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# Farewell to the Idea of Neutrality – Historical Perspectives on Churches and the New Geopolitical Challenges in Europe

Katharina Kunter

The geopolitical order in Europe, which had exhibited relative stability since the end of the wars in Kosovo and Yugoslavia in the late 1990s, was not disrupted solely in 2022 with the start of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine on the 24<sup>th</sup> of February, but rather as early as 2014 with the annexation and occupation of Crimea by Russia. These actions clearly violated established norms of international law, encompassing both the coercive military integration of Crimea into Russian territory and the war against Ukraine. Fundamental principles, including the inviolability of borders, the prohibition of the use of force and the principle of the territorial integrity of states as enshrined in Article 2(4) of the UN Charter and Principles 2, 3, and 4 of the 1975 Helsinki Final Act, were egregiously violated.

Under Putin's leadership, Russia dismantled the aspiration for a peaceful Europe and a multilaterally-based political security framework as envisaged in the 1990 Charter of Paris. The Russian war in Ukraine, characterised by its brutality and imperialist ambitions, represents a major turning point in European history, marking the end of the policy of East-West détente in Europe, based on the principles articulated in the Helsinki Final Act. In addition, neutral countries such as Finland and Sweden sought to join NATO in 2022, which meant a change in the European security architecture.<sup>1</sup> This move also challenged the traditional foreign policy concept of neutrality in the European context.

However, in the weeks and months following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, these crucial moments were barely recognised by prominent figures in both Protestant and Catholic church circles, including bodies such as the *World*

<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Erik Sidenvall, NATO and the Swedish Churches: Dealing with Defence Policy in the Midst of a European Crisis, in: Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe, 42/7 (2022), Article 6; Miro Leporanta, Finnish Response to NATO – Views from the Evangelical Lutheran Church and Christians in Finnish Politics, in: Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe, 43/2 (2023), Article 5.

*Council of Churches* (WCC) in Geneva and the Vatican in Rome.<sup>2</sup> Instead, an opposing trend emerged, characterised by an escalating ecclesiastical and ecumenical reappropriation of détente policies.<sup>3</sup> Church leaders increasingly invoke the instruments of détente to justify contemporary ecclesiastical positions vis-à-vis the Ukrainian war, drawing upon their historical involvement in the peace movements of the 1970s and 1980s, more than 50 years later and three decades after the end of the Cold War.

The focal point of this ecclesiastical engagement centred on the question of providing military aid and armaments to Ukraine, accompanied by the concurrent challenge of holding ecumenical relations with the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and its Patriarch Kirill, who gave religious legitimacy to the war in Ukraine.<sup>4</sup> Slogans such as ‹dialogue as an alternative to Cold War mentalities›, ‹reconciliation between East and West›, ‹the pursuit of a just peace› and ‹advocacy for pacifism› were deployed to justify the continued official interactions with the ROC. Established strategies, originating from the bipolar geopolitical context of the Cold War and entrenched within the framework of European realpolitik, were subsequently reimagined as enduring ecclesiastical doctrines, thereby undergoing a reinterpretation as ostensibly impartial and neutral tenets.

### *Neutrality as an Alternative to Collectively Responsible Security?*

From a contemporary historical perspective, reconstructing the memory of the policy of détente is an interesting phenomenon. The experiences of freedom and

<sup>2</sup> See, among others, Regina Elsner, Die vatikanische Diplomatie im russischen Krieg gegen die Ukraine, in: Ost-West Europäische Perspektiven, 1 (2024), 2–11; Regina Elsner, Ökumene in der Zeitenwende? Russlands Krieg gegen die Ukraine als Zäsur ökumenischer Selbstverständlichkeit, in: ET-Studies, 14 (2023), 43–63; Cyril Hovorun, The Institutionalized Ecumenism and the Ukrainian War: a Critical Approach, in: Religion in Praxis, 25 October 2022, in: <<https://religioninpraxis.com/the-institutionalized-ecumenism-and-the-ukrainian-war-a-critical-approach/>> (8 May 2024); Katharina Kunter, Still sticking to the Big Brother. History, German Protestantism and the Ukrainian War, in: Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe, 43/5 (2023), Article 5.

<sup>3</sup> See travels of the WCC to Moscow and Kyiv in May 2023: <<https://www.oikoumene.org/news/wcc-general-secretary-after-the-visit-to-moscow-wcc-to-be-an-instrument-of-dialogue>> (8 May 2024); Keith Clements, Dialogue or Confession? Ecumenical Responsibility and the War in Ukraine, in: Journal of Anglican Studies, 21 (2023), 246–259.

