

Grieving in Baptist and Brethren Congregations for the Soldiers Killed in the First World War? The Elberfeld-Velbert Baptist Church and the Velbert Brethren Assembly¹

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1. Introductory remarks

The statement of my topic in the title is meant to make clear that we are discussing a very critical and far-reaching episode, an aggressive, deadly act, and the reactions to it. For that reason I do not write ‘fallen’² nor even ‘dead’ soldiers. I have consciously used ‘killed’ to describe the soldiers, and even then I feel it is, relatively speaking, an inadequate description.

Moreover, I have purposely made it a question. That should make us cautious as we research the reactions of our forefathers to the dreadful happenings of the First World War. How did our forefathers behave when they received news of the death of their sons, brothers, grandsons, nephews and cousins? Did they allow space for their pain and questions about the sense of these deaths? Did they complain? Did they even condemn? Did they seek to see in these soldiers men who gave their lives for something for which one cannot vouch but with one’s very life? Were they silent with pain? Or were they conscious of the senselessness of such gruesome killing?

1. This paper is a revised and expanded version of one I gave on 11 April 2013 in Bensheim to the working group of the Verein für Freikirchenforschung [Free Church Research Association] (VFF) and which was printed in its original form in the journal *Freikirchenforschung*, 23 (2014), 177–194. English translation is by Brian Davies [hereafter BD].

2. Speaking of the ‘Fallen’ [BD: German, *Gefallenen*] runs the risk of understatement, at least in German. He who falls can get up again; he is not dead! Besides that, behind this word lurks the religious concept of the resurrection of the dead. It is a case of choosing almost religious language, which played a significant role in the war.

1.1. *Generalities about the First World War*

Although even on the eve of the war thousands in Germany demonstrated against it, most soldiers went off to war enthusiastically. In his book about the war, Wolfgang Mommsen writes: 'In the early phase of the war a national sense of vocation and Christian faith created a symbiotic union ... The ideals of the German State and of God's kingdom were directly connected.'³ He further writes that it came to be a 'renaissance of religious sentiment' and the war virtually became a 'holy war'.⁴ About forty states were involved, directly or indirectly, in the war which was fought in Europe, the Middle East, Africa, East Asia and on the high seas. Consequently soldiers were killed worldwide. And the number of soldiers killed was considerable, ever more so the longer it lasted. It is estimated that in the war years about 17 million people died. According to Thomas Kühne 'About one in three soldiers (there are no precise statistics) died or survived with lasting injuries.'⁵ It was the most horrific bloodbath the world up to then had known.

1.2. *The reactions to soldiers' deaths*

From as early as 1816 Prussia had observed a Totenfest [Feast of the Dead] on the last Sunday of the church year. It had been introduced by Friedrich Wilhelm III after the bloody battles and victory over Napoleon. When it later became known in the calendars of the state churches* as Ewigkeitssonntag [Eternity Sunday], its eschatological character was to be emphasised. The traditional remembering of the dead still persists, however, and is subsumed in the almost 200-year-old custom of the religious sacrifice commemorations with prayers

3. Wolfgang J. Mommsen, *Der Erste Weltkrieg. Anfang vom Ende des bürgerlichen Zeitalters* [The First World War. Beginning of the End of the Age of Bourgeoisie] (Frankfurt am Main, 2004), 168f.

4. *Ibid.*, 170.

5. Thomas Kühne: 'Der Soldat', in Ute Frevert and Heinz-Gerhard Haupt (eds.), *Der Mensch des 20. Jahrhunderts* [Twentieth-century Man] (Frankfurt am Main, 1999), 345f.

[*BD: German, *Landeskirchen*; these could be Lutheran, Reformed, or United.]

for the soldiers, particularly as in the Napoleonic Wars every victory over the French troops was celebrated with a thanksgiving service.

The tradition of the ‘national-religious honouring of the fallen’⁶ revived in all the commemorations for the slain soldiers of the First World War. It fitted into the religious euphoria at its start. All soldiers killed were unquestioningly heroes who had sacrificed their lives. There was no thought of being an offender. Significantly, the verdict of the German-Jewish satirist, Kurt Tucholsky, in 1931, ‘Soldiers are murderers’, which can be shown to have appeared in various forms since as early as 1770, did not resurface in these war years.⁷

Given this stylisation of soldiers as heroes and active sacrifices (*sacrificium*),⁸ laying down their lives on the altar of the Fatherland, a genuine expression of mourning was impossible. But for many there was congruence with Christ’s sacrifice. The bereaved were thereby urged, indeed obliged, to be proud and thankful. Any deep shock, let alone indignation or disapproval, about what was happening was hardly possible.

That this collective pressure was the best breeding-ground for further violence, and not at all for a religious awakening, was not realised by many evangelical Christians, as I would now like to show in reference to German Baptist and Brethren congregations. My question is: in what measure can we discover the rise of a real sacrifice-myth and cult of the fallen, even in our own churches? How far were they children of their times, and where did they show through their faith, different attitudes and stances towards the First World War? Amidst the predominant hero-worship were there

6. Gerhard Besier, ‘Die Landeskirche und der Erste Weltkrieg’ [The State Church and the First World War], in Joachim Rogge and Gerhard Ruhbach (eds.), *Die Geschichte der Evangelischen Kirche der Union* [History of the Protestant Union Church], vol. 2 (Leipzig, 1994), 486.

