

STILL STICKING TO THE BIG BROTHER HISTORY, GERMAN PROTESTANTISM AND THE UKRAINIAN WAR

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Abstract. This article examines statements on church policy by leading representatives of the Protestant Church in Germany and the World Council of Churches in the first year of the Ukraine war (2022/23) and places them in a church-historical perspective. Ahistorical appropriations and peculiarities become clear, such as an anachronistic use of Ostpolitik, a Russia-friendly assessment and a largely secular evaluation of the situation in Ukraine.

Keywords: Protestant Church in Germany, World Council of Churches, General Assembly World Council of Churches Karlsruhe 2023, Russian Orthodox Church, Ukraine, Ostpolitik, Zeitenwende.

One year after the start of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, temporary and momentary perceptions in Europe have become more tangible and, in some cases, have been confirmed as deeper historical-political constructions. While everyday lives are saved or destroyed in war-torn Ukraine, there are those who are privileged to live outside the war in Ukraine: in freedom, geographically far enough away from the war front – and despite all the lamentations about rising energy costs – in a warm, secure, and stable country: in Germany. Here, even a year after the start of the war, people can still afford to write manifestos against weapons supplies to Ukraine and to call for an immediate ceasefire. They can organise demonstrations and go to them, and contemplate their own peace ethics positions, often gained in the peace movement of the 1980s.

Germany often has its own pace; people like to ponder, “gründlich” and with dogmatic aspirations. Timothy Garton Ash’s recent creation of the word “scholzing” reflects this German character.² The Protestant Church in Germany is a representative

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² Timothy GARTON ASH, “I Went Viral in Germany for a Meme about Scholzing – But the Chancellor’s Hesitancy over Ukraine is No Joke”, *The Guardian* (3.02.2023), <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/feb/03/germany-olaf-scholz-twitter-ukraine>, last accessed 2nd May 2023.



part and mirror of this attitude. This has to do with a specific historically developed state-church relationship in Germany. Despite secularisation, almost 20 million Germans are still members of the Protestant Church; the German church tax contributes to the fact that the Protestant Church is not only one of the financially strongest churches in the world, but it is also a public body well anchored in German society.

It has often been revealed in the great historical upheavals of contemporary history that quick, situational ad-hoc assessment and reaction is not the strength of German Protestantism: This was the case after the collapse of Imperial Germany (*Kaiserreich*) and the sovereign church regiment (*Landesherrliches Kirchenregiment; summus episcopus*) in 1918, as well after the end of the Second World War, when German Protestantism was long at odds with democracy and Adenauer's ties to the West.³ The Peaceful Revolution in the GDR in 1989 (as the civic uprisings of 1989/90 in the other Central European countries) also surprised the leaders of the Protestant Church in West Germany and left them for a time speechless.⁴ An unexpected political outbreak has a paralysing effect on the otherwise so eloquent German Protestantism. Part of it – and this seems to be a historical continuity at least in the 20th and early 21st century – is that at the moment of change, the past is idealised and gilded. Only after a while is the new present accepted.

Reluctant Protestant Reactions to 24 February 2022

All these elements could also be observed a year ago, with the beginning of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine.⁵ On 24 February, Annette Kurschus,

³ Further Siegfried HERMLE and Harry OELKE (ed.), *Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte _evangelisch: Protestantismus in der Nachkriegszeit (1945–1961)* (CuZ, 9), Leipzig: EVA, 2021; Katharina KUNTER, “Die protestantischen Kirchen und „Europa“ nach 1945”, in *Die europäische Integration und die Kirchen IV. Versöhnung und Ökumene, Ethik und Recht*, edited by Irene DINGEL, Jan KUSBER and Małgorzata MORAWIEC, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2020, 31–41; Martin GRESCHAT, *Protestantismus im Kalten Krieg. Kirche, Politik und Gesellschaft im geteilten Deutschland 1945– 1963*, Paderborn: Schöningh, 2010.

⁴ Katharina KUNTER, *Erfüllte Hoffnungen und zerbrochene Träume. Evangelische Kirchen in Deutschland im Spannungsfeld von Demokratie und Sozialismus 1980–1993*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006.

⁵ When I look at the ecumenical foreign policy of the Protestant Church in Germany in the following, it must of course be borne in mind that Protestants have been working with

head of the Protestant Church in Germany, immediately issued an official statement. She expressed shock at the attacks on Ukraine, the shifting of borders, the disregard for Ukraine's state sovereignty and the violation of international law.⁶ However, at the same time, she declined to call Russia the aggressor, warned against further military escalation and armed violence and "refused to believe that there is no longer a chance for mutual understanding and for a just peace".⁷ The statement of the Church Conference of 23–24 February followed this line, but presented the war more outspokenly as an act of violence by the Russian President and emphasised, on the other hand, the "polyphony within the Russian Orthodox Church and the hope that the Russian Orthodox Church will be still a bridge for mutual understanding."⁸ Both statements already formulated the future ecumenical and church-political guideline in the Protestant Church at this time: No clear condemnation of the Russian war of aggression and its religious and historical political stepping-stone, the Moscow Patriarchate led by Patriarch Kirill. In parallel, the head of the Protestant Church's Department for Eastern Europe, Oberkirchenrat Martin Illert, highlighted in an article for the church magazine "Zeitzeichen", aimed at a broad Protestant audience, that the "ecclesiological vision of the Moscow Patriarchate is not a national one" and insisted on its own Russian Orthodox spiritual perception and acceptance by its ecumenical partners in Germany.⁹ Even when the religious-nationalist legitimisation of the war by Patriarch Kirill became increasingly clear in the spring of 2022 and all appeals

great commitment, effort and passion at all levels for the Ukrainian refugees arriving in Germany and in Ukraine via humanitarian support in many ways. As for the Protestant Church in Germany I refer primarily to the Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland (EKD).