<sup>4</sup> See Jonathan Luxmoore, WCC again urged to suspend Russian Orthodox, as conditions worsen in Ukraine, in: Church Times, 29 July 2022, in: <<https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2022/29-july/news/world/wcc-again-urged-to-suspend-russian-orthodox-as-conditions-worsen-in-ukraine>> (8 May 2024); Martin Illert, Monströses Feindbild. Warum die Russisch Orthodoxe Kirche keine Putin-Kirche ist, in: online Zeitzeichen, 26 February 2022, in: <<https://zeitzeichen.net/node/9599>> (8 May 2024); Margot Käsmann, Die Beziehungen nicht abbrechen. Vor der Vollversammlung des Ökumenischen Rates der Kirchen in Karlsruhe, in: Herder Korrespondenz, 76 (2022), 27–29.

uprising in Central and Eastern Europe in 1989 were not actualised in the present war situation, and they were not taken as a starting point for ecumenical evaluation due to the blind spot that 1989 represents for the ecumenical movement.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, these observations from contemporary history and the politics of history (German: *«Geschichtspolitik»*) suggest new avenues of scholarly inquiry and fresh perspectives on the era of *détente*.

One of the central topics here is the notion and conceptualisation of neutrality.<sup>6</sup> Throughout the Cold War era, agents hailing from neutral states often assumed the function of forums for deliberation and negotiation, fostering spaces for dialogue between the opposing blocs of the United States and the Soviet Union and occupying positions that were politically and ideally detached from the superpowers – a stance often referred to as the *«Third Way»*. Simultaneously, this perceived independence conferred upon them a unique capacity for mediating international conflicts. As early as the 1980s, the political scientist Dieter S. Lutz suggested that neutrality during the Cold War functioned as a component of *détente* and as an antithesis to the paradigm of collective security.<sup>7</sup> One could further ask whether neutrality in foreign policy inherently entails a predisposition towards dialogue, consensus-building, and conflict avoidance.

This raises the question regarding European ecclesiastical institutions: to what extent did globally influential Christian bodies, such as the Vatican, the WCC and other religious organisations, perceive themselves as neutral entities during the Cold War, and furthermore, did they cultivate self-perceptions that were aligned with this posture? To answer this question, a summarising exploration of the conceptual and contemporary underpinnings of political neutrality is presented in the first part of this article. This will also explore how neutrality can be used as a historical category. The second part of this article examines the role of churches as supposedly neutral agents and analyses the limits of their politically *«neutral»* engagement. The focus of the inquiry is on the Protestant churches and the

<sup>5</sup> See Katharina Kunter, *Osteuropa – ein ökumenischer Fremdkörper? Der Zusammenbruch der sozialistischen Regime und Wahrnehmungen in der europäischen Ökumene 1989/90*, in: Christian-Erdmann Schott (ed.), *In Grenzen leben – Grenzen überwinden. Zur Kirchengeschichte des 20. Jahrhunderts in Ost-Mittel-Europa*, Münster 2008, 93–104.

<sup>6</sup> For recent research from the perspective of neutral countries, see, for example, Aryo Makko/Peter Ruggenthaler/Mark Kramer (eds.), *The Soviet Union and Cold War Neutrality and Nonalignment in Europe*, Lanham 2021; Thomas Fischer/Juhana Aunesluoma/Aryo Makko, *Introduction: Neutrality and Nonalignment in World Politics during the Cold War*, in: *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 18 (2016), 4–11; Thomas Fischer, *Die Grenzen der Neutralität. Schweizerisches KSZE-Engagement und gescheiterte UNO-Beitrittspolitik im Kalten Krieg, 1969–1986*, Zürich 2004.

<sup>7</sup> Dieter Lutz/Annemarie Große-Jütte (eds.), Hans Carl von Werhern, *Neutralität – ein überholtes Konzept? Eine Auseinandersetzung mit einer Kritik von Dieter S. Lutz*, in: *Sicherheit und Frieden (S+F) / Security and Peace*, 5 (1987), 263–265.

Protestant ecumenical organisations, and it is based on previously published literature and research. Less attention is paid to the Catholic Church as two articles in this issue already focus on it.<sup>8</sup> In the conclusion, the historical findings are discussed and compared with the churches' current self-image amid the developing geopolitical dynamics surrounding the war in Ukraine.