7. In 1878 Victor Hugo characterised the military hero as a ‘kind of murderer’; in 1794 Christoph Martin Wieland spoke of ‘assassins’; Freiherr von Knigge in 1795 of ‘hired murderers’; and even Friedrich the Great in 1773 was worked up about the ‘privileged murderers who lay the earth to waste’: Kühne, ‘Der Soldat’, 345f.

8. For a distinction between passive (Lat. *victima*) and active (Lat. *sacrificium*) sacrifice, see Kühne, ‘Der Soldat’, 362.

contradictory signs and symptoms in their grieving for men from their own ranks killed at the front?

2. Brethren assemblies' reactions

2.1. Journals 1914-1919

2.1.1. Botschafter des Heils in Christo [Salvation in Christ Messenger]

The *Botschafter*, a journal for believers, was the 'leading organ'⁹ of the Closed Brethren (also known as 'Exclusive Brethren' or 'Darbyists').* Gerhard Jordy, the German Brethren movement's historian, writes about this monthly: 'If we look in the *Botschafter* for information about the local churches, which one would normally expect to find in such publications alongside articles for teaching and edification, we will search in vain. It contained exclusively teaching and edification articles ...'.¹⁰ Thus we would not expect any political statements either. But that was not the case. The issue of August 1914 included a two-page article, presumably written by the editor Rudolf Brockhaus (1856–1932), entitled 'War is Declared!'; in it the writer reminds his readers that 'there are also children of God on the other side'.¹¹

And so it is not surprising that the *Botschafter* carried an obituary for a soldier who was a French citizen. It is the only obituary for a soldier killed in the First World War that this journal ever carried, and it is quite distinctive. In 1915 a letter of condolence from this French brother to a sister in the Lord who had lost her husband in the

9. 'Geschichte des *Botschafters* bzw. der *Botschaft*', [History of *The Messenger* or *The Message*] <<http://www.bruederbewegung.de/themen/zeitschriften/botschafter.html>>.

[*BD: German, *Geschlossene Brüder*; *Exklusive Brüder*; *Darbyisten*: the assemblies were in the Lowe-Continental connexion. For a summary of German Brethren history, see Stephan Holthaus, 'A Hundred and Fifty Years of the Brethren Movement in Germany', in Tim Grass (ed.), *Witness in Many Lands: Leadership and Outreach among the Brethren* (Troon, S. Ayrs, 2013), 227–39.]

10. Gerhard Jordy, 'Eine kurze Geschichte der BOTSCHAFT' [A Brief History of the BOTSCHAFT], in *Die Botschaft*, 139/2 (1998), 9.

11. Gerhard Jordy, *Die Brüderbewegung in Deutschland* [*The Brethren Movement in Germany*], 3 vols (Wuppertal, 1979–86), 3: 27.

war was published.¹² It was a very pastoral letter. At the end the readers are informed that the letter-writer, Joel D., a 25-year-old French brother, was killed by a grenade on 9 June 1915, twenty-four days after he had composed the letter. His superiors and comrades of battle described him as a brave hero and true Christian, who had died with a radiant face.

This pattern—comrades' comments; letters; diary extracts painting the soldier in an heroic light—is further developed and consolidated in the obituaries in another journal by a writer who also belonged to the Closed Brethren, General von Viebahn (see below, section 2.1.6).

Clearly this letter and the obituary for the French brother were meant to comfort German mothers and wives going through the same sorrow, and to give courage to fellow-believers to die with radiant faces. But it is this obituary to a *French*, therefore enemy, soldier that shows that there were convinced Christians on the other side of the front who were being killed by German grenades. Let it be noted that in 1914 alone, France lost 900,000 soldiers (slain, wounded, or missing), and that the German army lost 750,000 men.¹³ It was therefore not incongruous to remember at least one French soldier. In the following issue a second letter appeared that the French brother had written to his parents.¹⁴

2.1.2. Gnade und Friede [Grace and Peace]

Gnade und Friede was a monthly paper also directed at Christians produced by the Geschwister Dönges publishing house, whose leader was the former teacher, Dr Emil Dönges (1853–1923), a leading second-generation figure in the German Brethren movement.

12. 'Ein Soldatenbrief' [Soldier's Letter], composed on Sunday 16 May 1915, *Botschafter des Heils in Christo*, 63 (1915), 225–31; 'Anmerkung' [Remark] on the death of Joel D. on 9 June 1915, *ibid.*, 231f.

13. Cay Rademacher, 'Verdun', in *Geo Epoche: Der Erste Weltkrieg*, 14 (2004), 50.

14. 'Ein zweiter Soldatenbrief' [Second Soldier's Letter], composed on 24 February 1915, *Botschafter des Heils in Christo*, 63 (1915), 309–318: the letter is introduced with further information about the writer.

