



Gemeinschaft Evangelischer Kirchen in Europa (GEKE)
Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE)
Communion d'Eglises Protestantes en Europe (CEPE)

The Community of Protestant Churches in Europe commemorates the outbreak of the First World War

I. First and foremost, we shall remember the victims

„We are the dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved, and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields.”

“In Flanders Fields” is the title of the poem written near Ypern, Belgium, on 3rd May 1915, which was to become the most well-known poem of this war throughout the English-speaking world. Written by Canadian Lieutenant John Mc Crae about the death of his friend the previous day, it describes the reality of the dying that was happening just the same in the Balkans, in Tyrol, in East Prussia and elsewhere.

Foremost in our thoughts: the countless breathing individual human beings, both soldiers and civilians, who became the victims of this “great seminal catastrophe” (G.F. Kennan). These people fell victim in their death; and they fell victim as the war destroyed, ruined and wreaked havoc on their lives, even if they escaped and returned with their lives. The war killed ten million soldiers and injured 20 million more. It is believed that there were some seven million civilian victims.

The scale of this horror is as unspeakable today as it ever was. Thus one fitting sign of European remembrance shall be the moment of silence – throughout all Europa, from Iceland to the Balkans, from St. Petersburg to Lisbon, from Hammerfest to Ankara – when all life and work stands still for one minute on 1st August 2014 at 12 Noon (CET). We encourage our member churches to follow this lead in their own particular setting.

II. The political repercussions continue to this day

The First World War affected the states and societies of Europe and all over the world in different ways. Many countries were involved on one or the other side; some were occupied or formed the main deployment zones – only few fully escaped its touch. Thus its meaning varies immensely to the different individual European states the CPCE member churches call home. It changed the political landscape of Europe profoundly. The repercussions are still very much felt in parts of Europe, such as the Balkans and Caucasus. Some of the conflicts still thrive and remain unresolved.

The year of remembrance 2014 can offer churches and societies the chance to once again recount and talk to each other about the different memories in Europe so that these various perspectives can be heard in tandem. During recent decades, churches around the world have learned as part of the “Healing of memories” process how the act of talking and listening to each other often promotes a fresh start to neighbourly relations. Thus remembrance includes the appeal to pursue together the different forms of memories as a means of aiding reconciliation throughout Europe.

III. The Protestant theology and Church legitimised the War

Another historical element of the First World War was the role played by many Protestant theologians and Protestant churches at that time, which was very nationally biased. For the most part, they welcomed the outbreak of war and were at pains to legitimise the entry of their own country into a “just war” in theological terms. God and war were placed into a positive relationship. For instance, a leading Protestant theologian of the era, Paul Althaus, said: “We stand alongside God in this war as His servants, called upon and obliged to do His bidding. Thus this is a Holy War, and everyone who who takes part with a pure heart does so in God’s service.”¹ 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 among theologians.

IV. Protestant voices for peace

The voices appealing for peace were smothered in August 1914, but they should most certainly still be remembered. On 1st August 1914, a group of around 90 Protestant theologians from twelve countries gathered in Constance to found the World Alliance for Promoting International Friendship through the Churches. The conference was interrupted by the outbreak of war, but everyone involved promised each other to promote peace in their respective societies and churches. Many of the members of their congregations supported this aim. Throughout the war, Archbishop Nathan Söderblom of Sweden made repeated attempts to persuade the European church leaders to produce a joint appeal for peace. Even if he was only heard in the non-warring countries at first, the desire to form a cross-border Christian commitment to peace led to the foundation after the war of the Life and Work Movement, which became one of the three driving forces that would lead into the current-day ecumenical movement.

V. Peace work in Europe is an ongoing mission

The Community of Protestant Churches in Europe practices unity in reconciled diversity. Its Leuenberg Agreement (1973) acknowledges the centuries-old, often harmful disagreement that preceded this fellowship of Protestant churches, which was only finally overcome in the 20th century. “Thankful that they have been led closer together, they confess at the same time that the struggle for truth and unity in the Church has also been, and remains, marked by guilt and suffering” (LA 1). From the outset, the CPCE has considered itself to be part of the efforts towards understanding and neighbourly relations on the part of the broader European and global ecumenical movement (LA 46ff.). We are dismayed to see that European countries still continue to pursue violent conflict and involve themselves in armed disputes. In this situation, the CPCE holds fast to the promise and charge of the Gospel: “Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.” (Matthew 5:9)

The Council of the CPCE

Copenhagen, June 2014

¹ From a sermon he delivered on 21 February 1915, printed in: “Kommt, lasst uns anbeten! Acht Kriegspredigten aus Russisch-Polen”, Berlin, 1915, p.49ff.