### *Historical Foundations of State Neutrality*

When examining the concept of neutrality in the context of the Cold War era, it is necessary to explore its historical foundations and to recall the beginnings of state neutrality. Neutrality, defined as the political stance of not joining alliances, dates back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Sweden, for example, had maintained its traditional neutral position since the Peace of Kiel in 1814, a stance established in the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars. The only exception to this commitment was the 1855 Treaty of Guarantee between England and France. Similarly, Switzerland had maintained its neutral status since the Treaty of Paris of 20 November 1815, a treaty that formally recognised Switzerland's permanent neutrality under international law and affirmed the inviolability of its territory. Finland's neutrality, on the other hand, was established only after the Second World War and was consolidated in particular by the signing of the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance with the Soviet Union in 1948. It is worth noting, however, that the concept of 'Finlandization' associated with Finnish neutrality may have been more of a pragmatic political strategy than an unwavering ideological commitment.<sup>9</sup> Beyond the self-perceived neutrality of these three nation-states, the perspective of international law, particularly as outlined in the Hague Conventions of 18 October 1907, warrants consideration.<sup>10</sup> Foremost among the principles laid down in the Hague Conventions is the inviolability of national territory, which is considered a fundamental right. In addition, the Conventions prescribe obligations that are primarily related to wartime events and that articulate the core responsibilities of a neutral state. These include refraining from taking part in armed conflicts, ensuring self-defence, treating all belligerents impartially in matters such as arms exports, refraining from providing mercenaries to warring parties, and denying access to its territory for military purposes.

Extending this line and considering it as a guiding principle for neutral countries and organisations, one could morally invoke neutral countries as potential

<sup>8</sup> See the articles by Massimo Faggioli and Roland Czerny-Werner.

<sup>9</sup> For the Finnish Lutheran Churches, see Ville Jalovaara, *Kirkko, Kekkonen ja politiikka 1962–1982*, Helsinki 2011.

<sup>10</sup> See International Committee of the Red Cross (ed.), *International law concerning the conduct of hostilities: collection of Hague conventions and some other treaties*, Geneva 1989.

guarantors of world peace: Imagine a scenario where all countries adopted neutrality, conflicts would be mitigated, and peace would prevail. This idea is probably a fundamental aspect of the churches' understanding of neutrality. At the same time, however, it remains unclear what kind of peace was envisaged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and to what extent it corresponds to the contemporary and theological conceptions of peace during that time. For much of the Cold War period, and particularly during the period of détente, «peace» was often synonymous with maintaining the political status quo in Europe. This was a primary objective of the Soviet Union, which sought to use the concept to legitimise its illegitimate territorial acquisitions after the Second World War and to consolidate its sphere of influence. This peace orientation also permeated the détente policies of the churches, especially during the pontificate of Paul VI, within the WCC, the *Lutheran World Federation* (LWF) and the *Conference of European Churches* (CEC).<sup>11</sup> The focal points and paradigms of this peace initiative were defined by new ecumenical dialogues between Eastern and Western countries and churches as well as inter-confessional dialogues between Protestant and Orthodox groups, and exchanges between Christians from Central and Eastern Europe and their Western counterparts.<sup>12</sup>

The Soviet Union propagated these new dialogues as manifestations of peaceful coexistence, and this narrative found resonance within the churches in the 1960s, as evidenced by initiatives such as Christian-Marxist dialogues and extensive East-West consultations on peace and security in Europe. The end of the Cold War did not mean the end of these models of dialogue between the East (often

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Alexey Beglov/Nadezhda Beliakova, *Church Diplomacy in the Conditions of the Cold War: Directions of International Activity of the Russian Orthodox Church during the Period of Detente International Tension in the 1970s*, in: *Istoriya*, 12/11 (109) 2021; Paul Mojzes (ed.), *North American Churches and the Cold War*, Grand Rapids 2018; Lennart Sjöström (ed.), *Innan Murarna Föll. Svenska kyrkan under kalla kriget*, Skellefteå 2019; Roland Czerny-Werner, *Vatikanische Ostpolitik und die DDR*, Göttingen 2011; Katharina Kunter, *Die Kirchen im KSZE-Prozess 1968–1978*, Stuttgart 2000; Gerhard Besier/Armin Boyens/Gerhard Lindemann, *Nationaler Protestantismus und ökumenische Bewegung. Kirchliches Handeln im Kalten Krieg 1945–1990*, Berlin 1999.