In similar fashion to the *Botschafter* there are numerous allusions to the war with a strong eschatological tone,¹⁵ the war being a sign of the last times. In this journal there are no obituaries for soldiers from the Closed Brethren assemblies, although Dönges himself lost two sons on the battlefield.¹⁶ Is this silence attributable to Christian humility and modesty, or is it evidence of an unspeakable grief gripping the father? It is an open question.¹⁷

2.1.3. Gute Botschaft des Friedens [Good News of Peace]

Gute Botschaft des Friedens was an evangelistic paper from the Dönges publishing house for free distribution. During the war years there were regular extracts from field letters and reports from field hospitals and other frontline sources.¹⁸ The aim of all these accounts in this evangelistic publication was to bring people to faith. So direct personal obituaries are missing. In all cases, more or less anonymous men are described as having died bravely and full of Christian confidence¹⁹—as heroes then. The hero-myth with its high symbolical meaning is assiduously perpetuated. My contention is that by virtue of anonymity—hardly any names are given—this myth had an even stronger effect, because it was appropriate for every soldier killed. And yet the experience and behaviour described in no way corresponded to the reality. The horrific experiences, the dreadful fears, the inhuman slaughter are suppressed. The extent of the horror and grief was whitewashed, which was only the catalyst for more dying and killing—macabre, when one considers that this was in a journal whose title included the word ‘peace’.

15. Emil Dönges was even more preoccupied with eschatological topics than was Rudolf Brockhaus.

16. Gerhard Jordy: *Die Brüderbewegung*, 2: 28.

17. We lack a comprehensive biography of Emil Dönges.

18. For example, the last field letter is published from a headteacher from Württemberg, a Christian, ‘Seine letzte Botschaft’ [His last message], *Gute Botschaft des Friedens*, 28 (1915), 55.

19. For examples, see *Gute Botschaft des Friedens*, 28 (1915), 35 (‘Auch ein Sieg’ [Also a Victory]); 48 (‘Sein letztes Wort’ [His Last Word]); 64 (‘Zwei glückliche Krieger’ [Two Happy Warriors]); 67 (‘Der selige Heimgang eines Kriegers’ [The Blessed Homecall of a Warrior]).

2.1.4. Mitteilungen aus dem Werke des Herrn in der Ferne [Reports of the Lord's Work Afar]

Mitteilungen aus dem Werke des Herrn in der Ferne was the Closed Brethren's missionary magazine with reports of the missionary work abroad. Here again there are no death notices for brethren who had fallen at the front, but there were brief mentions of missionaries and their sons killed or missing. But it was not just German men who were the subjects of the reports of suffering and death, but also brothers from enemy countries. In all these cases the news is conveyed in a very matter-of-fact way. The heroic narratives of the other journals (see above) are absent.

Gerhard Jordy states: 'World War I and its aftermath of political and economic problems had such a noticeable effect in the sphere of world mission, heavily influenced as it was by international relationships, that the journal became in a certain sense a mirror of the mood of the time.'²⁰

2.1.5. Offene Türen [Open Doors]

Offene Türen, the missionary news sheet of the Open Brethren, has a similar approach. Here again, as a rule, there is a predominance of relatively matter-of-fact reporting with slight echoes of hero-worship.

2.1.6. Schwert und Schild [Sword and Shield]

We find a quite different approach in *Schwert und Schild*, published by the retired general, Georg von Viebahn (1840–1915), a member of the Closed Brethren. Gerhard Jordy points out that all Viebahn's writings—there was also the periodical entitled *Zeugnisse eines alten Soldaten an seine Kameraden* [*An Old Soldier's Testimony to his Comrades*—fall outside the framework of Brethren journals, because 'whilst they are influenced by the spirit of the Brethren movement, they are not principally designed for those readers'.²¹ According to Jordy, they had a larger circulation amongst pietist circles within the state churches. Viebahn's journals were thus aimed

20. Jordy, *Die Brüderbewegung*, 2: 33.

21. *Ibid.*, 2: 31.

at members of the Evangelische Allianz [Evangelical Alliance].²² That however is irrelevant to our topic, since we are concerned not with the readership of the journal but with the writers' reactions and mindset as they are revealed in the death notices.

Schwert und Schild, which appeared only up to 1915, the year of Viebahn's death, gives detailed information of dead officers, their death and way of life.²³ Against the three obituaries in 1914 for officers in Viebahn's immediate circle there were ten in 1915. Here we have longer narratives of life and death, some more than twenty pages long! In addition the magazine's publishers did three (known to me) special print runs of articles by Dr Friedrich Wilhelm von Viebahn (1878–1957), the general's oldest son, which contained biographies and obituaries of dead officers.

All the obituaries that emanated from this publisher are structured along the same lines. As a rule they are introduced or concluded with a word of Scripture and then there are word portraits by war comrades of the dead officer with extracts from his field letters and diaries which show his irreproachable Christian attitude.²⁴ These obituaries are frankly hero-stories in which, almost always, words of Scripture hint at parallels with Christian martyrs. By way of example, the very first obituary is introduced with 2 Samuel 1: 26f., which ends with the sentence: 'How the mighty have fallen and the weapons of war perished!'²⁵ The last obituary in the first of the war years ends with Revelation 14: 13: "'Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on!' 'Blessed indeed' says the Spirit, 'that they may rest from their labours, for their deeds follow them!'"²⁶

22. For the formation and aims of the Evangelische Allianz, see Stephan Holthaus, 'Friedrich Wilhelm Baedeker (1823–1906): His Life', in Grass (ed.), *Witness in Many Lands*, 70–1.

23. The majority of the dead officers came from awakened groups within the state churches, but all had been in personal contact with Georg von Viebahn and some owed their conversion to his evangelistic efforts.

24. See also Hans Brandenburg, *Georg von Viebahn. General und Evangelist* (Aidlingen and Wuppertal, 1984), 207–209.

25. *Schwert und Schild*, 16/4 (1914), 3.

26. *Ibid.*, 15.

