

Reflections on the 33rd Anniversary of the Peace Prayers in Leipzig , October 9, 1989

The cold war was suddenly and nonviolently ended, and the end of history was proclaimed as the triumph of democracy and freedom. Yet today there is a hot war in Europe on a scale unknown since WWII. How did things go so wrong? What are the signs of hope?

In 2007 I led a group of college students on a Church history tour of Europe, in which by God's grace we had the opportunity to meet Pastor Christian Führer of Leipzig's Nikolai church in the former East Germany. None of the intelligence experts or journalists saw what was coming in 1989, when people like Christian Führer and churches like Nikolai church brought about the collapse of the Berlin Wall non-violently from within--without a shot being fired. The story he told us that day inspired me to want to better understand how it was possible that a marginalized church could play such a central role in bringing about the collapse of a totalitarian regime. This led me to write the book, *Keine Gewalt! No Violence! How the Church Gave Birth to Germany's Only Peaceful Revolution*. What did the church in Germany do that made such a non-violent transformation possible, especially in a nation where violence against its own population as well as other nations, was a deeply ingrained habit?

Lessons from Leipzig

I would suggest that Pastors like Führer and congregations like the Nikolai church helped the people of Leipzig and Germany itself unlearn a most debilitating lessons handed down by their government officials and authority over many decades, concerning what Dom Helder Camara called the spiral of violence. The violent spark may erupt when a cruel misuse of power by the police leads to a protest by young people or students on the streets which soon includes acts of property damage or even retaliatory violence against those representing "the system." One thinks of the needless killing of George Floyd and the less than peaceful protests which roiled many cities throughout America. In response, the authorities crack down hard to quell the protests. For a while all is calm perhaps, but under the surface, the anger is seething, waiting for another incident to break out all over again, followed in turn by a new round of intimidating enforcement methods to secure "law and order." This can go on for years as the governing class and the protestors consume their energies endlessly repeating the same dynamic while collaborative contributions to the common good are left attempted and social conditions erode. At Leipzig on October 9, the spiral was interrupted when the words of the Sermon on the Mount were taken onto the streets, as 70,000 people, armed only with candles and prayers, not stones or spray paint, disarmed the heavily armed police and military with Jesus' spirit of peace, treating them as fellow members of a wounded family, seeking a common good and a better future based on mutual respect not the intimidation of the weaker by the stronger. A month later the Berlin Wall itself was breached and began to be dismantled by peaceful crowds without the breaking of a single window.

At the time of this event in 1989 I was pastor of a small church in the north of England and was completely unaware of the Church's central role. The silence regarding the role of the church was not so much an intentional conspiracy by the media as simply that it didn't fit the plausibility structures of our modern Western world view, one long internalized by most journalists or by government intelligence agencies. How could prayers and candles, and the reading of the Sermon on the Mount have such an influence? (The exception to this assumption

was Poland, due to its historically strong Roman Catholic identity). But East Germany (the GDR) was historically Protestant, and after 40 years of being marginalized by the government, it was minimally attended. It is very difficult to see what people are trained not to see, that is, the church is simply a marginal dinosaur, an echo of the past with little relevance to modern, public life.

This failure to grasp the role played by non-violent resistance modeled and led by the church, may help to explain one of the great *non sequiturs* of history, that is, how was it possible that now with the 40 long years of fear of a nuclear Armageddon joyfully subsiding, with an unexpected peaceful end of the Cold War, did the foreign policy consensus in Washington, D.C. convince itself that the time was ripe for the use of assertive military coercion to change the governance of the Muslim societies of the world, especially in the Middle East? Formerly, this was a region of the world where we had been reticent or at least covert in our use of military coercion. But suddenly instead of a peace dividend, there came an unprecedented upsurge of U.S. military activism; as the foreign policy establishment embraced the belief that only the determined exercise of military power would somehow shape the global order in harmony with our Western values of free markets, democracy, and pluralism.

What was the logic of this shift? The Cold War mercifully ends without a shot being fired, (with the sad exception of Romania). Within a year the first free elections are held in East Germany since 1933. By 1994 over 300,000 Russian soldiers, staff and their families peacefully troop back to their homeland. *Therefore* in the days and months that followed, the consensus of both American political parties determines that the lengthy but much less dangerous geo-political landscape of the Greater Middle East can and ought to be shaped to conform with our Western values by the firm, insistent use of military force. How do those two things connect? The cold war ends mercifully without violence; the war for the greater middle east is duly launched with military action in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya. If history was logical, we would call this the great *non sequitur*.