<sup>12</sup> For the German Protestant Churches, see e.g. Heiko Overmeyer, *Frieden im Spannungsfeld zwischen Theologie und Politik: Die Friedensthematik in den bilateralen Gesprächen von Arnoldshain und Sagorsk*, Frankfurt 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 2016.

synonymous with Russian Orthodoxy) and the West. On the contrary, they continued and evolved into a somewhat anachronistic model.<sup>13</sup> In the WCC, this dialogue was eventually extended and ‹dogmatised› through the principle of consensus in 2002.<sup>14</sup>

One of the consequences of this persistence, especially within the ecumenical movement, has been the emergence and intense discourse around the term and concept of a ‹just peace› in recent decades. Various church statements, including those of the WCC and the Protestant Church in Germany, have repeatedly referred to this concept. The question is, however, whether the concept of a ‹just peace› does not already represent a new norm that departs from earlier ideas of neutrality and instead embodies a value-oriented church foreign policy.

### *Churches as Successful Neutral Actors?*

In many ways, churches have been inspired in their humanitarian endeavours by both neutral states and the ideal of neutrality. The International Red Cross movement, founded in 1859 by Henri Dunant, a reformed Swiss businessman, was a major influence in this development. The International Red Cross helped thousands of wounded and dying soldiers on the battlefield of Solferino, demonstrating humanity, compassion, and impartiality regardless of nationality. Since then, the humanitarian principles have stood the test of time in the humanitarian work of Christians and churches (and later in their secular counterparts).

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, churches as institutional entities have simultaneously asserted that their involvement goes beyond mere humanitarianism, which has usually been carried out by the churches' relief agencies. Particularly in cases of ecumenical orientation, churches began to assert active engagement in promoting political peace alongside their humanitarian efforts.

The peace initiatives of the Swedish Archbishop Nathan Söderblom during the First World War became a model for this.<sup>15</sup> Hailing from neutral Sweden, Söderblom had issued an appeal *For Peace and Christian Fellowship* in 1914,

<sup>13</sup> Petra Bosse-Huber/Martin Illert, *Theologischer Dialog mit der Russischen Orthodoxen Kirche. Die Begegnungen 2008–2015*, Leipzig 2016.

<sup>14</sup> See the WCC decision: ‹<https://www.oikoumene.org/news/some-central-committee-members-are-wary-but-consensus-is-achieved-on-special-commission-report>› (8 May 2024); further Konrad Raier, *The Challenge of Transformation*, in: *The Ecumenical Review*, 70 (2018), 30–34.

<sup>15</sup> See Jonas Jonson, *Nathan Söderblom called to serve*, Grand Rapids 2016; Harmjan Dam, *Der Weltbund für Freundschaftsarbeit der Kirchen 1914–1918. Eine ökumenische Friedensorganisation*, Frankfurt 2001.

calling for reconciliation between belligerent and neutral countries.<sup>16</sup> In his appeal, Söderblom refrained from blaming any of the parties involved in the war. Instead, he invoked the image of Christ's wounds as a symbol of the suffering caused by the war and called on churches to take on a pioneering role in promoting reconciliation between nations. Söderblom's initiative failed. However, the question of whether Christians and their churches could or should remain politically neutral in a situation of international conflict or war became a central issue of church and ecumenical foreign policy throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The traditional line of Lutheranism in this respect was set out by Martin Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms, often interpreted as advocating a classical neutral position. It found resonance among the Lutheran Churches in Northern Europe and provided a fundamental perspective for the Lutheran church stance in times of global turmoil.

This position was challenged again at the 1937 Life and Work Conference in Oxford.<sup>17</sup> This conference, convened under the leadership of the charismatic Scottish theologian Joseph H. Oldham, brought together more than 400 delegates from over 120 churches. Major theologians of the day, including Karl Barth, Reinhold Niebuhr, John C. Bennett and William Temple, shaped the discourse. The agenda of the conference revolved around the position of the church and Christianity in relation to contemporary society and the rise of totalitarian regimes, particularly Nazi Germany in Europe. Although German Protestant representatives were absent from the meeting, the discussions focused on the following: How should the ecumenical movement engage with Nazi-affiliated churches, and how should it manage its relationship with the Nazi-critical Confessing Church? After lengthy deliberations, the views of the future general secretary of the WCC, the Dutch theologian Visser 't Hooft, and of the Anglo-Saxon theologians finally prevailed.<sup>18</sup>

The participants of the Oxford Conference decided not to take a direct stance in support of the Nazi-critical Confessing Church, which became known through the phrase «Let the church be the church»<sup>19</sup>. This neutral stance of the Oxford Conference aroused the ire of the Swiss Reformed theologian Karl Barth.<sup>20</sup> Barth

<sup>16</sup> The appeal was translated into seven languages. See, e.g., the appeal as a source in Gerhard Besier, *Die protestantischen Kirchen Europas im Ersten Weltkrieg. Ein Quellen- und Arbeitsbuch*, Göttingen 1984, 94f.