Georg von Viebahn, like his personal friend Dr Emil Dönges, lost two of his sons in the war. This experience may well have been the reason why in 1915 his strength declined and he died.²⁷ But in his periodical there was not a single sentence about the death of his sons. Tradition has it that on the day when his son Wilhelm was reported as missing, he was holding a Bible ministry meeting at Berlin's Hohenstaufenstraße, which was an Open Brethren assembly. His son, Dr Friedrich Wilhelm, wrote about the general's reaction on hearing that his son Georg had been killed in France, 'Whilst he was not overwhelmed by the news, since even at such a time he was through faith at peace in his Lord and God, ... his father-heart was deeply shaken.'²⁸

2.1.7. Handreichungen aus dem Worte Gottes [Counsels from the Word of God]

This section concludes with a brief look at *Handreichungen aus dem Worte Gottes*, the most widely read magazine of the Open Brethren, published by Albert von der Kammer (1860–1951) and Fritz Koch (1880–1936). Even in the war years it restricted itself to the exposition of Bible passages. Whoever reads through this journal will learn nothing about the then current circumstances.

2.2. Ernst Lange's Hauptmann Willy Lange [Captain Willy Lange]

As already indicated, there was in the literature of German Brethren assemblies a particular pattern of hero-veneration which was first to be seen in *Botschafter des Heils in Christo* and then received extensive and comprehensive expression through Georg von Viebahn and his eldest son. As I would now like to show, this tradition continued and was nurtured in both Brethren groups right through to the Second World War.

Proof of this can be found in a book which appeared in 1934 and exactly followed Viebahn's obituary model. The full title is *Hauptmann Willy Lange. Und setzet ihr nicht das Leben ein, nie wird euch das Leben gewonnen sein!* [*Captain Willy Lange: And if You*

27. According to Brandenburg, *Georg von Viebahn*, 208f.

28. Brandenburg, *Georg von Viebahn*, 261–3.

Don't Risk Your Life, You Won't Win It!].²⁹ The book was issued by Schwert und Schild, the publishing house which Viebahn had established and which used the same name as his magazine. The first edition appeared in 1934, followed by further editions. The book was a bestseller in Christian circles during the 1930s.³⁰

The author, Ernst Lange (1880–1942), was an army major, who belonged to the Open Brethren. Lange lost two of his brothers in the First World War. An obituary for his eldest brother, Fritz Lange, is to be found in *Schwert und Schild*.³¹ About his younger brother, Ernst Lange wrote a book of twenty chapters, nine of which are allotted to what happened in the war; or in other words, ninety-four out of 176 pages. Whilst the author's declared wish is to keep alive the memory of Willy Lange, who was to be a role model for young people, calling them to be Christ's disciples, to our eyes nowadays it is a work which fed and nurtured the hero-myth, and also prepared the way for the National Socialist *Führer*-cult and the Second World War. Take the last sentences of the book for example:

We Germans are now engaged in giving to Germany, in the person of its leader,* what is Germany's.

29. The rhyming couplet used as the subtitle is from Friedrich Schiller's play, *Wallensteins Lager* [*Wallenstein's Camp*], in which the characters praise the Thirty Years War and their commander, Albrecht von Wallenstein.

30. The book appeared in 1952 in a revised version—the most strongly militaristic passages had been omitted or toned down—under the title *Willy Lange, ein treuer Christuszeuge* [*Willy Lange: Christ's Faithful Witness*], by the Bundes-Verlag Witten, with an epilogue by Bernd von Viebahn.

31. *Schwert und Schild*, 17/4 (1915), 8–19. Ernst Lange also wrote an article about his brother Fritz with the title 'Ein Brief Christi' [A Letter of Christ] for the magazine *Kameradendienst* (April 1935) of the Deutsche Wehrmachts- und Schutzpolizei-Mission [The German Mission to Police and Servicemen], of which he was the leader from 1935 to 1936. He paints him as a model 'letter of Christ'. Fritz Lange was, as a letter of 20 April 1915 to his sister-in-law Dora Lange shows, much more critical of the war than his brothers: 'Oh, would that God would grant peace! ... I cannot quite follow father Viebahn, as in my view he is expecting too much from the war'.

[*BD: German, *Führer*.]

It is the fulfilment of what Willy Lange said in 1917 when betrayal was rife, ‘The nation is entirely ready to follow any clear and great man’.

It would constitute the culmination of this work—not at all a contradiction—if multitudes of Germans would rise to ‘give God what God is’ ... We should not wait—we owe the Lord of Lords and King of Kings the homage, the devotion of our whole being. It is a question of life and death which decision we make.³²

I will offer a personal comment on that. This book was bequeathed to me by my father, who belonged to a Closed Brethren assembly. As a hand-written note by him in the book shows, he was given it for his eighteenth birthday ‘in wartime 1942’ by two young ladies of the youth group in the assembly. At the end of 1943 he was conscripted, became an officer, and was then as a pious young man from a small Thuringian village, involved in a war crime on the civilian population, as he told me on several occasions just before his death. What role did this book have in playing down happenings in the war and justifying crimes? One of my father’s comments after his account was, “But it was war after all!” (as if that would justify criminal acts).

