

8 May 1945: Remembering the Past – Shaping the Future Differently

A Statement for Orientation on the 70th anniversary of the End of World War II

Presidium of the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe

I.

Seventy years ago, on 8 May 1945, Germany's military capitulation took effect and put an end to the Second World War in Europe. Varying estimates put the death toll in this war at between 55 and 62 million – counting civilians as well as soldiers. There were 27 million deaths in what was then the Soviet Union, and up to 6 million in Poland. Worldwide an estimated 20 million people were forced to flee, were displaced, deported or sentenced to do forced labour. The destruction and devastation in many cities of Europe, and in the countryside, was appalling. Many people all over the world suffered enormous losses and unspeakable pain.

II.

In the shadow of the war, a crime against humanity was committed in Europe, the Shoah: 6 million Jews were systematically transported to ghettos and concentration camps, made to do forced labour, killed, gassed, burned. This crime also extended to an estimated 20,000 to 500,000 Sinti and Roma, as well as people with a disability, homosexuals and those with other political ideas, who were also persecuted and killed.

The biblical lament comes to mind: "My eyes are spent with weeping: my stomach churns; my bile is poured out on the ground" (Lamentations 2:11).

This was the "breach of civilization" (Dan Diner)¹, that "for a long time undermined the basic trust in civilisation that sustained people until the recent past" (Joachim Fest)².

With respect to the Shoah, a considerable number of Protestant churches recognise that "they failed in this situation...because of indifference and fear, pride and weakness; they also failed, above all, as a consequence of wrong interpretations of texts from the Bible and the terrible theological errors to which they led."³ It was only by plunging to the depths of this abyss that Protestant churches in Europe and their theology were able to change, with the realisation "that in God's history with his creation, from the beginning to the end of time, the People of Israel continues to have its lasting place [as God's chosen people]."⁴

That equally involved recognising the importance of the rights of minorities and their protection.

¹ Historian at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, former director of the Simon Dubnow Institute for Jewish History and Culture, and Professor of History at Leipzig University.

² Joachim Fest, *Bürgerlichkeit als Lebensform, Späte Essays*, Hamburg, 2007, 75.

³ Church and Israel. A Contribution of the Reformation Churches in Europe to the Relationship of Christians and Jews, *Leuenberger Texte* 6, Frankfurt a.M., 3. ed. 2004, Part I, 1.1, 15.

⁴ Op. cit., Part II, 3.1, 71.

III.

8 May 1945 marked the end of the war in Europe, and for many people and states this end brought liberation; not only that, it created at the same time a fundamentally new political power constellation in Europe. The continent was divided; an “Iron Curtain” was installed. The Cold War developed between the Western and Eastern blocs. The USA and the USSR became the world’s two superpowers, also predominant in Europe.

Today we remember 8 May 1945 from the perspective of events after 1989, which overcame the post-war political division of Europe. As Christians we believe that God creates and enables new beginnings. The process of European integration starting with the Council of Europe and the European Union, and assisted by the persistent political negotiations of the Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe (the predecessor of the OSCE – the Organisation of Security and Cooperation in Europe), ushered in a fundamental change in this continent and managed to overcome the old divisions and hostilities – between states, peoples, nations and societies. This process was also promoted by cooperation in the framework of the United Nations, stressing international law and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. We consider this development a gift to Europe and its people. However, we also note that economic and social cohesion in Europe has not yet been achieved.

IV.

Seventy years after the end of the war, Europe – its states and societies – is going through a time of new conflicts and distortions.

After the World War II and the fighting in former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, war and armed conflict have returned to Europe with the conflict in eastern Ukraine and the occupation of Crimea. The Presidium of the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe is grateful for the OSCE mandate to verify the cease-fire achieved with the Minsk Agreement. However, it is also aware of the fragility of the present situation. From the contacts with Protestant congregations in Ukraine we have learned about the people’s distress and their fears of further fighting. Jesus’ blessing of the peacemakers, who will be called the children of God (Matthew 5:9), sounds very relevant and is valued in all Christian denominations. The people in Russia and in Ukraine went through nameless suffering and distress in World War II. Support should be given now to all the groups that foster a flourishing life together, indeed, a reliable peace.