<sup>17</sup> Joseph Oldham, *The Oxford Conference. Official Report*, Oxford 1937.

<sup>18</sup> See reflections and correspondence of Visser 't Hooft about the Oxford Statement 1937 in: Jurjen Zeilstra, *Visser 't Hooft, 1900–1985. Living for the Unity of the Church*, Amsterdam 2020, 132ff.

<sup>19</sup> The phrase was coined by John A. Mackay, *Ecumenics: The Science of the Church Universal*, Prentice Hall 1964, 5–6.

<sup>20</sup> Zeilstra, *Visser 't Hooft, 1900–1985* (see note 18), 132ff.

saw this abstention as a betrayal of the church's duty to stand up for the truth. Originating from Switzerland, a neutral country like Söderblom's Sweden, Barth diverged sharply by rejecting the notion of church neutrality. He became even more outspoken over this issue after the Munich Agreement of 1938, the German invasion of Poland and the start of the Second World War in 1939. It was evident to him that he had to side unequivocally with the Protestant Church's resistance to the Nazi regime and that neutrality could in no way mean Switzerland's alignment with this regime.<sup>21</sup> Barth's rationale included a pragmatic dimension, contrasting with the perspective of his Swiss theological contemporary, Leonhard Ragaz, who had previously critiqued Swiss neutrality in the aftermath of the First World War.<sup>22</sup>

But Oxford's decision not to take a stand against the Confessing Church set the course. After the Second World War, the WCC's founding assembly met in Amsterdam in August 1948 against the backdrop of a war-ravaged Europe, with the devastation of bombs and the humanitarian crises that followed. There were more than 800 participants, many of whom had witnessed the grim realities of war. In the face of this humanitarian catastrophe, what contribution could the ecumenical movement make to a world beset by suffering and despair? Core ethical principles were put to the test: Could the concept of a 'just war' still be valid in the aftermath of such widespread devastation? Was Christian pacifism not the logical culmination of the harrowing experience of the Second World War? The founding assembly of the newly formed WCC in Amsterdam in 1948 grappled with a profound question: How should the church respond to the geopolitical challenges in Europe? This question was explored in several sessions, particularly in Section IV, entitled «The Church and International Disorder»<sup>23</sup>. Three different perspectives emerged from the discussions, with the pacifist stance representing the minority viewpoint.

### *Gaps in the Third Way Model*

At the same time, the 1948 Assembly met in the shadow of a looming new conflict: the Cold War. By the end of 1948, Communist parties had taken power in Central and Eastern Europe, ushering in the implementation of the Stalinist Soviet

<sup>21</sup> Karl Barth, *Des Christen Wehr und Waffen* (1940), in: Karl Barth, *Eine Schweizer Stimme: 1938–1945*, Zollikon/Zürich 1945, 123–146; further Rüdi Brassel-Moser, *Karl Barths Kritik an der <anpassungsfähigen> Neutralität*, in: *Neue Wege*, 92 (1998), 289–299.

<sup>22</sup> Markus Mattmüller, *Leonhard Ragaz und der religiöse Sozialismus*, Zürich 1968, 541.

<sup>23</sup> Willem Visser 't Hooft (ed.), *The First Assembly of the World Council of Churches*, Amsterdam 1948, London 1949.

model. Guided by the tenets of Marxism-Leninism, Christians and religious institutions were systematically marginalised, repressed and relegated to the private sphere. Geopolitically, the global arena witnessed fierce competition between the two superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, each offering competing visions for the new post-war international order. The ideological clash between communism and collectivism, championed by the Soviet Union, and liberalism, individualism and capitalism, championed by the United States, intensified. As with the discourse on the concept of a ‹just war›, church representatives at the 1948 Assembly in Amsterdam struggled to formulate a unified stance amid the world’s burgeoning bipolarity. Once again, General Secretary Willem Visser ’t Hooft sought to find a middle ground.<sup>24</sup> To this end, he invited two polarising figures as keynote speakers: American politician and future Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and Czech theologian Josef Hromádka. While Dulles espoused the ideals of a free society and individual human rights, Hromádka identified Western bourgeois values as the underlying cause of nationalism, fascism, and the Second World War. For him, the renewal of Eastern Europe required socialism and communism.