2.3. *The booklet Gedenk-Blätter aus ernster Zeit* [Commemorative Notes at a Solemn Time]

Gedenk-Blätter aus ernster Zeit is a thirty-page-long booklet, which appeared about 1919/20 and was jointly published by the houses of the Closed Brethren, R. Brockhaus in Elberfeld and Geschwister Dönges in Dillenburg. It was to be

a farewell greeting to all in the army who during the war have been in touch with the Soldatenmission [Soldiers Mission] of Düsseldorf-Duisburg-Barmen. It is dedicated to remembrance, the remembrance of the goodness and faithfulness of God who exercised love where hate and enmity drove the masses against each other, who let

32. Ernst Lange, *Hauptmann Willy Lange. Und setzt ihr nicht das Leben ein, nie wird euch das Leben gewonnen sein!* (Diesdorf, 1934), 176.

blessing flow out of the curse of sin, as He was saving lost souls and binding the saved more closely together.³³

Alongside this missionary concern there is a detailed description of the work of the Soldatenmission, which belonged to the Evangelische Allianz.³⁴ It is remarkable that Closed Brethren in Düsseldorf, Duisburg and Barmen were happy to associate with an Allianz work!

In the book there is first an address on 1 Corinthians 15: 54f. under the title ‘Death is Swallowed up in Victory’. After that there are extracts from field letters and letters by Russian prisoners, a biographical portrait of Georg von Viebahn, a report by Felix Brockhaus on his four-year internment in England, and ‘Examples of Divine Protection in the War’. All the articles aim to inspire readers to faith in Christ. The last chapter is the exception. It lists the ‘names of all our brothers and friends who are missing, have fallen or died from wounds or sickness’ between the city of Aachen and the village of Zwota;³⁵ names upon names with date and place of death—in all 995 men slain. It is noteworthy that here not a single syllable leans towards the hero-myth, although in those post-war years a flood of war literature emerged, in many cases embellishing the war and celebrating the killed as heroes.³⁶

33. *Gedenk-Blätter aus ernster Zeit* (Elberfeld and Dillenburg [c.1919/20]), 3.

34. Birgit Siegmann offers further information about the Soldatenmission in ‘Fürchtet Gott! Ehret den König! Habt die Brüder lieb! Die Soldatenmission des CVJM-Westbundes’ [Fear God! Honour the King! Love the Brethren! The Mission to Soldiers of the YMCA Western Federation], in Birgit Siegmann and Peter Schmidtsiefer (eds.), *Feldgraue Mentalitäten. Der Erste Weltkrieg in religiösen Perspektiven aus dem Wuppertal* [*Field-grey mentalities. The First World War in Religious Perspective from the Wupper Valley*] (Nordhausen, 2011), 71–95.

35. Zwota is a village in the Vogtland area of Saxony near to the German-Czech border (now incorporated into Klingenthal). A footnote points out that this list is not complete: ‘for all our great effort we have not succeeded ... in obtaining the requested details from all places’ (*Gedenk-Blätter*, 107). Nonetheless the researcher has in his hands a very comprehensive list of the places in Germany in which Exclusive Brethren assemblies existed.

36. An exception is the world-renowned novel by Erich Maria Remarque, *Im Westen nichts Neues* [*All Quiet on the Western Front*] (1929; ET 1929).

It looks as if this work manifests an anti-war tendency. At the start, the address on 1 Corinthians 15 speaks of the ‘recently ended frightful war of nations’. It goes on to say, ‘The fighters at the front [not the heroes!] have stared into the face of the “King of Horror” in many and often gruesome forms.’ After that, to mentions of ‘significant successes and brilliant victories’ are added the view of Germany’s defeat as ‘the judgement of God on so much pride, godlessness and immorality in our land’.³⁷ The authors see their pessimistic view of the world, which was particularly at home in the Brethren, vindicated by this war. They thus want to guide the reader to an understanding of humanity’s depravity and the need for repentance. They are thereby giving sense to senseless killing and interpreting the war as ‘God’s means of judgement’, thus condoning it.

It is true that the book does not set out to venerate heroes, but by virtue of its missionary concern it gives meaning to senseless slaughter and thereby justifies it. It was therefore surely a conscious decision to include in the penultimate chapter—before the enumeration of the slain soldiers—a report under the title ‘For peace had I great bitterness!’ (Is. 38: 17). In my view this verse has a simultaneously macabre and revealing effect. The entire booklet, inspired by Jesus’ commission, acts as a prohibition of mourning. The view that this war leads to repentance makes any natural grief impossible and any resultant peace engagement by Christians unthinkable.³⁸ On the contrary, the authors advocate that the returning soldiers, often highly traumatised (and all their relatives at the home front), should not allow any reaction of grief but should go about their daily life in prayer and evangelism. They exhort the reader: ‘Let no-one seek public tasks; they constitute dangers for the Christian. Let everyone work in substantial quietness, being the salt, whose effectiveness begins as soon as it dissolves and thus

37. *Gedenk-Blätter*, 8f.

38. The Christian recognition that bitter suffering leads to healing and the Healer, or any other way of making sense of suffering, is only thinkable after a long, painful process. If this step comes too early, it rejects grieving and leads to a pathological grief. See specialist books on grief, grieving processes and bereavement counselling, of which there are now plenty on the market.

disappears. ... And so the Christian best serves the general public by seeking to acquaint individuals with the best.’³⁹

That brings me to a comparison with a publication of the German Baptist Churches.

3. The *Gedenkbuch* of the German Baptists

In 1919 the Baptist publishing house in Kassel brought out the 338-page long *Gedenkbuch an die in dem Weltkriege gefallenen Mitglieder der deutschen Baptistengemeinden* [*Book of Remembrance for the Members of the German Baptist Churches Fallen in the World War*]. It was compiled and edited by Benjamin Schmidt who had taken over the running of their publishing house, Oncken-Verlag, in 1905.