Part of the answer is a lingering mental habit of the Cold war, diagnosed by the British historian Sir Herbert Butterfield as the habit of seeing the world as a great conflict between two organized systems of self-righteousness, each only too delighted to find the other is wicked, and each only too glad that its sins give it the pretext for still deeper hatred. It was almost as though once the main conflict was over, the consensus in Washington simply transferred this mental habit to other regional conflicts.

One could put it somewhat crudely and say we tidied up the complexities of foreign policy into a simple Manichaeian formula of good guys vs. bad guys. But this is to heal the wounds of people lightly, to recall Isaiah's famous words. As the Russian novelist Solzhenitzen notably put it in a Commencement speech at Harvard Univ in 1978.

"The line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either -- but right through every human heart -- and through all human hearts. This line shifts. Inside us, it oscillates with the years. And even within hearts overwhelmed by evil, one small bridgehead of good is retained.

The good guys vs. bad guys paradigm oversimplifies what Solzhenitzen learned while serving time in the Gulag. It promotes hubris instead of humility. As a tool of political statecraft, it shuts down both problem-solving creativity as well as intellectual honesty.

Let's return to the fall of the Berlin Wall for a moment. When asked how to explain it, then President of Germany, Richard von Weizsäcker replied in four words: "The Church and Gorbachev." Things could have been quite different had either of these two realities been otherwise. For example, in Dresden there were also street protests around the same time as Leipzig. There the city pastors were also deeply involved in trying to keep things peaceful while urging the authorities not to over-react. Historian M. E. Sarotte has described how during one such public event a junior KGB officer became alarmed and wanted to fire upon the crowds in order to disperse them and send a clear message. He requested permission and was told, as was typical in the top-down structure of the system, he first must get permission from Moscow. The supervisor called. No permission to shoot was granted. "Moscow was silent." (Sarotte, *Not One Inch*, 20)

Can you guess the name of this disappointed young KGB officer? He never forgot. You've guessed his name, of course: Vladimir Putin. Later he would call the collapse of the Soviet Union the 'greatest geo-political catastrophe of the century.' Before Gorbachev, the Soviets had always sent in the tanks. In Germany in 1953, in Hungary in 1956, in Czechoslovakia in 1968, and declaration of martial law in Poland by the military, ordered by Moscow in 1981. Today once again, under Putin, Russia sent in the tanks and thousands of soldiers across the border to occupy and reclaim a neighbor it considers a breakaway part of greater Russia.

As for the church in Russia, it has not been silent during all this. It has spoken out clearly. But under the leadership of Patriarch Kirill, it has given its blessing to the invasion. It's been a marriage between church and state painfully reminiscent of the German Christians of the 1930s which pastors like Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Niemöller resisted. It led the Confessing Church at Barmen to declare that the church had only one message to proclaim, "Jesus Christ, as he is attested to us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God whom we have to hear, and whom we have to trust and obey in life and in death," not a two-headed deity of Christianity and nationalism, and the blessing of military domination which follows. Of course, in the West, and in the US in particular, we have a not dissimilar version of Christian nationalism which has been an ongoing feature of political life since the Cold War, with too many prominent voices to name. The Barmen declaration of 1934 called it idolatry then, and it's still idolatry today.

So here we are. Buttressed by Christian nationalism, the largest fighting in Europe since WWII has broken out. In retrospect one wonders if it was only a matter of time before another powerful nation would follow the example of the post Cold War Washington consensus towards its own ongoing conflicts and perceived threats in their sphere of influence. To be clear, I don't mean to blame the United States for Russia's decision to invade its neighbor. That would be like blaming the Versailles treaty for Hitler's decision to invade Poland, as if the Nazis had no agency. But one of the more interesting what ifs of our day is this: might Putin's decision about Ukraine have been a different one, the red herring of Nato disputes notwithstanding, had we modelled a different approach in the Middle East these past three decades since the Cold war ended?

As for predictions on how this will end, it's incredibly difficult to predict the outcome of any war, especially a war of choice whose leader says he had no choice. Unexpected complications arise. I will venture one observation however. If America's success (or lack thereof) in the remaking of the Greater Middle East in our image is anything to go by, Russia's military efforts to remake Ukraine according to its template are unlikely to succeed. The Kremlin sent the tanks thinking it could topple the government within a few days and roll straight into Kiev. Six months later, that assumption has been proved wrong.