- ⁶ Statement (Wortlaut) der EKD-Ratsvorsitzenden zum russischen Angriff auf die Ukraine: Annette Kurschus, Präses der Evangelischen Kirche von Westfalen, Ratsvorsitzende der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland, <https://www.ekd.de/statement-kurschus-zum-angriff-ukraine-71680.htm> (last accessed 4.03.2023).
- ⁷ Statement, <https://www.ekd.de/statement-kurschus-zum-angriff-ukraine-71680.htm> (last accessed 4.03.2023).
- ⁸ "Gewalt beenden, dem Hass entgegenreten. EKD-Kirchenkonferenz zum Krieg in der Ukraine", <https://www.ekd.de/kiko-ekd-gewalt-beenden-dem-hass-entgegenreten-72457.htm> (last accessed 4.03.2023).
- ⁹ Martin ILLERT, "Monströses Fremdbild. Warum die russisch-orthodoxe Kirche keine, Putin-Kirche ist", *Zeitzeichen* (26.02.2022), <https://zeitzeichen.net/node/9599> (last accessed 4.03.2023).

at mediation by the World Council of Churches failed, the Protestant Church in Germany continued to emphasise the polyphony of Russian Orthodoxy and maintained that the dialogue should be conducted with the Moscow Patriarchate. As before, its foreign policy and public focus was primarily oriented towards the Moscow Patriarchate as an essential door opener for peace in Ukraine.

In face of this primary concern the ecumenical expression of empathy and solidarity for the church and Christians in Ukraine fall short – and this is not about the great humanitarian church commitment to Ukrainian refugees in Germany and through the *Diakonie* in the Ukrainian war zones. It relates to the geopolitical ecclesiastical interpretation patterns, around collectively represented ecclesiastical and theological narratives. This was also apparent from the public reaction of Bishop Petra Bosse-Huber, responsible for the international church relations of the Protestant Church in Germany, to an open letter of 3 June to the Protestant Church in Germany and the World Council of Churches. I co-initiated this letter with over 60 signatories from church, society and politics.¹⁰ We called not only for a moratorium on all church-leading contacts with the Patriarchate in Moscow, but also for a change in current German and ecumenical church policy: away from the focus on the church-leadership dialogue with the perpetrator, towards genuine solidarity with the victims. Shortly after the letter was published in the media, the press department of the Protestant Church had already framed it on their website, in the direction that the letter was solely about the exclusion of the Russian Orthodox Church from the World Council of Churches.¹¹ In the press statement, Bosse-Huber didn't address the central demand of the letter to intensify contacts with all churches and religions in Ukraine and focus in its public communication on the suffering of the people in Ukraine – and worry less about the bad image of Russian Orthodoxy. Instead, Bosse-Huber again pointed to the ecumenical importance of the Russian Orthodox Church and opposed a blanket perception of it. For the first time, at least the blasphemous speech of Kirill was mentioned,

¹⁰ Brief an die EKD und ÖRK: Klare Zeichen gegenüber dem Moskauer Patriarchat setzen (3.06.2022), *Nachrichtendienst Östliche Kirchen*, <https://www.noek.info/hintergrund/2482-brief-an-die-ekd-und-oerk-klare-zeichen-gegenueber-dem-moskauer-patriarchat-zu-setzen> (last accessed 4.03.2023).

¹¹ EKD-Auslandsbischofin reagiert auf Offenen Brief. Evangelische Theologen und kirchennahe Politiker fordern den Ausschluss der russisch-orthodoxen Kirche aus dem Weltkirchenrat (3.06.2022), <https://www.ekd.de/ekd-auslandsbischoefin-reagiert-auf-offenen-brief-73643.htm> (last accessed 4.03.2023).

but in view of the “inner plurality of Russian Orthodoxy”, the Protestant Church must support the “efforts to maintain bridges of dialogue”, which could “open up paths that will be of great importance for a peace process”. No more, and no single word about Ukraine.

This was along the same lines which had been publicly advocated several times by the Bavarian Bishop Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, the previous head of the Protestant Church in Germany.¹² He too stated that building bridges with the Russian Orthodox Church was central and had to take place at the upcoming General Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Karlsruhe from 31 August to 8 September 2022. At the same time, he spoke in favour of supplying weapons to Ukraine, but emphasised that Ukraine was not the only country in a humanitarian catastrophe now. Again, there was no room for the victims’ perspective, for the suffering of Ukraine and for words against the brutal attacks on the Ukrainian civilian population. Another aspect ran through various protestant public statements in the summer of 2022: Leading personalities in the Protestant church condemned Kirill’s blasphemous preaching. However, at the same time, this was followed by the explicit rejection of the political narrative that Ukraine with its resistance against the Russian aggressor, is waging a fight for independence, for freedom for Europe and for Western values. On several occasions, Annette Kurschus publicly emphasised that “scepticism is called for when the war in Ukraine is idealised as a defence of Western values”.¹³

One could analyse further examples: For example, the consistent voices in the Protestant Church that advocate radical pacifism, speaking out against any arms supply for Ukraine and the partly shared political positions of the German post-communist party *Die Linke*. Especially in the first months of the war, prominent voices were protagonists, such as Ralf Becker of the network “Rethinking Security” (Sicherheit neu denken) based in the regional church in

¹² Andrea NEUMEIER, Barbara SCHNEIDER, Beim Ökumenischen Rat: Begegnung mit russisch-orthodoxer Kirche (1.06.2022), <https://www.br.de/nachrichten/bayern/beim-oekumenischen-rat-begegnung-mit-russisch-orthodoxer-kirche,T7UhiFe> (last accessed 4.03.2023).

¹³ EKD-Ratsvorsitzende zur Ukraine. Kurschus wirft Kyrill Gotteslästerung vor, (22.06.2022) <https://www.evangelisch.de/inhalte/202556/22-06-2022/kurschus-wirft-kyrill-gotteslaesterung-vor>; Friedensethik und Ukraine-Krieg. Kurschus: „Auch in mir ist diese Zerrissenheit“ (7.06.2022), <https://www.evangelisch.de/inhalte/202007/07-06-2022/kurschus-auch-mir-ist-diese-zerrissenheit> (last accessed 4.03.2023).