In the *Gedenkbuch*, 1,527 soldiers killed in action, and one lady missionary who had died in an English POW camp,⁴⁰ are mentioned by name. In addition, a photograph was printed from the church in Schwentainen in Pomerania of a plaque on which twenty-seven soldiers are named.⁴¹ 1,563 soldiers were thus known to have been killed. In the book itself, mention is made of ‘about 1300 Fallen from our circles’.⁴² That is a considerable number of dead young men from the German Baptist Federation. However, those mentioned here are far from being the total of slain soldiers from Baptist churches: one has to take into account that there will have been churches which did not participate in the production of this book. Furthermore, in the succeeding years some of the wounded died.

On the first few pages an address by the Baptist preacher Carl Breidenbach (1866–1946) is printed, an address given during the service of commemoration at the twenty-third conference of the Federation in Kassel from 15 to 17 September 1918. From 1913

39. *Gedenk-Blätter*, 100f.

40. *Gedenkbuch an die in dem Weltkriege gefallenen Mitglieder der deutschen Baptistengemeinden* (Kassel, 1919), 305.

41. *Ibid.*, 246. The text under the photograph of the plaque, however, says that 35 were killed. The inscription on the plaque is significant: ‘They died a hero’s death for us’—clear evidence of hero-veneration.

42. *Ibid.*, 3.

Breidenbach had been a collaborator and later director of the Allianz-Soldatenmission [Alliance Soldiers Mission] and was therefore called the 'Federation's father to soldiers'.

At the beginning of his address Breidenbach cites, *inter alia*, the poem 'Helden' ['Heroes'] by an unnamed, unknown (to me) author. With this poem it becomes clear that the service of remembrance was a service of remembrance of heroes. Breidenbach had already identified the slain soldiers as 'those departed, whom God deemed worthy to be heroes', and 'deceased heroes',⁴³ and put them on parallel with Christ who 'died for all' (2 Cor. 5: 15).

This service was, then, not at all a mere expression of grief and deep shock at the heavy losses of gifted and committed fellow workers in the churches and enterprises of the Federation. Nor is the book, consequently, just a 'book of remembrance', as the title promises. As was customary in those days, the bravery, courage, patriotism, loyalty, willing sacrifice, and other qualities of the dead soldiers are praised. There is no suggestion that the people were terrified, suffered horribly, and died pointlessly. Every now and again there is a hint that they would have liked to carry on living.

A process of the transfiguration of history, or more precisely of war, was going on then. Through hero-veneration the war was embellished, through the 'ennobling' of the 'heroes', war was even glorified. The soldiers killed were all victims. But where then were the perpetrators of devastation, who behaved like animals, who slaughtered, butchered, and gassed what appeared before their eyes? Today, with the experience of two world wars, that is a completely unacceptable way of seeing things.

Into this attitude to the war fits the fact that the book cover, the title page, and many other pages of the book, bear a depiction of the Iron Cross. The shape itself of this military decoration was charged with symbolism. It was a conscious imitation of the beam cross of the Deutscher Orden [German Order]. It is the black cross pattée with four splayed feet, which the German knights of the fourteenth century wore on their white cloaks. The war was thereby associated with the tradition of the Crusades and thus given a sacred aura—

43. Carl Breidenbach, quoted in *ibid.*, 4, 5.

probably quite unconsciously. Accordingly, the book imperceptibly drew the war into proximity with religious conflicts and wars.

A corresponding feature in the book is the garlands bound and wound round with ribbon like victor's laurels.⁴⁴ Within the book poems are printed alongside Bible verses and verses of well-known hymns, all exhorting the reader to hope and confidence in the faith, whilst by virtue of the hope of the resurrection 'the floods of grief become new springs of blessing', as Breidenbach puts it.⁴⁵

It is therefore not surprising that the most quoted Bible verse (a mere twenty-five times!) is Revelation 2: 10, 'Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.' But how did the authors understand this verse? For them did 'faithful' make them think of faithfulness to God (as the Biblical author meant), or to the Emperor* and the Fatherland, or were both intertwined, and was there no such sharp distinction between Church and State?

Psalms 73: 26 is the second most-quoted verse (nineteen times): 'My flesh and my heart faileth: but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever.' When the subject is pitiful death (failing), grief gets an apparently appropriate mention. But true grief has no place in the book or at the commemoration service. In line with this is a poem by Georg Holzey with the words:

If they could speak, all those silent
grave mounds, that cover our heroes,
...
If they could speak, they would say,
You German mothers and wives and brides-to-be
In your mourning garb, you must not complain,
as if we were the booty of cruel Fate.
...⁴⁶

44. See *ibid.*, 53.

45. *Ibid.*, 4.

[*BD: German, *Kaiser*.]

46. Wenn sie reden könnten, alle die stillen
Grabhügel, die unsere Helden bedecken,

...
Wenn sie reden könnten, sie würden sagen:

It is therefore clear that most German Baptists did not stand out at all from the mass of the German nation. The book shows how very much children of their time they were. The message of God's reconciliation and peace did not make them rise up against war and death, but rather they found in the Easter message solace in their pain, and in the picture of the Crucified, a precursor of the self-sacrificing soldiers, who were all heroes and therefore more honoured than mourned for. The anti-war novel *Die Waffen nieder!* [*Lay Down your Weapons!*], written by Austrian Berta von Suttner in 1889 and widely read at that time, was hardly to be seen in Baptist homes.