Amid these divergent perspectives, the Assembly wrestled with the question of the role of the church and the direction of ecumenism. The final report reflected the nuanced discussions, advocating a stance that resisted both communism and laissez-faire capitalism. Instead, it emphasised the Christian responsibility to seek innovative and just solutions that uphold both justice and freedom without compromising either. Amsterdam thus heralded the birth of the ‹Third Way› – an ethos that saw the churches as neutral arbiters amidst the burgeoning tensions of the Cold War.

The attempt to forge a nuanced approach amidst the tensions of the Cold War era proved effective as long as it remained anchored in the principles of individual human rights and religious freedom, especially in the absence of open warfare in Europe. However, this approach began to unravel when, in the late 1960s, the Soviet Union and its allies increasingly demanded that churches play a more assertive role in promoting peace on the European continent. The risk of co-option loomed large, and the ROC’s entry into the WCC in 1961 exacerbated this concern. Neutrality shifted from a position between West and East to one of maintaining the status quo in Europe without compromising peace efforts. The processes of globalisation, decolonisation and proxy wars in the Global South further underlined the imperative for peace. The Helsinki Final Act of 1975 was then a

<sup>24</sup> See, e.g., Martin Greschat, *Ökumenisches Handeln der Kirchen in den Zeiten des Kalte Krieges*, in: *Ökumenische Rundschau*, 49 (2000), 7–25.

pivotal moment because it opened new possibilities for East-West church encounters.<sup>25</sup> They developed slowly, but in many ways were easier and less complicated than in previous decades. For the first time in the post-war period, almost all Eastern European churches were able to send delegates to ecumenical meetings abroad. This gave a boost to international conference ecumenism and simultaneously enabled the development of a more professional representative ecumenism. The political slogan, initially introduced by the Soviet Union, of the ‹peaceful coexistence› of two hostile systems now marked countless meetings, assemblies, and ecumenical conferences. The pan-European peace movement at the beginning of the 1980s and the conciliar process on justice, peace and the integration of creation were expressions of these successful East-West encounters.<sup>26</sup> However, it was accepted that the anti-communist perspective that dominated most Western and Northern European churches in the 1950s and early 1960s had been gradually abandoned. The concrete reprisals and restrictions suffered by Christians in Eastern Europe fell out of sight in the West. At the same time détente brought a perspective of partnership and mutual learning. Those involved in East-West relations on the Protestant side generally took dialogue very seriously as a concept of peace.

However, this new position as a neutral mediator between Eastern and Western Europe had its challenges. At the 1975 WCC assembly in Nairobi, an open letter written by Gleb Yakunin and Lev Regelson, two priests from the ROC, urged the WCC to publicly condemn religious persecution in the Soviet Union.<sup>27</sup> In response, official representatives of the ROC were offended and refused to endorse such a statement, even threatening to withdraw from the WCC. Despite this tension, the WCC neither issued a public statement in support of the dissidents nor developed a coherent strategy to address the dilemma. The aftermath of this unsatisfactory solution led to the regionalisation of religious freedom and human rights violations in Central and Eastern Europe. Church representatives from

<sup>25</sup> Katharina Kunter, *Die Kirchen im KSZE-Prozess 1968–1978*, Stuttgart 2000.

<sup>26</sup> See, e.g., Daniel Gerster, *Friedensdialoge im Kalten Krieg. Eine Geschichte der Katholiken in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, 1957–1984*, Frankfurt/New York 2012; Beatrice de Graaf, *Über die Mauer. Die DDR, die niederländischen Kirchen und die Friedensbewegung*, Münster 2007; Merylyn Thomas, *Communing with the Enemy. Covert Operations, Christianity and Cold War Politics in Britain and the GDR*, Bern 2005; Katharina Kunter, *Erfüllte Hoffnungen und zerbrochene Träume. Evangelische Kirchen in Deutschland im Spannungsfeld von Demokratie und Sozialismus (1980–1993)*, Göttingen 2006; Stephen Brown, *The conciliar process for JPIC and the New Germany*, in: *Ecumenical Review*, 54 (2002), 179–193.