Baden (Badische Landeskirche)¹⁴, Bishop Friedrich Kramer, the official peace representative of the Protestant Church¹⁵, but also prominent Protestants such as the former Bishop and head of the Protestant Church Margot Kässmann¹⁶ or the Theologian and Politician Antje Vollmer¹⁷ of the Party *Die Grünen*. The latter two have also signed the current and controversial manifesto “Für den Frieden” (For Peace) by Sara Wagenknecht of *Die Linke* and the feminist Alice Schwarzer – now signed by more than 700,000 people.¹⁸ They may not represent most of the German protestants, but they are part of a new, and at the same time old, German exceptionalism. Although this understands itself from contemporary German history and justifies its positions with the experiences of the Second World War and the Cold War, it is reminiscent of older traditions of national German Protestantism in its anti-Western and anti-American arguments.

German Protestantism’s Historical Friendliness Towards Moscow

The ability to deal with the past (*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*), thus coming to terms with the dark sides of one own’s history, is part of today’s German identity and thus also of German Protestantism.¹⁹ Officially, the legacy of the

¹⁴ <https://www.sicherheitneudenken.de>, <https://www.ekiba.de/infotehek/arbeitsfelder-von-a-z/frieden-gerechtigkeit-2/kirche-des-gerechten-friedens/szenario-sicherheit-neu-denken/> (last accessed 4.03.2023).

¹⁵ Landesbischof Kramer: Ukraine hat mit Korruption zu kämpfen, *Idea* (2.02.2023), <https://www.idea.de/artikel/landesbischof-kramer-ukraine-hat-mit-korruption-zu-kaempfen> (last accessed 4.03.2023).

¹⁶ Margot Käßmann diskutiert mit SPIEGEL-Abonnentinnen und -Abonnenten »Waffen schaffen keinen Frieden!«, <https://www.spiegel.de/backstage/margot-kaessmann-ueber-den-ukrainekrieg-waffen-schaffen-keinen-frieden-spiegel-deep-dive-a-19a7757f-dfe7-40ca-b80c-4df05de0bcf9> (last accessed 4.03.2023).

¹⁷ Antje Vollmers Vermächtnis einer Pazifistin: „Was ich noch zu sagen hätte“, *Berliner Zeitung* (23.02.2023), <https://www.berliner-zeitung.de/politik-gesellschaft/ein-jahr-ukraine-krieg-kritik-an-gruenen-antje-vollmers-vermaechtnis-einer-pazifistin-was-ich-noch-zu-sagen-haette-li.320443> (last accessed 4.03.2023).

¹⁸ Manifest für Frieden, <https://www.change.org/p/manifest-f%C3%BCr-frieden> (last accessed 4.03.2023).

¹⁹ Susan NEIMARK, *Learning from the Germans. Race and the Memory of Evil*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019.

Nazi-critical Confessing Church, the heritage of courageous Theologians such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer or Martin Niemöller, has prevailed in the Protestant churches of Germany. However, in the post-war period, this theological heritage repeatedly clashed with the hierarchical, top-down thinking and management of the Protestant Church in Germany. Against this background, it was not surprising that the solidarity document “A Declaration on the “Russian World” (Russkii Mir) teaching” of 13 March 2022, which was written in the style of the Barmen declaration of the Confessional Church 1934 and gained worldwide resonance, evoked mixed reactions..²⁰

To understand why the Protestant Church in Germany finds it so difficult to break its Moscow-friendly course of dialogue, one must look back into history. It was the upright Protestant Martin Niemöller, Hitler’s personal prisoner in the concentration camp, who in 1952 travelled to Moscow and met Patriarch Alexij, at his invitation.²¹ This trip caused an outcry in Adenauer’s Westward-looking Germany: Niemöller was seen by many as a traitor, naively instrumentalised by Moscow. However, his trip became the trailblazer for German Protestantism and marked the beginning of a social-democratic policy of reconciliation with the Soviet Union. It had the Russian Orthodox Church as its main partner and was embedded in the German Ostpolitik of the 1960s and 1970s.²² Its Credo was dialogue, a concept that was also made attractive to non-political actors, such as the churches, with the soviet propagation of peaceful coexistence during the détente phase.²³ The German Ostpolitik was carried out

²⁰ A Declaration on the “Russian World” (Russkii mir) Teaching (15.03.2022), <https://www.ethos.org.ua/en/a-declaration-on-the-russian-world-russkii-mir-teaching/>; further A Statement of Solidarity with the Orthodox Declaration on the “Russian World” (russkii mir) teaching, and Against Christian Nationalism and New Totalitarianism”, *Religion in Praxis*, <https://religioninpraxis.com/a-statement-of-solidarity-with-the-orthodox-declaration-on-the-russian-world-russkii-mir-teaching-and-against-christian-nationalism-and-new-totalitarianism/> (last accessed 4.03.2023). Oral information by Pantelis Kalaitzidis, Volos.

²¹ Martin GRESCHAT, „Er ist ein Feind dieses Staates!“ Martin Niemöllers Aktivitäten in den Anfangsjahren der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 114 (2003) 333–356.

²² Martin GRESCHAT, *Der Protestantismus in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland (1945–2005) 60 Jahre Kirche und Staat* (Kirchengeschichte in Einzeldarstellungen), Leipzig: EVA, 2010, especially chapter 3.

²³ Katharina KUNTER, *Die Kirchen im KSZE-Prozess 1968–1978*, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2000.

politically and religiously by leading Protestant presidents such as Gustav Heinemann in the early years of the Federal Republic or later Johannes Rau and for example, by Frank-Walter Steinmeier, today's German Protestant President. The Protestant variant of the *Ostpolitik*, the *Ostpolitik* of Reconciliation, for which the 1965 published *Ostdenkschrift* was a milestone, claimed the reconciliation with the Eastern peoples. That included *Realpolitik*, the acceptance of the existing borders in Europe and a renunciation of the German Eastern territories, for which there had been no peace treaty since the Potsdam Conference in 1945. As a consequence, the *Ostpolitik* was mainly oriented towards Poland and the Soviet Union, and less towards the other Central and Eastern European states and their Protestant Christians.²⁴ The basic lines of this *Ostpolitik* continued after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the reorientation of Europe. After the 2+4 Treaty 1990, which had now secured the Oder-Neisse border in Poland under international law, the *Ostpolitik* concentrated on Russia. Here, too, the Protestant Church was again a soft factor of the so-called new *Ostpolitik*, which now focused primarily on economic – and thus also political – interdependence between Germany and Russia. However, due to visible erosion processes and the accompanying clericalization in the Protestant church, it was no longer as socially and intellectually representative and politically influential as it had been in the 1960s. From time to time, tensions arose over content, for example when the Russian Orthodox Church in 2009 refused to recognise Margot Käßmann as the first female and ordained head of the Protestant Church and then suspended any official relations.²⁵ But after Käßmann's resignation, the bilateral encounters were continued in different places, for example in the Working Group of Churches of the Petersburg Dialogue²⁶ or in new, bilateral dialogues between the Moscow Patriarchate and the Protestant church. During these gatherings, issues such as the Crimean occupation of 2014 or the war in the Ukrainian eastern territories were left out.²⁷ The