At the same time, the European Union is still confronted with a deep-seated economic crisis, which has not just had a severe social impact in many member countries and societies, but is now undermining their life together in the EU based on mutual understanding. We are witnessing a roll-back towards national interests in states and societies in Europe; this runs counter to reconciled diversity, which is a principle of the CPCE.

It is perfectly possible that the long-term consequences of this crisis, along with political measures to overcome it, will weigh heavily on the internal relationship between the states and societies in the EU. “European integration brings persons and states, nations and peoples closer

together, sometimes closer than they would like,"⁵ the CPCE stated in 2001, in order to describe the effort required by living together in Europe.

It is all the more important to underline on 8 May 2015 that the European integration process should not be based on economic data alone. Rather, it must be a process of shaping a peaceful cooperation in Europe founded on respect for human dignity and human rights, democracy and the rule of law. Furthermore, it must aim for economic welfare and social security for all, precisely because Europe has suffered the quite different, bitter and dark sides of an all-out war and the annihilation of a spirit of humanity. Today we can shape another future through remembering the past.

It is worth remembering that the Schuman declaration of 9 May 1950, ushering in the European Coal and Steel Community only 5 years after the end of the war, called for a "de facto solidarity", which again has to be seen from a European perspective in the present-day crisis.

V.

We are going through a time of profound changes. The world and its power-policy constellations are shifting tectonically. We hear of disintegrating states and of new terror regimes claiming to be justified by religion. There are as many refugees now as during the whole Second World War, trying to find protection and assistance.

Although far from complete and currently at risk, the traditional unity of Europe is a gift, seventy years after the end of the War. In the midst of complex processes of change worldwide, however, it also involves a common responsibility in Europe – that of doing our utmost to shape the world in peace and with justice. "Depart from evil and do good; seek peace, and pursue it." As we remember the end of World War II this appeal from Psalm 34:15 (in the Hebrew Bible) remains a relevant challenge, a warning and a promise.

CPCE Presidium, 8 May 2015
Vienna

⁵ Church-People-State-Nation, A Protestant Contribution on a difficult relationship, Leuenberger Texte 7, Frankfurt a.M. 2002, 6.3.3, 156.

Suggested announcement to make in church services

The Presidium of the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe, to which our church also belongs, has drafted a statement for orientation to mark the 70th anniversary of the end of the Second World War. In this statement, it remembers the millions of victims of fighting, forced labour, expulsion and displacement in connection with World War II. At the same time, it expresses its gratitude at God's gift of the new beginning after the war and as a consequence of overcoming the post-war division of Europe. People in Europe have the opportunity to organise their life together in peace and with justice, precisely in view of the challenges arising from the armed conflicts in Ukraine and through severe economic crises.

To quote from the CPCE statement:

“Although far from complete and currently at risk, the traditional unity of Europe is a gift, seventy years after the end of the War. In the midst of complex processes of change worldwide, however, it also involves a common responsibility in Europe – that of doing our utmost to shape the world in peace and with justice. ‘Depart from evil and do good; seek peace, and pursue it.’ As we remember the end of World War II, this appeal from Psalm 34:15 remains a relevant challenge, a warning and a promise.”

Intercessory prayer to mark the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II

War leaves behind wounds – the victors are also losers.
These wounds still hurt: the dead,
the children who had no childhood,
the countries who then had to suffer under a dictatorship.
The fact that life was possible at all afterwards
Is a gift from you, oh God.
You gave forgiveness,
when we could not forgive ourselves and each other.
You gave a new beginning,
where we destroyed everything.

There are wars again and again.
Now as well.
We pray to you for all who suffer directly from them:
for the refugees and displaced persons,
for the victims of arbitrariness, violence and hate,
for the soldiers who every day risk their lives,
for the families back home.
Protect and be with them all.
We pray in particular for the politicians.
Their decisions determine the future.
God, we pray to you:
Give us a life in peace and a safe future.