Unlearned Lessons

Does our current situation mean the lessons of Leipzig with its prayers and non-violent vigils are no longer of any use? Since we left them on the shelf for thirty years has their sell by date expired and now it's all about military strategies, supply chains logistics, and high-tech weapons all the way up to tactical nukes? Has the church no role whatsoever? The short answer is I have no idea. But I offer four brief closing thoughts worth keeping in mind.

Not a Romantic option.

The first is from Stephen Kotkin, Professor of History at Princeton, who reminds us not to romanticize what the former East Germany accomplished in October 1989. The communist government did not agree to hold free elections as a good will gesture or as a negotiation strategy. Though the regime's capitulation was not due to violent force of arms, it was compelled--by the prayer services and the massive vigils which followed. Leipzig offers the clearest of evidence that active, non-violent resistance can effect a transformation of society. (*Uncivil Society*, 63) Of course, no one knew this would happen. It was not inevitable. In fact, it was well known that five months before Leipzig, the Chinese government brutally sent in the tanks and soldiers fired indiscriminately to clear away Tiananmen square. According to a recently released report by the British government, around 10,000 protesters were killed. Non-violent resistance is by no means a guarantee of peace; nor is it, when you think about it, the opposite of coercion. It is a form of coercion in which one puts one's own body on the line. Nothing would create greater fear in Putin's mind, than 100,000+ people marching in a candle lit vigil around the Kremlin with banners saying stop the war. Would he choose the Leipzig option or the Chinese solution? In other words, non-violent resistance is neither the safe nor the easy option. It was said by a pastor that people went out into the streets of Leipzig on Oct 9, 1989 as if to their funerals. No children went out in the streets that night. (Jörg Swoboda, *The Revolution of the Candles*, 186.)

Peacemaking as Action to Stop Violence.

Secondly I note a remarkable interview with an Evangelical Ukrainian pastor and director of the Evangelical Protestant seminary in Kiev, Ivan Rusyn, in the *Plough*, a magazine of the Bruderhof community from April of this year....The Pastor describes his own attempts to live in faithful solidarity with his church and his community in the wake of the attack on Kiev and the nearby suburb where his seminary buildings were under assault. He describes how he rode his bicycle in and out of neighborhoods controlled by two warring armies, in the attempt to provide pastoral support as well as personal hygienic supplies. I heard an echo of Bonhoeffer's dilemma from eighty years earlier.

I try to be authentic and honest. I used to be a pacifist. When I was called up for military service, I chose alternative service. Now I believe that only the nation that has known the horror of war has the right to speak about pacifism. I used to be involved in mission projects in Azerbaijan and many Azeri people asked me what I thought about their war with Armenia. I was quick to teach them about forgiveness and pacifism because I had no clue.

What does pacifism mean when your loved ones are killed? I am so embarrassed about my speeches. So I think now Ukraine can think and speak about pacifism or not pacifism because we know what it means. My theology has been changed. For me, peacemaking is not a passive thing anymore, an ability to absorb and embrace everything. No, it is very active – action in order to stop violence.

<https://www.plough.com/en/topics/faith/prayer/in-the-ukraine-war-the-church-is-there>

How are Christians to act in War?

Thirdly, Pastor Ruslyn's words brought to mind a catechism for young adults written by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in 1935. It asks the question: "How are Christians to act in War?" It answers: "There is *no* revealed commandment of God here. The church can never give its blessing to war and weapons. The Christian can never participate in unjust wars. If the Christian takes up arms he must daily ask God for forgiveness for this sin and pray for peace." (*Dietrich Bonhoeffer Collected Works, Vol. 14, Theological Education at Finkenwalde, 1935-1937, 791*)

Theology by numbers.

Finally, it's worth remembering some numbers.

40 years. Thanks to people like Pastor Fuhrer, a people who lived for 40 years in a dictatorship found a way to break free from the cycle of revenge, the spiral of violence, something Germany had never managed to do in its long history, and changed its government with free elections, without even one window broken.

10%. Pastors like Führer, who participated in the conflict, insisting that the church was open for everyone to pray, not just Christians, were never more than about 10% of the clergy. In other words, pastors who intervened in the growing crisis were about the same percentage as pastors who were paid to inform on their church members by the Stasi, the state secret police.

70,000. That's the number of marchers who went out on October 9th in Leipzig, a city of 500,000 in 1989. That's roughly 14% of the population—so statistically, the average citizens were a bit braver than the clergy, which is not really very surprising for anyone who has spent many years in the church. But together the 10% and the 14% went out to the streets with Tiananmen square a bare five months in the rearview mirror. Yet it was enough to make the difference. We should not forget this. "*When the great hope is present, small hopes must always arise for the immediate future.*" (Karl Barth)