²⁴ Hartmut LENHARD, *Versöhnung und Frieden mit den Völkern der Sowjetunion: Herausforderungen zur Umkehr. 8 Thesen*, Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1987; Dietrich GOLDSCHMIDT (ed.), *Frieden mit der Sowjetunion – eine unerledigte Aufgabe*, Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1989.

²⁵ Russisch-Orthodoxe Kirche boykottiert Bischöfin Käßmann, *Spiegel* (12.12.2009), <https://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/vorab/a-666683.html> (last accessed 4.03.2023).

²⁶ Petersburger Dialog, <https://petersburger-dialog.de/arbeitsgruppen/kirchen-in-europa/> (last accessed 4.03.2023).

²⁷ Petra BOSSE-HUBER and Martin ILLERT, *Theologischer Dialog mit der Russischen Orthodoxen Kirche: Die Begegnungen 2008-2015*, Leipzig: EVA, 2016.

only exception in these circles was Joachim Gauck, the protestant pastor and GDR civil rights activist, whose sympathies were never with Putin's Russia, but always with the Central European post-Soviet countries and their revolutions of freedom. But Gauck remained a foreigner in his own church, the Protestant Church of Germany.²⁸

However, today one must critically ask whether the commitment of German Social Democracy and the German Protestant Church to the *Ostpolitik* of the 1970's has turned into an anachronistic and contextless doctrine. A central prerequisite for the rapprochement and the dialogues resulting from the policy of détente was the validity of the Helsinki Final Act, which the Soviet Union had also signed. Today, Russia has not only broken all the principles of the Helsinki Final Act but has also thrown away all efforts at diplomacy and multilateralism. As the current situation and mood in Germany shows, the Kremlin and the Russian Orthodox Church (represented by their leadership) have found reliable partners in both milieux (incidentally, this also applies to former chancellor Gerhard Schröder, who is also a member of the Protestant Church in Hannover, where the Protestant Church has its headquarters). The *Zeitenwende* proclaimed by Olaf Scholz has been visibly deepened by the German chancellor's recent visit to the United States in March 2023. Whether this will also take root in the Protestant Church in Germany remains to be seen. In any case, the reflection on peace ethics announced at the synod of the Protestant Church in September 2022 is only taking small, very slow steps.²⁹ The Protestant Church is not in a hurry; the final text should be available by the end of 2024. Meanwhile, the current discussions have long been going on elsewhere.

Lack of Interest in the History of Freedom in Central and Eastern Europe

Another topic that is partly linked to the *Ostpolitik* and the Détente-period in Cold War's Europe is the historical preference for the concept of "peace" which in German Protestantism – and perhaps in Germany itself – is generally more valued than the concept of "freedom". One can attribute this to the specific historical German nation building process, which apart from the Peaceful

²⁸ Stephan DETJEN, "Joachim Gauck. Der außenpolitische Präsident", *Deutschlandfunk* (2.09.2014), <https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/joachim-gauck-der-aussenpolitische-praesident-100.html> (last accessed 4.03.2023).

²⁹ Evangelische Kirche will Friedensethik überarbeiten, *EPD* (7.11.2022), <https://www.ekmd.de/aktuell/nachrichten/evangelische-kirche-will-friedensethik-ueberarbeiten.html> (last accessed 4.03.2023).

Revolution in the GDR had no successful revolution from below. This also applies to the Reformation in the 16th century, which was pushed close to a revolution only from the outside, as shown for example by English historian Timothy Garton Ash with his neologism *refolution*.³⁰ For the German mind set, and as stated before, for the Protestant Church as a reflection of that: peace and peace policy promised the secure stability of the status quo in post-war-Europe. On the other hand, the commitment to freedom and / or human rights had been seen by most German protestants for a long time as a danger of unrest and destabilisation, something that German Protestantism had shied away from since the French Revolution of 1789 at the latest.³¹ The political status quo orientation as a consequence of the *Ostpolitik* was one reason why the leading representatives of the Protestant Church sided in the Cold War with church leaders in Central and Eastern Europe who were loyal to the state, together with the World Council of Churches. Therefore, they found it difficult to give Christian dissidents and opposition figures from Eastern Europe in the 1970s and 1980s public space and a voice – and this also referred to the opposition in the GDR. The fear that visible support for the Christian dissidents could upset the existing conditions in Europe was too strong. Hence the Protestant Church in Germany then and now relied on Track 1 high-level diplomacy between prominent church representatives and the establishment of official bi- or trilateral theological dialogues.³² The lack of a corresponding backing for the church base at the grassroot level had consequences; the collapse of the socialist regimes in Middle and Eastern Europe 1989/1991 came as quite a surprise to them.³³

³⁰ Timothy GARTON ASH, “Refolution: The Springtime of Two Nations”, *New York Review of Books* (15.06.1989), 3–10.

³¹ Katharina KUNTER, “Christianity, Human Rights, and Socio-Ethical Reorientations”, in *History of Global Christianity* vol. 3: *20th Century*, edited by Jens Holger SCHJØRRING, Norman A. HJELM, Kevin WARD, Leiden: Brill, 2018, 127–146.

³² Heiko OVERMEYER, *Frieden im Spannungsfeld zwischen Theologie und Politik: Die Friedensthematik in den bilateralen Gesprächen von Arnoldshain und Sagorsk*, Frankfurt: Lembeck Otto, 2005; Martin ILLERT, *Dialog-Narration-Transformation. Die Dialoge der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland und des Bundes der Evangelischen Kirchen in der DDR mit orthodoxen Kirchen seit 1959*, Leipzig: EVA, 2016.