4. Reactions and events from local history

It would be good to delve further into this obstructed, suppressed grief with my observations from research into local history.

By 1914 Velbert in the district of Mettmann in the Rhine Province had become a very successful industrial town. The largest free-church fellowship was the Closed Brethren assembly. As well as the Methodists and Pentecostals, there was also a small Baptist congregation, a church-plant from Elberfeld,⁴⁷ which was then still an independent town in the Rhine Province before it was incorporated into the city of Wuppertal. By 1914 Velbert's population had grown to 31,400.⁴⁸ About two per cent of the

Ihr deutschen Mütter und Frauen und Bräute
Im Trauergewande, ihr sollt nicht klagen,
als wären wir grausamen Schicksals Beute.
...]

Ibid., 141. The poem comes from Holzey's book *Dennoch bist du mein Gott. Worte des Trostes in geistlichen Liedern* [*Yet You are My God. Words of Comfort in Hymns*], which he published himself in 1918.

47. These branch congregations or church plants were called 'stations' [BD: German, *Station*]. The Velbert station came into existence in 1906.

48. Gert Ritter, *Velbert—Heiligenhaus—Tönisheide. Kulturgeographische Entwicklung eines niederbergischen Industrieraumes* [*Velbert—Heiligenhaus—Tönisheide. Cultural-geographical Development of the Niederbergisch Industrial Area*] (Ratingen 1965), 109.

population belonged to the so-called Freikirchen [free churches], including one per cent in the Closed Brethren assembly.

It is thought that between 1914 and 1918, 644 Velbert men met a soldier's death, which constituted on average 0.53 per cent per annum of the inhabitants. In four years Velbert thus lost two per cent of its population through war service alone. As far as can be ascertained today, about twenty-five young men from the Brethren and Baptist churches did not return from the war. That would mean that approximately four soldiers in a hundred came from these free-church circles, Baptists or Brethren, in Velbert. Of these twenty-five young men, only a fifth belonged to the Baptist congregation.

How then did the Closed Brethren and the Baptist Church react to these happenings in Velbert?

4.1. *Death announcements in the Velberter Zeitung* [Velbert Newspaper]

In general the first thing to observe is that there were two quite distinct types of death announcement in the Velbert local press. In the case of soldiers who had died after lengthy suffering in a field hospital, their suffering is sometimes described and their death announced. But if the soldiers had been fatally wounded in action, then their death had been a 'hero's death' or 'a hero's death for Emperor and Fatherland.' But there were also a few exceptions in which only the death was announced, without mention of hero-status. Let us look at that more closely.

In the *Velberter Zeitung* there were thirty-six death announcements for sons, brothers, and fathers from free-church families. Twenty-four of them were submitted by the families; in some cases businesses or friends also submitted a notice. Why there are about ten missing still has no answer.

The very first press announcement (Emil Vitz, 10 September 1914) was from a Closed Brethren family. On the left the so-called Territorial Army Cross (also called the Iron Cross) is printed, and on the right Revelation 14: 13 in the Elberfeld version, the translation of the Closed Brethren: 'And I heard a voice from heaven saying, Write, Blessed the dead who die in the Lord, from now on! Yea, says the

Spirit, so that they may rest from their works, for their deeds follow them.’

This verse was also cited in 1914 in Viebahn’s *Schwert und Schild*. It hints at the families’ tendency to view their sons’ deaths as that of Christian martyrs, whereas the verse is an utterance of God in regard to persecuted and slain Christians, not soldiers killed in action. At the same time it is clear that the family sees their son dying ‘by God’s unsearchable will’ and ‘as a hero for Fatherland on the field of honour’. So hero-worship was nurtured even by families in the Closed Brethren assembly right from the start of the war.

Another indirect indication of how the war was perceived as a ‘holy war’ is the incorporation into the death announcements of the Iron Cross, which was subsequently ever-present in the death announcements in the *Velberter Zeitung*. I do not know whether the inclusion was by the express wish of the families or at the instigation of the publisher, but in the context of these ideas the mere caption of the Territorial Army Cross (‘With God / for King and / Fatherland’) is significant. I have already alluded to the deeper symbolism of the cross.

Not all of the subsequent notices by free-church families include the idea of a ‘heroic death for the Fatherland’. But most allude to a Bible verse such as Psalm 23: 4 (Walter Clabes, on 25 May 1915); Revelation 21: 4 (Otto Hornscheidt, on 10 June 1915); Revelation 2:10 (Hugo Wascheidt, on 15 May 1916); or 2 Corinthians 5: 1 (Paul Vitz, on 12 May 1917).

A comparison of this last death notice, which was for Paul Vitz, with the first one to be published in the *Velberter Zeitung*, which had been for Emil Vitz, reveals that the men were from the same family. Again the death of a hero is alluded to, though the rest of the words underline Christian hope and certainty more strongly than in the first. Did a slight change of thinking take place in the family between 1914 and 1917? Were they not quite so proud of their son’s heroic death as in the first instance? Did they mourn their second son’s death more explicitly, more clearly, more transparently? This family was even afflicted by another bereavement. Directly above the death notice of Paul Vitz is the announcement of the death of his mother. The family

of Johann Vitz was therefore mourning the loss of both mother and second son. But the Vitz family was not the only one to pass through such traumatic experiences in those four war years. Many a family lost several sons and relatives.