<sup>27</sup> See Bastiaan Bouwman, *Nairobi, 1975: The World Council of Churches and Human Rights*, in: *Online Atlas on the History of Humanitarianism and Human Rights*, in: <https://hhr-atlas.ieg-mainz.de/articles/bouwman-nairobi> (8 May 2024); Katharina 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.

Eastern European countries, often sympathetic to socialist regimes, continued their involvement in the WCC, focusing on peace initiatives in Europe. Meanwhile, emerging Christian opposition movements for freedom, democracy, and human rights in Central and Eastern Europe in the 1980s found little support in the ecumenical movement or were regarded with suspicion due to their potential destabilising effect on the system. The ecumenical movement was also caught off guard by the successful civil revolutions in Central and Eastern Europe in 1989. The revolutions left a void, particularly due to the failure of socialist aspirations.

### *Conclusions*

The preceding evaluation examines the self-perception and strategic choices of churches during the Cold War, particularly in the context of *détente*, through the lens of neutrality. Neutrality, understood here as a historical construct and a descriptor of foreign policy, dynamically evolved within the complex interplay of various structures of alliance and security dynamics in Europe. Initially rooted in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as non-alignment within systems of alliance, the concept of neutrality developed with the advent of institutions like the Red Cross, which introduced the humanitarian principle of impartiality, thus offering aid without taking sides in armed conflicts. Subsequently, in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, humanitarian principles coalesced into international humanitarian law, exemplified by the Geneva Conventions and the United Nations Charter of Fundamental Human Rights.

The churches, especially the ecumenical movement, felt attached to the concept of neutrality. This referred not only to humanitarian neutrality but also to the idea of being able to work as international actors for peace between peoples without taking a political stance. However, the international challenges of the 20<sup>th</sup> century revealed the limits of this understanding of neutrality. This was particularly true with regard to opposition churches and Christians in dictatorships as well as during the pan-European *détente* phase of the Cold War, when the understanding of neutrality changed again: When churches understood themselves as international actors for peace, they primarily considered their official purpose to be the maintenance of the political status quo in Europe.

Churches wielded considerable influence in the realm of *détente* policy. On the one hand, the Holy See played a pivotal role in advocating for the inclusion of Principle VII, i.e., safeguarding human rights, in the Helsinki Final Act. On the other hand, through their cross-border cooperation, nascent ecumenical dialogues and other transnational initiatives, churches contributed to the realisation of the Helsinki Final Act. Consequently, they appeared to acquire newfound political significance. However, their role as neutral mediators encountered constraints

when confronted with specific instances of injustice and human rights violations. Even in the aftermath of the demise of communist regimes in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the ecumenical self-identity continued to be imbued with this ethos of cross-border neutrality.

### *Outlook: 2022 End of Neutrality?*

The onset of Russian aggression against Ukraine on 24 February 2022 constituted a pivotal political watershed for the entirety of Europe. It symbolised a transgression by Putin and Russia against the foundational agreements, principles, and multilateral values enshrined in the Helsinki Accords of 1975 and the Charter of Paris of 1990. This development raises a number of questions concerning the concept of neutrality, which also pertains to the role and evaluation of churches. First, with regard to the political future of neutral states in Europe: Are Switzerland, Austria, Ireland (and conceivably the Vatican as a sovereign entity and neutral state) the sole remaining bastions of neutrality in the European geopolitical landscape? Moreover, does neutrality no longer signify an enduring and universally applicable option; is it rather contingent upon specific historical circumstances, particularly those of the Cold War era and especially the period of *détente* in the 1970s? Second, these questions are intertwined with another fundamental one. To study neutrality as a historical construction, it is important to analyse its basic principles and its development from the Cold War era to the post-Soviet period. Throughout the Cold War, political bipolarity stood as the defining feature. Did the bipolar nature of the global order foster a receptivity to a third alternative or option, also within the churches and in ecumenical circles? Was such an attitude only viable in the context of a divided Europe and the systemic differences between *«East»* and *«West»*, and did it lose its legitimacy under the conditions of an ongoing brutal war of aggression? Would this thesis, applied to churches, mean that the neutrality claimed by the Vatican and the WCC, with regard to the war in Ukraine and their relationship to the ROC, is doomed to failure? The past two years have provided evidence to support this assumption at the level of church policy. But it has yet to be verified by source-based historical studies on the churches in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### *Farewell to the Idea of Neutrality – Historical Perspectives on Churches and the New Geopolitical Challenges in Europe*

Particularly in the first two years of the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine, numerous ecumenical church representatives invoked the instruments of the *détente* policy of the 1970s to legitimise their current church policy positions on the war in Ukraine. The terms *«dialogue»* and *«neutrality»* were central to this. The article examines the extent to which

globally influential Christian institutions such as the Vatican, the World Council of Churches and other religious organisations saw themselves as neutral actors during the Cold War and also cultivated a self-perception that was consistent with this stance. «Neutrality» is introduced and used as a historical category by analysing the role of the churches as supposedly neutral actors and the limits of their politically «neutral» engagement. The focus is on the Protestant churches.