³³ Katharina KUNTER, “Osteuropa – ein ökumenischer Fremdkörper? Der Zusammenbruch der sozialistischen Regime und Wahrnehmungen in der europäischen Ökumene 1989/90”, in *In Grenzen leben – Grenzen überwinden. Zur Kirchengeschichte des 20. Jahrhunderts in*

However, the strong orientation towards Russia is not only a distortion of perception within the ecumenical movement or the Protestant churches in Germany, but also within academic confessional studies dealing with Orthodoxy and Eastern Europe.³⁴ The dominance of Russia and their so-called “justified security interests” in public opinion leads in turn to a neglect of the Central European countries and churches and their geopolitical situation. This also means ignorance of their consciously chosen political security decisions, which are oriented towards the West, towards the EU and NATO, and not towards Russia. This can only be understood by those who look with a historical perspective at the cruel experiences and sufferings of these countries and their people at the hands of the Soviet Union. Unfortunately, one must realise that the historical knowledge about this is no longer present in current church leadership in Germany. The extent to which such perceptions make people biased could already be seen in 2014, after the Russian annexation of Crimea, when the Protestant Church in Germany remained relatively silent. In their prayer proposal of 3 March 2014, they only talk of “strife and [...] discord in Ukraine”. Russia and its annexation of Crimea and the violation of international law were not mentioned at all, not even in the statement accompanying the prayer proposal,³⁵ which only spoke of “escalation and tensions in Ukraine” and of “military movements, mobilisation and bellicose rhetoric” and called for “dialogue and negotiations”.³⁶ Ralf Haska, the courageous pastor of the German-speaking Lutheran congregation of St. Catherine in Kyiv, can also be

Ost-Mittel-Europa, edited by Christian ERDMANN-SCHOTT, Münster: LIT, 2008, 93–104; EAD., “Kirchen und Ökumene im Kalten Krieg: Ein Beitrag zum aktuellen Diskussions- und Forschungsstand”, in *Die Ökumene und der Widerstand gegen Diktaturen. Nationalsozialismus und Kommunismus als Herausforderungen an die Kirchen*, edited by Joachim GARSTECKI, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2007, 191–202.

³⁴ See the joint article with Gisa Bauer in June 2022, “Durchkomponierte Einseitigkeit. Warum die EKD ihre kirchenpolitisch-ökumenische Haltung im Hinblick auf die Russisch Orthodoxe Kirche aufarbeiten sollte”, <https://zeitzeichen.net/node/9805> (last accessed 4.03.2023).

³⁵ Forum Friedensethik in der Evangelischen Landeskirche in Baden, „Zu Gespräch und Verhandlungen zurückkehren“, EKD-Auslandsbischofin Bosse-Huber zur Lage in der Ukraine (4.03.2014), in *Rundbrief 2/2014* (März 2014), p. 6: https://www.ekiba.de/media/download/variant/157407/ffe_rundbrief_2014_2.pdf (last accessed 4.03.2023).

³⁶ Bosse-Huber: „Zu Gespräch und Verhandlungen zurückkehren“. EKD-Auslandsbischofin zur Lage in der Ukraine (4.03.2014), <https://www.presseportal.de/pm/55310/2678548> (last accessed 4.03.2023).

remembered in this context. Haska stood between demonstrators and police on the Maidan and prevented violence. Shortly after this, he was recalled from his ministry by the Evangelical Church in Germany, because as it was reported in the media, he had broken a taboo, by saying in an interview: “Nobody likes to hear or say it, but under certain circumstances freedom and peace must be defended by force of arms.”³⁷

Reality Check: the 2022 General Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Karlsruhe

The experiences and narratives briefly touched on here led to many believers and church members being disappointed by the public statements of the Protestant Church in Germany on the Ukraine war. They had hoped for clearer and more explicit statements expressing solidarity in Ukraine. This also referred to the World Council of Churches and its General Assembly meeting in Karlsruhe in late summer 2022. There had already been controversy in the run-up to the central committee meeting in June 2022.³⁸

Now, at this church world assembly in Germany, to which over a million Ukrainians had fled, should representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church as members of the World Council of Churches have the right to speak and participate, while Ukraine had no representatives? Behind the scenes unrest was arising. The presence of the representatives of the Moscow Patriarchate in Germany undermined German foreign policy. Should the promise of subsidies for Karlsruhe still be kept? The lack of clear and public communication caused resentment up to the highest political levels in Germany.³⁹

³⁷ Roman GONCHARENKO, “Der mutige Pastor von Kiew”, *Deutsche Welle* (7.11.2019), <https://www.dw.com/de/der-mutige-pastor-von-kiew/a-51155558>; Frank HOFMANN, “Maidan pastor Leaves Ukraine”, *Deutsche Welle* (7.05.2015), <https://www.dw.com/en/lutheran-pastor-ralf-haska-leaves-ukraine/a-18562935> (last accessed 4.03.2023).

³⁸ Martin HOEGGER, “Why did the World Council of Churches refuse to suspend the Russian Orthodox Church?”, *Réformés.ch* (26.06.2022), <https://www.reformes.ch/blog/martin-hoegger/2022/06/why-did-world-council-churches-refuse-suspend-russian-orthodox-church> (last accessed 4.03.2023).

³⁹ Reinhard BINGENER, “Steinmeier beim Weltkirchenrat: Eine Chance, die Haltung des Westens zu erklären”, *FAZ* (1.09.2022), <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/inland/steinmeier-beim-weltkirchenrat-auftritt-trotz-heikler-themen-18282715.html> (last accessed 4.03.2023).

