

Declaration of Peace by the City of Linz 2014

2014 is a fourfold commemorative year:

- It has been 100 years since the outbreak of World War I with the futile attrition of its trench warfare and horrific destruction of human lives on both sides—10 million people, all told.
- World War II was launched 75 years ago. Its Blitzkrieg offensives, battles of encirclement, saturation bombing, sieges, the deployment of atomic weapons and the Holocaust claimed the lives of 70-80 million human beings.
- Between those two bloodbaths, Austria was rocked by a civil war. 80 years have since passed.
- And 25 years ago, the fall of the Berlin Wall ended the Cold War.

In 1934, following the abolition of parliamentary democracy, the Austrian political culture rigidified. Its protagonists lacked prudence and tolerance; they were driven by stereotyped images of bogeymen, and incapable of consensus and cooperation. The driving political forces on all sides were militants who ignored the basic principles of human coexistence, and each has to shoulder some share of the blame. All of us, to this day, should be distressed by what happened then; it should serve us as a warning and a lesson.

Especially in the Second World War, Linz was the scene of enormous, appalling woe – for the concentration camp inmates forced to dig tunnels and toil in the steel plant at the Hermann Göring-Werke; for residents targeted by the Allied air forces' 22 bombing raids.

In retrospect, we can see that the glorification of violence and uncritical acceptance of the use of force that were widespread in Europe long before 1914 formed the basis for these hostilities among the general public. And on top of that, the political landscape had become pervaded by a deep-seated fatalism encapsulated by "The war is unavoidable anyway!" So that we may not once again stumble like sleepwalkers into warfare to which there is said to be no alternative, the Linz City Council regards it as its duty to prevent a resurgence of such collective attitudes by nipping them in the bud before they can take hold.

Fortunately for us in 1945, the Allies drew the right lesson from the events of the interwar years: not collective punishment and humiliation modeled on the 1918 Treaty of Versailles but rather generous reconstruction programs and support for democratic forces and structures are the right approach to preventing the fires of war from continuing to smolder. In this spirit, strengthening direct democracy on the municipal level too is a matter of utmost importance to the Linz City Council (bill introduced in the legislature of the Province of Upper Austria on January 23, 2014). And today we know how important it is to keep alert and not turn a blind eye to what transpires in our neighboring countries as was the case in 1933-38

with the racist, bellicose implications of Hitler's rhetoric of peace. We are also aware that tightly woven economic and social interrelationships diminish the probability that countries will wage war with one another.

Based on our experiences in the 20th century, we look with grave concern upon the regions where conflicts currently rage on the European Union's borders and in the Near East: fighting in Ukraine, Syria, Iraq and between Israel and Palestine. We call upon the belligerents to seize any conceivable chance for negotiations, compromise and reconciliation, no matter how deep the rifts between them may be. The essential precondition for this is a sense of empathy – trying to understand the other side's position, feelings and views. It is imperative not to place one's own interests – however justifiable – above the interest in peaceful coexistence on the part of all the parties to the dispute if we do not want to end up in the same predicament that, a century ago, was the point of departure of the worst catastrophe in human history. When everything has been reduced to rubble and ashes, nobody benefits from having been right in the first place.

We applaud the Austrian Foreign Ministry's efforts to insure that a cautious, moderate approach guides this country's policymaking towards Ukraine, as well as proposing that neutral Austria host diplomatic negotiations leading to a sustainable peace accord that does justice to the key objectives on both sides' agendas. In going about this, Austria's positive experiences with neutrality could set an encouraging example for Ukraine. Furthermore, it is conceivable that the South Tyrol Package Agreements of 1947 and 1972 contain provisions that are relevant and conducive to the peaceful coexistence of the ethnic groups in Ukraine and the negotiations leading to it. Then as well, the crux of the matter was providing for equal rights for the speakers of various languages and reconciling diverse political and economic interests. We request that the City Senate inform our Ukrainian sister city Zaporizhia/Zaporozhyia about this.

The consequences of these current conflicts have yet to reach the dimensions of the 20th century's conflagrations, but they are already appalling enough, and bring enormous human, political and economic problems in their wake. According to the UN Refugee Agency, 2.5 million Syrians are currently living in exile; another 6.5 million have fled to other locations in Syria. IS terror – the fourth war in Iraq in the last 34 years – has worsened the situation by adding 2 million Iraqi refugees. At present, a quarter of Lebanon's population consists of Syrian refugees. The massive influx of Iraqis into Turkey has led that country to announce that it has reached the limits of its absorption capacity. Thousands of small children living in refugee camps are threatened by starvation. The traumatization of the survivors – for instance, children, and especially young girls, having been sold by their desperate parents – will persist for generations and not only in the affected region.

We therefore call upon the Republic of Austria and our fellow citizens to generously support these starving, desperate human beings and, in doing so, not to forget that these people, in addition to their immediate physical needs, also have mental needs – for a feeling of security, for education and latitude to pursue sport, art and music on their own. If we fail to provide for these needs, the violence will keep spiraling upward and we Europeans will not be able to build a wall high enough to shield us from the ultimate consequences.

The festive commemoration of the fall 25 years ago of the Berlin Wall and the Iron Curtain that had separated East and West is an appropriate occasion for us to express hope that the visible and invisible partitions and border fortifications that have been erected since then between the rich North and the poor South will one day be dismantled too and make room for unfettered exchange on all levels. The main precondition for this to happen is eliminating the barriers and demonizing stereotypes in our heads.

Interstate violence is not the only cause for alarm; on the societal level as well, violence has reached dreadful proportions:

- Approximately 21 million people, mostly women, are – more or less openly – enslaved and forced to engage in prostitution, and Europe is no exception;
- There are countries in which children and youngsters put in 12-hour days working in factories, performing farm labor like harvesting crops such as cocoa, or working in mines. The output of their toil leads to the low prices that delight us as consumers;
- Violence against women is still a common, everyday occurrence; a recent survey shows that at least 20% of Austrian women have experienced this personally;
- Racist harassment and the public denigration of people who lead alternative lifestyles occur occasionally in Linz as well. If society becomes polarized, we can expect to see collective faultfinding lead to an increase in such incidents. This will ultimately poison the social climate in our city if we do not succeed in taking preventive action in a timely manner and implementing human rights in everyday life for all: for women and men, demonstrators and police officers, mainstream burghers and people living on the margins of our society. The right to demonstrate may not be misused to give free rein to violence. We must safeguard the democratic values that were won at such a high cost and forswear the abuse of them in any form!

Accordingly, we want to recall the words of the Linz Declaration of Tolerance and Nonviolence issued on October 17, 2002:

“The Linz City Council, local government agencies and municipal employees remain united in our resolve to see to it that people in Linz not be insulted, humiliated or subjected to racist harassment.”

In summary and conclusion:

Those who fail to confront their own past lack a foundation for the future. May the 2014 Commemorative Year that is now coming to a close provide an impetus for every single one of us to be cognizant of the responsibility that we bear as government officials in our city: That there is no place in our political culture for hate, brutality and vicious stereotyping; that violence and radicalism begin in the language we use; and that we, as avowed democrats, despite our divergent political views, hereby resolve to interact with one another in a manner guided by acceptance and mutual respect!

The Linz City Council unanimously passed the 2014 Declaration of Peace by the City of Linz during its session on November 20, 2014.