the Iron Curtain 1989. Until then, the economic prosperity of free societies contrasted with those that were apparently just (even self-righteously so) but were in reality totalitarian societies, restricting individual and collective freedoms in many respects with their own ideological justifications. Even the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – the greatest achievement in the wake of the war – was instrumentalised politically. Again, what mattered was not the equal rights of every person at every place but political powers that decided who was permitted to live in peace and freedom and who remained deprived of this life or who lived in a simulation of it.

While Europe has a common history it has no common memories. People's own stories, the ones that shape their personal lives, are not recalled in a history book and preserved from being forgotten or repressed. Suffering, pain, loss, hate, revenge, guilt and shame are far more than historical facts. Memories are not neutral and cannot be reduced to a common historical denominator. They are narrated, shared, interpreted, can connect and divide. Memories polarise when they are used to legitimise our own worldviews. Memories can reconcile when, albeit uncomfortable, they call not for uniformity but for mutual respect in order to bear with and acknowledge ambivalences. Peace and reconciliation are not founded in clear consensus but

in the serious, shared wish to pursue our own, differentiated, opposing and challenging remembrance. Every person and group that is denied its remembrance will find its place in the world contested. If people are denied the right to their own memories, and the past is not worked through, that prepares the ground for new injustices in the present.

The Communion of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE) brings together churches that are not only connected in various ways with the history of European violence in the 20th century, but also quite differently impacted by the consequences of war. The national, ethnic and societal conflict situations are directly mirrored in the member churches. With the Leuenberg Agreement of 1973 these churches ended their half-millennium of Reformation conflicts. At the same time, in the middle of the Cold War, they built bridges across the political walls of a divided Europe. The communion succeeded, because it confessed a unity that politics can neither create nor hinder: the unity of the church of Jesus Christ, in word and sacrament, in witness and service. The CPCE understands itself as an element and initiator in the process of European integration by understanding Europe as an area in which to take responsibility for its historical legacy.

Today, eighty years later, the prospect of a peaceful Europe, disturbed already by the war in Yugoslavia, is receding even more into the distance after the attack by the Russian Federation on Ukraine. Other destructive elements are authoritarian trends, neonationalism, historical narratives seeking reversal of territorial losses, policies of economic isolation, withdrawals from international agreements and a growing distrust of democratic participation. The European idea of making wars impossible through economic, social and cultural interconnections is coming under internal and external pressure and being called into question by national interests, populist narratives, a moralizing know-it-all stance and construed pseudo-truths. Europe and its democratic constitutional frameworks have again become disputed projects – with the churches in the midst of it all.

The Communion of Protestant Churches in Europe is not united through uniform interpretations but through a commitment to an earnest engagement with contradiction, without ignoring or repressing it. We also meet concern with the remembrance of 8 May 1945. It means remembering resistance: against the normalisation of guilt, against the relativisation of human rights, against the cynicism of friend-and-enemy reasoning. Peace, in the biblical, Protestant understanding, is linked with standing up for just conditions, in which violence is named without reprisal, and conflicts are dealt with, not suppressed. This calls for a remembrance which does not play them down as relative but makes distinctions, so that the dignity of every person does not again become the bargaining mass of inhumane policy-making. This requires the determination to understand the concerns of others and to create a culture of trust in which people can speak openly and reconciliation is possible.

Merciful God,
You who have promised to wipe away our tears,
keep our remembering,
so that we do not become careless when forgetting;
keep our doubt,
so that we do not unsuspectingly follow political ideologies and enemy stereotypes;
keep our certainty,
so that, in face of violence, injustice and strife around us, we do not become silent and
despondent;
keep our courage,
so that we hold firmly to your message of peace.
You are our peace,
let your peace shine through us in the world.
Amen