In her welcome address in Karlsruhe, Annette Kurschus made a strong theological statement: “Christ’s love does not tolerate a war of aggression.”⁴⁰ This was followed in the afternoon by a speech by German President Steinmeier. As he was an active member of the Protestant church and one of the former main promoters of the pro-Russia social democratic foreign policy of the past years, his speech was eagerly awaited. He positioned himself clearly, confronted the attending representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church leadership which had aligned itself with the war crimes against Ukraine and represented a totalitarian ideology dressed up as theology.⁴¹ The Assembly shouldn’t remain silent to the Russian representatives about the “truth about this brutal war” and the role of the Russian Orthodox leadership in this war, he continued. He also sharply differentiated between the general church talk of the mission of dialogue and bridge-building:

But building bridges requires willingness on both sides of the river; a bridge cannot be constructed if one side tears down the pillars that support it. In the run-up to the Assembly, the opinion was expressed that dialogue at least should be made possible. Yes, but dialogue is not an end in itself. Dialogue must bring to light what is happening. Dialogue must draw attention to injustice, must identify both victims and perpetrators – and their henchmen. Yet dialogue that does not move beyond pious wishes and vague generalisations can, in the worst case, become a platform for vindication and propaganda. What sort of dialogue will we engage in here?⁴²

Steinmeier’s speech and Kurschus’ statement were the clearest public statements of German Protestantism unequivocally condemning the Russian aggressor up to this point. After a tough spring in which Steinmeier had faced harsh

⁴⁰ Kurschus begrüßt weltweite Christenheit in Deutschland (EKD (31.08.2022), <https://www.ekd.de/kurschus-begruesst-weltweite-christenheit-in-deutschland-74837.htm> (last accessed 4.03.2023).

⁴¹ Speech at the 11th Assembly of the World Council of Churches, Karlsruhe, 31 August 2022 <https://www.bundespraesident.de/SharedDocs/Reden/EN/Frank-Walter-Steinmeier/Reden/2022/220831-VV-OeKR.html>, also Address of the Federal President of Germany Frank-Walter Steinmeier at the WCC 11th Assembly in Karlsruhe, much later after the Assembly included also at: <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/german-federal-president-frank-walter-steinmeiers-address-at-the-wcc-11th-assembly> (last accessed 4.03.2023).

⁴² Ibid.

criticism for his earlier pro-Russia *Ostpolitik* and after the brutal massacres in Bucha, he finally seemed to have arrived in the new reality of war in Europe. With his Karlsruhe speech, he took over responsibility for mistakes in his previous Russia policy. Hardly anyone could have warned more credibly than he against just relying on dialogue with the Russian Orthodox Church for the sake of dialogue in Karlsruhe.

But the leading representatives and delegates of the Protestant Church in Germany and the World Council of Churches were perplexed. They had struggled to get president Steinmeier for a speech in Karlsruhe, but now his warning words did not fit into their concept and worldview. The church press departments of the Protestant Church in Germany and the World Council of Churches reacted and simply made no reference at all to the critical words of Steinmeier and omitted his speech parts about the Ukraine war in the public announcement.⁴³

German professor Fernando Enns, member of the executive committee of the World Council of Churches, expressed frustration about Steinmeier's speech and criticised Steinmeier because he "did not help dialogue",⁴⁴ stressing he would have liked to hear words contributing to bridge-building with the Russian Orthodox Church.⁴⁵ That seemed to correspond with the assessment of other German and ecumenical representatives, as shared on (social) media or in talks.⁴⁶ In a rhetoric familiar from the Cold War, Metropolitan Antony, head of the Russian Orthodox delegation in Karlsruhe, also strongly condemned Steinmeier's speech in Karlsruhe

⁴³ German President Extends Wishes for Fruitful WCC 11th Assembly Characterised by Hope, WCC, 31.08.2022, <https://www.oikoumene.org/news/german-president-extends-wishes-for-fruitful-wcc-11th-assembly-characterised-by-hope> (last accessed 4.03.2023).

⁴⁴ Digitales Austauschtreffen nach der 11. ÖRK-Vollversammlung in Karlsruhe – „am Ball bleiben!“, Arbeitsgemeinschaft Christlicher Kirchen in Deutschland, <https://www.oekumene-ack.de/aktuell/nachrichtenarchiv/artikel/artikeldetails/digitales-austauschtreffen-nach-der-11-oerk-vollversammlung-in-karlsruhe-am-ball-bleiben/> (last accessed 4.03.2023).

⁴⁵ „Die Liebe Christi bewegt, versöhnt und eint die Welt“, *Die Brücke* (6/2022), <https://www.theologie.uni-hamburg.de/einrichtungen/pdf-dateien/oerk-text-enns.pdf> (last accessed 4.03.2023).

⁴⁶ Reaction of the Evangelical Church of Germany to Steinmeier's Statements on the Church of Russia, *Orthodox Times* (1.09.2022), <https://orthodoxtimes.com/reaction-of-the-evangelical-church-of-germany-to-steinmeiers-statements-on-the-church-of-russia/>; <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/inland/moskauer-patriarchat-weist-steinmeiers-kritik-zurueck-18285202.html> (last accessed 4.03.2023).

and called on the WCC not to respond to his provocation. Steinmeier's call was an example of "blatant pressure" from the state and an "interference in the internal affairs" of the World Council of Churches, which has a "peacekeeping and politically neutral character".⁴⁷

Historians will hopefully later be able to research exactly what was discussed behind the scenes in Karlsruhe, Geneva and Hannover, from when and how the inclusion of Ukrainian guests was planned. However, the invitation and the presence of a twelve-member Ukrainian delegation of mostly younger participants was the first visible expression of ecumenical solidarity with the victims of the war after the World Council of Churches' humble attempts at mediation with Patriarch Kirill. At the same time, the Ukrainian contributions showed painfully how strong the imperial grip of the Russian Orthodox Church in the ecumenical movement had been in the past, because Ukraine, apart from the Ukrainian Orthodox Church which belonged to and was represented by the Moscow Patriarchate, had (and still has) no church representatives of its own in the World Council of Churches. Hence, Ukrainians could only participate in Karlsruhe as guests, without voting rights. Only now, with the outbreak of war, is the Orthodox Ukrainian Church's application for membership being endorsed.