Cold War – Détente – Dialogue – Neutrality – World Council of Churches – Ukraine War – 20<sup>th</sup> century – 1970s.

*Abschied von der Idee der Neutralität – Historische Perspektiven auf die Kirchen und die neuen geopolitischen Herausforderungen in Europa*

Vor allem in den ersten beiden Jahren des russischen Angriffskrieges in der Ukraine beriefen sich zahlreiche ökumenische Kirchenvertreter auf die Instrumente der Entspannungspolitik der 1970er Jahre, um ihre gegenwärtigen kirchenpolitischen Positionen gegenüber dem Ukraine-Krieg zu legitimieren. Zentral waren dabei die Begriffe «Dialog» und «Neutralität». Der Artikel untersucht, inwieweit sich weltweit einflussreiche christliche Einrichtungen wie der Vatikan, der Ökumenische Rat der Kirchen und andere religiöse Organisationen während des Kalten Krieges als neutrale Instanzen verstanden und darüber hinaus eine Selbstwahrnehmung pflegten, die mit dieser Haltung übereinstimmte. «Neutralität» wird dabei als historische Kategorie eingeführt und verwendet, indem die Rolle der Kirchen als vermeintlich neutrale Akteure sowie die Grenzen ihres politisch «neutralen» Engagements analysiert werden. Im Mittelpunkt stehen dabei die protestantischen Kirchen.

Kalter Krieg – Entspannungspolitik – Dialog – Neutralität – Ökumenischer Rat der Kirchen – Ukrainekrieg – 20. Jahrhundert – 1970er Jahre.

*Adieu à l'idée de neutralité – Perspectives historiques sur les églises et les nouveaux défis géopolitiques en Europe*

Au cours des deux premières années de la guerre d'agression russe en Ukraine, de nombreux représentants des églises œcuméniques ont invoqué les instruments de la politique de détente des années 1970 pour légitimer leurs positions politiques actuelles sur la guerre en Ukraine. Les termes «dialogue» et «neutralité» ont joué un rôle central à cet égard. L'article examine dans quelle mesure des institutions chrétiennes influentes au niveau mondial, telles que le Vatican, le Conseil œcuménique des églises et d'autres organisations religieuses, se sont considérées comme des acteurs neutres pendant la guerre froide et ont cultivé une perception d'elles-mêmes cohérente avec cette position. La «neutralité» est introduite et utilisée comme catégorie historique en analysant le rôle des églises en tant qu'acteurs supposés neutres et les limites de leur engagement politiquement «neutre». L'accent est mis sur les églises protestantes.

Guerre froide – Détente – Dialogue – Neutralité – Conseil œcuménique des Eglises – Guerre d'Ukraine – 20<sup>e</sup> siècle – années 1970.

*Addio all'idea di neutralità – Prospettive storiche sulle Chiese e le nuove sfide geopolitiche in Europa*

Soprattutto nei primi due anni della guerra di aggressione russa in Ucraina, numerosi rappresentanti delle Chiese ecumeniche invocarono gli strumenti della politica di distensione degli anni Settanta per legittimare le loro attuali posizioni di politica ecclesiastica sulla guerra in Ucraina. I termini «dialogo» e «neutralità» vi furono centrali. L'articolo esamina in che misura istituzioni cristiane influenti a livello globale quali il Vaticano, il Consiglio

mondiale delle Chiese e altre organizzazioni religiose si considerarono attori neutrali durante la guerra fredda e coltivarono anche una percezione di sé coerente con questa posizione. La «neutralità» viene introdotta e utilizzata come categoria storica in un'analisi del ruolo delle Chiese come attori teoricamente neutrali e i limiti del loro impegno politicamente «neutrale». L'attenzione si concentra sulle Chiese protestanti.

Guerra fredda – distensione – dialogo – neutralità – Consiglio mondiale delle Chiese – guerra d'Ucraina – XX secolo – anni Settanta.

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