

POINTS of RESISTANCE IV

SKILLS FOR PEACE

David Elliott

In a world in which wars and armed conflicts have become insidiously embedded as “normal,” and which again faces the threat of nuclear disaster, paranoid, self-seeking power vaunts its deficit of imagination, empathy, and compassion as “strength.” In this state of emergency action must be taken and *skills for peace* relearnt and mobilised. Reflecting this, the works in this fourth iteration of *Points of Resistance* link, in radically different ways, the nightmarish actions of past and present with harsh dreams about the future. Such forms of *resistance* set a clear sight on their targets: virulent, divisive nationalism; the manipulative self-interest of governments and corrupt (social) media barons; all those who attempt to subvert human freedoms and rights and who, in their desperate search for “enemies”, obliterate the possibilities of others for self-realisation, truthful reflection and considered critique. This battle, and the encompassing war of which it is part, is comprised of multiple acts of resistance, all made in the cause of truth.

Confined in enclosed, irreconcilable worlds, impervious to the nuances or openness of truth, Russia’s current war on Ukraine reveals how distinctions between “soldiers,” or “freedom fighters,” - or between “drug-fuelled neo-Nazis” and “terrorists” - may quickly become reduced to little more than “points of view.” The only possibilities of *resolution* remain either the complete obliteration of the “enemy,” or the unstable knife-edge of war-like co-existence. Under such conditions, *skills for peace* are desperately needed, not only in Ukraine and Russia but also in Ethiopia, Israel, Korea, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Syria, Tibet, Xinjiang and Yemen. Yet, where life is governed by the realpolitik of brute force, effective, prolonged *resistance* cannot depend on the vicious cycle of counter-atrocity and counter-inequity, paid in the same currency as that of the aggressor. Instead, it should assume the reverse approach by adopting an autonomous, humane, moral position, akin, perhaps, to that of art.

The life and death of theologian, pacifist and anti-Nazi activist, Dietrich Bonhoeffer provides a relevant reference to a low point in world history that also relates to our situation now.² Before his incarceration in Berlin’s Tegel prison, he had worked, during the early 1930s, in the *Zionskirche* where this series of exhibitions is taking place. His actions echoed his conviction that *resistance* to evil is a common responsibility, as was clearly shown in his public speeches, network of contacts, and association with the 20 July Plot against Hitler.³ But, as his oppressors had clearly shown during their rise to power, by subjugating truth, morality, law and religion to their cause, ideas of “truth,” “falsehood,”

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906 – 1945), German Lutheran pastor, theologian, anti-Nazi dissident and founding member of the Confessing Church (*Bekennende Kirche*).

³ The *20 July Plot* was a failed attempt organised by the German military in 1945 to assassinate Adolph Hitler. All those associated with it were executed.

“resistance” and “evil” could not only be interpreted in radically different ways but also made to seem synonymous.

Writing in a Nazi prison, immediately before his transfer to the Flossenbürg Concentration Camp where he was executed during the final days of World War II, Bonhoeffer reflected on such questions. In its justifications of a “master race”, the machinations of National Socialism had conflated fact with untruth and good with evil, a reversal that could only be achieved by an enabling tsunami of uncritical stupidity that had spread like a virus amongst the populace; this created an intellectual and social vacuum that, being impervious to reason, education, moral belief or faith, made “evil” also synonymous with “enemy”. In the nationalist-Aryan ideal, the cause of diversity had perished. In the darkness of his gaol cell, Bonhoeffer posed himself this question: if the stupid were to inherit the earth, how could life ever change?

Stupidity is a more dangerous enemy of good than malice. One may protest against evil; it can be exposed and, if need be, prevented by use of force. Evil always carries within it the germ of its own subversion in that it leaves behind ... a sense of unease. But against stupidity we are defenceless. Neither protest nor the use of force accomplishes anything; reason falls on deaf ears; facts that contradict one's prejudice simply need not be believed – at such moments the stupid person goes ballistic, and irrefutable facts are pushed aside as inconsequential, or incidental. In all this the stupid person, in contrast to the malicious one, becomes utterly self-satisfied and, being easily irritated, goes onto the attack. On closer inspection it becomes clear that every strong manifestation of power, whether political or religious, calculatedly smothers a large part of the people with stupidity. ...⁴