The bilateral Ukrainian-Russian dialogue that General Secretary Ioan Sauca and others had promoted at the beginning of the Assembly did not happen. Obviously, the participants of the Russian delegation were treated with respect and had conversations in Karlsruhe, benefiting from the lack of knowledge of most of the participants in Karlsruhe. They were able to speak freely everywhere and communicate the Russian war narrative. No one from the Russian delegation approached the Ukrainian participants on their own initiative.⁴⁸

There was a moment of shock at the assembly when the statement on the war in Ukraine was discussed in the business plenary on Europe and Russian delegate

⁴⁷ Comments of Metropolitan Anthony of Volokolamsk on the Adoption of the WCC statement 'War in Ukraine, Peace and Justice in the European Region (8.09.2022), <https://mospat.ru/en/news/89613/>, Comments Made by the Head of the Russian Orthodox Church's Delegation at the 11th Assembly of the World Council of Churches (31.08.2022), <https://mospat.ru/en/news/89580/> (last accessed 4.03.2023).

⁴⁸ Roman Sigov in an interview after the assembly: "The Ukrainian Voice in the World Council of Churches 11th Assembly in Karlsruhe, Germany, Religious Information Service of Ukraine" (9.09.2022), https://risu.ua/en/the-ukrainian-voice-in-the-world-council-of-churches-11th-assembly-in-karlsruhe-germany_n132139 (last accessed 4.03.2023).

Archimandrite Philaret Bulekov launched into a six-minute speech (the allotted time was one minute, but he was not interrupted by the moderator), declaring, that the discussed statement about Ukraine – which was even better than he had expected – had the importance of a statement given “by McDonald’s and Starbucks” and was an example of “the information warfare”.

Against this background the claims of Bishop Bedford-Strohm sound like odd whitewash and apologetics when he in his later reviews of Karlsruhe regularly emphasizes that it was appropriate to have the representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church in Karlsruhe, that he encountered much thoughtfulness in his discussions with their representatives and that there was no war propaganda in Karlsruhe.⁴⁹ His statement that Russian Orthodox and Ukrainian Christians spoke with each other in Karlsruhe⁵⁰, does not match with various statements by Ukrainian participants such as Roman Sigov and others.⁵¹ In this respect, it looks like Bedford-Strohm is bending reality to suit himself and the World Council of Churches in order to keep the dialogue dogma and the ecumenical relationship with the Moscow Patriarchate going on. In addition, all Ukrainian participants in Karlsruhe emphasised that a dialogue with the Russian Orthodox Church was not possible for them in this terrible war started by Russia. In view of this clear Ukrainian vote, it is a paternalistic intrusion of the World Council of Churches, but also of the Evangelical Church in Germany, to keep imposing from above on the Ukrainians a dialogue with the Russian Orthodox Church.

The Karlsruhe Statement: War in Ukraine, Peace and Justice in the European Region

After the discussion of the *Statement on War in Ukraine, Peace and Justice in the European Region* in the plenary on 7 September, a small working group revised the text. This working group was led by Peter Prove, director of the World Council of Churches’ Commission on International Affairs and included a Russian delegate

⁴⁹ Bedford-Strohm: „Viel Nachdenklichkeit bei Russisch-Orthodoxen“, *PRO. Das christliche Medienmagazin* (28.09.2022), <https://www.pro-medienmagazin.de/bedford-strohm-viel-nachdenklichkeit-bei-russisch-orthodoxen/> (last accessed 4.03.2023).

⁵⁰ Markus SPRINGER, “Heinrich Bedford-Strohm über seinen neuen Ökumene-Spitzenjob”, *Sonntagsblatt* (16.09.2022), <https://www.sonntagsblatt.de/artikel/kirche/heinrich-bedford-strohm-ueber-seinen-neuen-oekumene-spitzenjob> (last accessed 4.03.2023).

⁵¹ “The Ukrainian Voice”, *RISU*, https://risu.ua/en/the-ukrainian-voice-in-the-world-council-of-churches-11th-assembly-in-karlsruhe-germany_n132139 (last accessed 4.03.2023).

but no Ukrainian delegate. The final version was accepted by the general assembly on 8 September 2022.⁵²

The statement was based on the earlier statement of the Central Committee from June 2022.⁵³ Compared to the final statement of the general assembly in Karlsruhe, the one of the Central Committee was much more shaped by Russian propaganda language. The new statement was less strongly influenced by the Russian view in this respect, but by no means independent of it: it named the war a “war” and Russia as the aggressor. As in the previous text it called the Russian invasion “illegal and unjustifiable” and sharply rejected “any misuse of religious language and authority to justify armed aggression and hatred”. It expressed compassion for the “suffering people of Ukraine”. However, since it is rather a statement on an international conflict, it cannot be called a declaration of solidarity for Ukraine. It is a declaration that makes a vicarious claim for all parties involved (“We appeal to all sides in the conflict to respect”). It suggests that if both sides – Russia, Ukraine, and their churches – struggle for dialogue, understanding and prayer, this “conflict” could reach a peaceful solution. This indeed undercuts the fact that the war was started unilaterally by a known aggressor – and that this aggressor, Putin, could end the war immediately at any time. Therefore, the statement which appeals in general terms to both sides trivialises the war of aggression on Ukraine: “We renew the call for an immediate ceasefire”. The correct and more appropriate demand would be to call on Russia for a ceasefire.

It is interesting to note that despite these Russia-friendly formulations in the text, and although a Russian delegate was involved in the formulation of the statement, the Russian delegation finally publicly and vociferously rejected the statement, and the statement was defamed by the head of the delegation on the website of the Moscow Patriarchate.⁵⁴

⁵² “War in Ukraine, Peace and Justice in the European Region”. Statement by the WCC 11th Assembly in Karlsruhe, Germany, WCC (8.09.2022), <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/war-in-ukraine-peace-and-justice-in-the-european-region> (last accessed 4.03.2023).

⁵³ WCC Central Committee Statement on the War in Ukraine (WCC Central Committee meeting, 15–18 June 2022), WCC (18.06.2022), <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/wcc-central-committee-statement-on-the-war-in-ukraine> (last accessed 4.03.2023).

⁵⁴ Comments of Metropolitan Anthony of Volokolamsk, <https://mospat.ru/en/news/89613/> (last accessed 4.03.2023).

