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WHY WE WROTE IN JUNE 2022 AN OPEN LETTER TO THE EKD AND WCC ON THE WAR OF AGGRESSION AGAINST UKRAINE¹

By Katharina Kunter and Ellen Ueberschär

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“War shall not be according to God's will.” This simple sentence was agreed upon by the World Council of Churches (WCC) when it was founded in 1948. The start of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine on February 24, 2022, broke with this principle of the Ecumenical Movement. We were sure that the churches of all confessions, especially our own church, the Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland (EKD) and all other member churches of the WCC, would immediately and unanimously position themselves against the Russian war of aggression. But the clear word, which we had hoped for, did not come. Yes, there were letters from the WCC appealing to Patriarch Kyrill. There were pronouncements from various EKD bodies. But they were all far from the simplicity and clarity of the sentence: “War shall not be according to God's will.” The longer the war lasted, the clearer it became that Patriarch Kyrill, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, was not taking a stand against the war. More than that, he acted as a cue for the Russian neo-imperialism advocated by President Putin by legitimising it through the nationalist-religious concept of a "Holy Russia." In other words, he

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blessees the war of aggression. The German historian Karl Schlögel puts it even more sharply: the Russian Orthodox Church is an indispensable pillar in Putinism.

In the weeks after the beginning of the war, despite all the offers of dialogue, there was no sign of a change in the Moscow Patriarchate, nor of a willingness to engage in genuine dialogue. Our common conviction was that such a break with the Christian tradition of reconciliation and peace must not remain without consequences. This was all more true as the General Assembly of the WCC in our own country of Germany, scheduled for August/September 2022, drew ever closer. We did not share the fear of breaking with one of the largest member churches of the WCC. Our plan was to find perhaps a handful of people who wanted to express their outrage at the lack of clear words from the EKD and the WCC. In a short time, about 100 people shared with us above all the demand that the victims—the Ukrainians and their churches—be placed at the centre of the official Protestant statements and that clear conditions should be formulated regarding the participation of the Russian Orthodox Church and its leadership in the WCC General Assembly. We were driven by two matters: on the one hand, the shock of what has been done to Ukraine and its people, how brutally the Ukrainian population is being attacked. We wanted a visible public sign of church solidarity with Ukraine. And secondly, we feared that more than seven decades after the end of the Second World War, war propaganda would emanate from Germany.

In the meantime, the idea has been expressed that there could be a discussion in Karlsruhe (and in other places) with representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church without Kyrill. However, this idea failed to recognise the hierarchical power-structure in the Moscow Patriarchate. As head of the Russian Orthodox Church, Kirill sets the course of church policy. Everyone must follow him. He orders the exchange of members of ecumenical delegations and the removal or transfer of people from their posts. We still consider it naïve to overlook this aspect of the exercise of power. Dialogues with members of official delegations of the Moscow Patriarchate are doomed to failure from the outset if the vertical power structure is ignored. In addition, there is the danger of propaganda. That is why we have called for the suspension of these official relations with the Russian Orthodox Church; not only by the WCC, but also at the bilateral level of the EKD. Instead, we have advocated seeking dialogue with the few Russian Orthodox believers outside the official church, namely those who have retained their own independence. In the meantime, many of them have gone into exile and are committed to enlightenment and humanity. We would have liked to hear one of these voices at the EKD Synod in November 2022. At the same time, we would have welcomed it if the members of the EKD

Synod had positioned themselves for Ukraine with a sign of solidarity, such as a group photo with sunflowers.

In the spring 2022, when we wrote the Open Letter, it was not clear to us how a critical discussion with Kyrill and his delegation in Karlsruhe, also with Ukrainians, was to be conducted without preconditions. Despite great media announcements, such a Russian-Ukrainian dialogue did not take place in Karlsruhe. Nevertheless, the idea of such a dialogue without preconditions lives on.

We would like to remind that the supposed historical blueprint, the ecumenical East-West talks during the Cold War, were subject to one condition: namely, the validity of the Helsinki Final Act. Today, Russia, with the active support of the Moscow Patriarchate, has broken all applicable principles of the European order and multilateralism. Therefore, all calls for dialogue lack the historical and political foundation of that time.

Now is the time to finally tackle the historical reappraisal, both in the EKD and in the WCC. The decades of dialogue with the Moscow leadership must be put to the test. The nature, conditions, and goals of ecumenical dialogue in times of war of aggression and authoritarianism must be discussed and clarified. The WCC as a movement and platform of the unity of the churches must put the victim perspective first and not the dialogue with those who have abandoned the basis of understanding. Only then will institutional ecumenism remain credible in a time of great contestation.