Bonhoeffer did not survive to experience the aftermath, but, disquietingly, the distinctions he makes here are harbingers of equally paranoid conflicts in the present where stupidity and malice form a single cohort. Whether associated with the extremist ideologies of far right or far left, whether provoked by cultural difference, poverty or fundamentalist religious belief, their impact is aggregated by disinformation and conspiracy theories, both openly and covertly disseminated throughout media, social media and the internet to be avidly digested by a passive-aggressive, non-critical audience. Control of and access to the media is as important now as it ever has been. In the US, a majority of Republicans, it seems, favour only the cultish “truths” of Fox News and Q Anon. In Russia and China, “truth” is the monopoly of State media that propagate only official views of the news and the world and suppress or ridicule all others; it is regarded as a crime for citizens to seek alternatives.

During the span of its relatively short life, the *Zionskirche* has been associated with opposition to the dictatorships of both National Socialism and Communism, but, on occasion, has also tacitly supported them. Even at the beginning, it was a hub that reflected many of the conflicted histories and stories that still run throughout this exhibition.⁶

⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, <https://www.dietrich-bonhoeffer.net/zitat/604-dummheit-ist-ein-gefaehrlich/>

⁶ Otto von Bismarck's foreign policy as Chancellor was critical in this. After the short decisive wars fought with Denmark, Austria and France that enabled the formation of a united German Empire, Berlin, its capital, now played an important world role: The reallocation of the Ottoman Empire's Balkan territories was agreed at the *Congress of Berlin* in 1878 and the colonial partition of Africa was ratified by the “Great Powers” at the *Berlin Conference* in 1884-85.

Financed by reparations from the victorious war against France (as were many other new buildings in Berlin at this time), it was consecrated in March 1873 in the presence of Kaiser Wilhelm I and Otto von Bismarck, the “Iron” Chancellor, but, even at this most triumphant moment, it precariously straddled fault lines of opportunity, education and class. Sited on a former vineyard, then Berlin’s highest point, it was the “jewel in the crown” of the pentagonal square of *Zionskirchplatz*, but also not far from the grinding poverty of the quickly growing working-class districts of *Prenzlauer Berg* and *Wedding* that abutted it.

After the religious perversions of the Nazis, and the Allied fire bombings of World War II, the ruins of the church were sequestered in the DDR, close to the border and, after 1961, to the wall that divided the city. By 1953, its partly restored shell had been reconsecrated, and the activities associated with it slowly began to include the illegal discussion of civil rights. In 1986, as a reaction to the Soviet nuclear power plant disaster in Chernobyl (Ukraine), an *Umwelt Bibliothek* (Library for the Environment) was created in the church’s Rectory as a centre for peace and environmental studies, where politically banned literature could also be found. This quickly became the spearhead of a network of protest groups across the country who demanded freedom of expression and civil rights. Readings, discussion groups and exhibitions of the work of banned artists also took place there. In 1989 the Berlin wall famously “fell”, and the Iron Curtain with it, but far from this being “the end of history” predicted in the hubristic boom of neo-liberalism, many long unaddressed inequities, divisions, prejudices, memories, and ghosts still continued to fester.⁷ As the rude awakening of Russia’s war on Ukraine has made clear, the effects, attitudes and ideologies of the last World War still continue in the present.

In whatever form or medium it appears, the art in this exhibition confirms one essential truth: although it may be useless in the brute face of power, art possesses a discrete and subtle power of its own. It should never instruct, yet it holds knowledge; it should never moralise, yet it is unavoidably moral. Its function is to be nothing other than itself – which means that it must “do” nothing. Even though its palette may be the whole universe and the emotions that resound within it, this power is derived from its integral disinterest.

The artist has only one responsibility: to make art that is as good as possible, and only they may decide if and when their task is complete. We have to trust their sensibility, artistic integrity, and intelligence and, on balance, history has shown us that this trust has not been misplaced.

Because of its acuity, disinterest, commitment and humanity, all art, if it is any good, is inevitably a point of resistance; a small speck to be amplified - as an expression of vulnerability, as an embodiment of truths, and as a further step towards self-knowledge and peace.

END

⁷ In his book *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992), neo-liberal American political scientist Francis Fukuyama argued that a universal age of Western Liberal democracy had dawned as “the final form of human government.’