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HISTORICAL BURDENS AND THE “GERMAN *SONDERWEG*”: WHY IT IS SO DIFFICULT FOR THE PROTESTANT CHURCH IN GERMANY TO STAND ON THE SIDE OF THE VICTIMS IN THE UKRAINE WAR

By Katharina Kunter

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An Open Letter initiated by the German theologian Ellen Ueberschär and me to the Synod, the Council of the Protestant Church of Germany (EKD) and the General Secretary of the World Council of Churches (WCC) was published the week before Pentecost.¹ A broad spectrum of members of the Protestant Church in Germany signed the letter; so far around 90. These include many GDR Protestants who were formerly in the Christian opposition in the GDR and belonged to the civil rights movement of the Peaceful Revolution in 1989. From this circle, Marianne Birthler and Markus Meckel are perhaps the best-known Protestants. Marianne Birthler was the head of the Stasi authority after Joachim Gauck, and Markus Meckel founded the Social Democratic Party in the GDR and was the last foreign minister of the GDR in 1990. However, politicians from various parties, a former prime minister, pastors, superintendents, and other church employees from all over Germany, military chaplains and many committed Protestants at various levels have also signed. So far, the letter has been clicked on NOEK.info more than 2,800 times. All those who signed the letter--and many more--are very concerned about what will happen in Karlsruhe, Germany, in August/September 2022 when the General Assembly of the WCC takes place there. Because Karlsruhe is in EKD's territory, which means that the WCC Assembly is also the responsibility of the EKD, the letter was addressed to both the EKD and the WCC. The signatories are concerned that the delegation of the Russian Orthodox Church will use the General Assembly and the WCC primarily to spread their war propaganda. And that the suffering and the victims of the Russian war of aggression, namely Ukraine, will not be the focus. Because the churches of Ukraine,

¹ Here in this issue of OPPREE and both in English and German at NOEK.info: [Brief an die EKD und ÖRK: Klare Zeichen gegenüber dem Moskauer Patriarchat setzen \(noek.info\)](https://noek.info/Brief-an-die-EKD-und-ORK-Klare-Zeichen-gegenueber-dem-Moskauer-Patriarchat-setzen)

except for the presently somewhat unclear status of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchates, are until now not members of the WCC.

The letter is meant to be an impulse for the WCC and EKD to open a space for Ukraine and its Christians at the Assembly in Karlsruhe and that the Moscow Patriarchate and the church leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) will not be given an opportunity for its war propaganda. The Open Letter also assumes that the WCC and EKD should take a critical look at its dialogue policy with the ROC.² It should terminate the dialogue with the Moscow Patriarchate (at least during the time of the war) and instead give a voice to those who are the victims or who hold different opinions from the Moscow Patriarchate, who demonstrate against the war and are punished for it. These voices should be heard in Karlsruhe. And the WCC and the EKD should also communicate this publicly, so that there be no further loss of trust in the church.

One reason for the Open Letter was the silence of the WCC and EKD on this issue. The letter has at least set in motion a broader discussion and clarified positions that the EKD and the WCC should suspend the continued the dialogue of the Churches with the Moscow Patriarchate, at least for the duration of the war. Behind the current practice are ecclesiastical political attitudes that have a long history. They range from an East-West reconciliation focused on the Soviet Union after WW II, from Niemöller's trip to Moscow in 1952, to an unhistorical understanding of the *Ostpolitik* of the 1970s and 1980s, which places the legitimate interests of the Central and Eastern European countries and churches after the security interests of the Soviet Union. At the WCC General Assembly in Nairobi in 1975, there was already a similar clash with the Russian Orthodox Church. When an official statement was appropriately requested because of the violation of religious freedom in the Soviet Union, the ROC threatened to leave the WCC.³ The issue was then outsourced. One consequence of this ecclesiastical decision was that the emerging Christian opposition in Central and Eastern Europe in the late 1970s and then in the 1980s was not supported by either the EKD or the

² See also recent Gisa Bauer and Katharina Kunter, "Durchkomponierte Einseitigkeit. Warum die EKD ihre kirchenpolitisch-ökumenische Haltung im Hinblick auf die Russisch-Orthodoxe Kirche aufarbeiten sollten," in *Zeitzeichen* online, June 2022: <https://zeitzeichen.net/node/9805>

³ See further Katharina Kunter, "Christianity, Human Rights, and Socio-Ethical Reorientations," in Jens Holger Schjöring, Norman A. Hjelm and Kevin Ward (Ed.), *History of Global Christianity*, Vol. 3, 20th Century, (Leiden 2018), 127-146; Kunter, "Die Schlussakte von Helsinki und die Diskussion im ÖRK um die Verletzung der Religionsfreiheit in Ost- und Mitteleuropa 1975-1977," in: *Ökumenische Rundschau* 49 (2000), 43-51; Kunter, *Die Kirchen im KSZE- Die Kirchen im KSZE-Prozess 1968-1978*, (Stuttgart 2000).

WCC. The fall of the socialist regimes in 1989/91 also came as a surprise to the ecumenical movement.

Today, however, the rift continues, because the ROC church leadership justifies the Russian aggressive war on religious grounds. Nevertheless, an exclusion of the ROC is out of the question, as the EKD and just now the Central Committee of the WCC confirmed once again at its meeting this June. Church leadership dialogue was viewed as an element of stabilization in the service of peace. In the Open Letter and in other statements from these circles, on the other hand, it is emphatically demanded that the EKD and WCC change their focus, and instead of concentrating on dialogue with the ROK, priority is given to the suffering and representation of Ukrainian Christians, of Orthodox and Protestant churches in Ukraine. It is obviously difficult for the EKD and WCC to give up their Russia-centred church policy and turn from perpetrator to victim. As expressed in the current statement of the WCC Central Committee on the War in Ukraine from June 2022, the Russian interpretation of the war in Ukraine continues to dominate, even though Russia is now clearly named as the aggressor and the instrumentalization of religious language is condemned.⁴ But one can learn from the document about the narrow consensus in the ecumenical movement on the issue of the Ukrainian war, as well as about the power politics usage of vague terms and descriptions. It also belongs in the context of an increasing de-theologisation of official church texts. Apart from other aspects, the statement also contains a big historical blunder: it claims that the Ukraine war is now destroying the "post-World War II international security architecture." In my opinion, it is correct that the Ukraine war is destroying the post-Cold War order laid down in the Charter of Paris of 1990. Does this wording mean that the Soviet era is and was seen in the WCC as the most important guarantor of security in Europe and worldwide? Or is this simply a lack of historical awareness?

In any case, as long as the Karlsruhe Assembly has not yet taken place, there is still much time and space for new initiatives in favor of a representation of Ukrainian Christians in Karlsruhe, for making corrections in the direction of ecclesiastical politics, and for real steps towards freedom and peace in Europe.

⁴ [WCC Central Committee Statement on the War in Ukraine | World Council of Churches \(oikoumene.org\)](https://www.oikoumene.org/en/press-releases/2022/06/wcc-central-committee-statement-on-the-war-in-ukraine)