In addition, some problematic formulations from the previous statement were carried over into the statement. For example, the term “war” is not used consistently, but several times, as in the previous declaration, it speaks of “conflict” or “tragic conflict”. It is also inappropriate that the Ukrainian people are denied the right to have their suffering recognised on its own in a declaration about Ukrainians but only alongside (i.e., Russia, as in the previous text) and the whole world. This makes everyone a victim and thus levels the suffering of Ukraine. The sentence calling on believers and church leaders in Russia and Ukraine to raise their voices against the death, destruction, displacement and dispossession of the people of Ukraine also fits in with this. Again, the realities of perpetrator and victim are distorted when both are addressed on the same level. And of course, voices against the war and destruction are raised every day in Ukraine, while not a single public voice against the war was heard from the church leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church, even after Karlsruhe.

Two concluding observations are required on the lack of theological substance. The recurring use of the term “tragically” or “tragic” must be mentioned, which is part of the official Kremlin vocabulary when talking about the Donbass and Ukraine. Kirill also refers in his letter to Sauca (as in previous statements) to the war in Ukraine as “tragic conflict”.⁵⁵ It is a strange expression for an ecclesiastical document, a word that again obscures the distinction between perpetrators and victims. It emerged from the Greek tragedy in which a higher power is dragging people to their doom; in the world of Kirill and Putinism, this is either the NATO, the West, or the United States. The description of the war in the Donbass since 2014 and against Ukraine since 2022 and the suffering of the Ukrainian people as “tragic” also reflects therefore a profoundly anti-Christian image and thinking because the Christian God is an anti-thesis to the Greek gods.

Another point: It is striking that the whole statement speaks neither of God, nor of Christ (only affirmatively in the last sentence). Instead, a strong anthropological narrowing pervades the document: It is the assembly and an indeterminate “we” – presumably the governing bodies of the World Council of Churches and the assembly – that has everything in hand in this war. It is the assembly that knows the true way for Christianity in this war: that of unity, dialogue, an un-specific

⁵⁵ Response by H.H. Patriarch Kirill of Moscow to Rev. Prof. Dr Ioan Sauca, WCC (10.03.2022), <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/response-by-hh-patriarch-kirill-of-moscow-to-rev-prof-dr-ioan-sauca-english-translation> (last accessed 4.03.2023).

peace. God, without even appearing in the statement, is taken for granted for this strategy and goal. This is historical theology (*Geschichtstheologie*), and it is the same thinking, under reversed auspices, that Kirill applies with regard to justifying the war against Ukraine. What, if God is very different from what the dialogue advocates in the ecumenical movement think? If God wants revenge for his people in Ukraine, if God is lying on the ground as Christ in the blood of the soldier shot or the woman raped in Ukraine? If God is enraged and wants to condemn the perpetrators? If God expects confessions of guilt before granting reconciliation?

In this extraordinary situation for Europe, one could have expected more theological substance from a church world assembly in Germany. Thus, Kurschus' sentence, "God's love does not tolerate a war of aggression", remained the only theological statement from Karlsruhe.

Outlook

The Karlsruhe Statement served as a template for the upcoming Synod of the German Protestant Church in autumn 2022 for an intensive and differentiated discussion on its peace ethics position with regard to arms deliveries to Ukraine. It remains to be seen which position German Protestantism will take in the near future. A large proportion of Protestants in Germany are currently in favour of supplying arms to Ukraine and supports that. The official line of the Protestant Church in Germany at the moment seems to be supplying weapons to Ukraine, pointing out at the same time that this also means becoming guilty and that this action must be accompanied by a dialogue for peace with the Russian Orthodox Church. This has recently been expressed publicly by both the head of the Protestant Church in Germany (Kurschus) as well as by Bedford-Strohm at the World Council of Churches on various occasions.⁵⁶

Looking back on the first year of the Ukraine war, the position of the churches has changed slightly. On 24 February 2023, memorial services and prayers were called for throughout the country, and the church launched a campaign with seeds of hope for Ukraine. On behalf of the World Council of Churches, Bedford-Strohm and the new General Secretary Jerry Pillay released a message expressing their

⁵⁶ Kurschus: Waffen liefern und um Gespräche mit Russland bemühen, <https://www.ekd.de/kurschus-waffen-liefern-und-um-gespraechе-mit-russland-bemuehen-77727.htm> (last accessed 6.03.2023).

grief over the war in Ukraine and calling for an end to the war, albeit without mentioning Russia or Russians by name in the entire statement.

In the Protestant Church in Germany there is no longer any talk of polyphony in the Russian Orthodox Church. Nevertheless, the importance of continued contacts with the Russian Orthodox Church is emphasised, especially for a post-war perspective. Why and for what it remains unclear, and the same pattern of thought continues: in this mindset peace in Europe can only be achieved through Russia. In contrast, one hears hardly anything about Ukraine, the contacts with the Ukrainian churches, Christians and civil society in the public church statements. While the Catholic Bishops' Conference in Europe is pushing for Ukraine's rapid EU membership, nothing has been heard of this from the Protestant Church in Germany so far, nor of Ukraine's long-term admission to NATO. While a small part of the German Social Democratic Party has demanded a critical reappraisal of the *New Ostpolitik* and is painfully carrying this out in public, nothing has yet been heard from the Protestant Church in Germany in this direction. In this respect, the *Zeitenwende* has not yet taken place in the Protestant Church in Germany.

To conclude: the Ukraine war is a clear failure of the Church's Track I diplomacy. This applies to the World Council of Churches as well as to the Vatican and Pope Francis. Because there is no longer an independent civil society in Russia, it may also be doubted if contacts with Russian civil society, i.e. with organisations that can still influence public opinion, emphasised by the Protestant Church in Germany actually exist. Even experienced diplomats in peacebuilding strategies now admit that Track II diplomacy and even Track III diplomacy are no longer possible in Russia. They point to the unobtrusive and very long-term support of individuals in the local, neighbourhood environment, which must be developed from the bottom up – over a very long timeframe.

Against this background, the dialogue diplomacy of the World Council of Churches and the Evangelical Church in Germany can be regarded as a failure. It also raises the serious question of the extent to which the ecumenical movement is actually capable of professional peacebuilding in the Ukraine war.

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