It would certainly be enlightening to compare the death announcements of the general public with those of the soldiers, but that would overstep my remit, so I will stick with the latter. I would like to turn my attention to two exceptions amongst the notices in the *Velberter Zeitung*: they do not speak of 'heroic death'. The first, which appeared on 9 June 1915, relates to Otto Hornscheidt, the son of the town treasurer Wilhelm Hornscheidt (1850–1930). Wilhelm Hornscheidt was the leading brother in the Velbert Closed Brethren assembly, having for decades made his house available as a meeting-place. It is conspicuous that the omission of an allusion to 'heroic death', and the clear expression of grief ('painful news'), go together with the choice of disengaged vocabulary in reference to the war ('the tumult of war'). The verse quoted also points in this direction: 'And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away' (Rev. 21: 4). It indicates grieving and the hope of an end. Here something of genuine deep consternation, grief, and aloofness from the war is perceptible, which has nothing to do with the widespread veneration of heroes. The announcement is also noteworthy when one knows that the father and two of his sons were Prussian civil servants who had taken the oath of office, swearing loyalty and obedience to 'Your Majesty my All-gracious King and Emperor'.

The second notice, on 13 May 1918, is that of the Busch family. They also belonged to the Closed Brethren. In reference to Psalm 23, they speak of fearlessness in the valley of the shadow of death and to 'a table prepared in the presence of my enemies'. But there is no mention of the heroic-death concept.

These two notices are deviations from the other death announcements. They are, however, far from being proof that the hero-myth was not nurtured in these families. That is revealed in a second notice by the Hornscheidt family, namely the notice of the

death of their eldest son, Peter Hornscheidt on 8 August 1918 (that is, nearly at the end of the war). Whilst the actual concept of ‘heroic death’ is not used, it speaks of ‘death for the Fatherland’—a sacrificial death, then. We can therefore affirm that amongst the Freikirchen, the family notices for the most part maintained the hero-myth until the end of the war.

Notices inserted by manufacturers who belonged to Freikirchen for their dead workers do not show a different picture.

4.2. The records of the Elberfeld Baptist Church

Let us now turn to the Velbert Baptist Church, which the Elberfeld Baptists took care of as their daughter church. In the records of the Elberfeld Baptist church very little can be learnt about the war. The problems dealt with in the meetings of the leadership committee and of the whole congregation are no different from those before and after the war. These meetings were focussed mainly on mission campaigns, baptismal notices, and cases of church discipline. It is only in the minute book of the youth association that we can occasionally read about what was happening in the war.⁴⁹

At no point do the records go into the death of members and the tragic consequences for the affected families. Only one note intimates that soldiers from the church were killed. The records of the church meeting on 13 October 1918 affirm succinctly,

Brother Wupper [the preacher] read out the invitation from our publishing house in Kassel to take part in the publication and delivery of a planned book of remembrance for the fallen brethren from our congregations. The meeting resolved to be involved and to make these books available to member families who had lost loved ones in the present war.

49. The entry for 20 September 1914 is informative: ‘Our friend Br. Rahm had prepared an address for us, which can be entitled: Turmoil on the battlefield and my wound. Amongst other things he described to us the barbaric actions of Belgian inhabitants. He could not give us full information on the condition of our troops in the field.’

This notice makes clear, for one thing, that each Baptist church decided whether to notify the publisher of soldiers killed. It is possible that some churches declined to comply with the publisher's request. We also discern that they were thinking of the member families. Amongst the soldiers notified to the publisher, there could also be sons who were not baptised and therefore not church members. The *Gedenkbuch* therefore featured names of soldiers who were included in the church's circle of friends. The trauma of the war had blurred the boundary between member and non-member. There was such a consciousness of how grievously members were mourning for their slain (non-member) sons that they could not be denied an 'honourable mention' in the book of remembrance. A more open and gracious attitude was on its way.

The entry about a church meeting on 24 October 1918 is also relevant. The wording is:

Sunday 22 December at 4 p.m. reception to welcome members and friends returning from the war in conjunction with a customary (in recent years) young people's Christmas party. The money collected for the Christmas parcels for our soldiers will prove useful for setting a special table for our warriors, and the brothers and sisters responsible for supplying the soldier parcels will prepare what is necessary. The whole church is in agreement with this.

In order to make the connection with our topic we really need the photograph of the Christmas party, which actually does exist.

4.3. *The 1918 celebration at Elberfeld Baptist Church*

To this day a photograph of the occasion hangs in a room of the Evangelisch-Freikirchliche Gemeinde [Evangelical Free Church] (EFG) in Elberfeld. A portion of the image, when magnified, reveals that a plaque on the pulpit bears the names of the soldiers killed or missing. On this simple plaque there is no mention of heroes or heroic death. However, the plaque was given a festive garland round the perimeter. Was this a sign of hero-veneration after all?

Of the nine dead soldiers, three were from Velbert. I was surprised that none of them was the subject of a death notice in the

Velbert newspaper. What construction can we put on that? And yet during the war there had been death announcements for the fathers of two of them. How they bore in mind these dead members at this celebration is likewise an open question. The actual reason was a Christmas celebration at which the returning soldiers were welcomed back. I therefore assume that there was a brief mention of the dead, followed by a minute's silence.

5. An evaluation

If we take into account the stances and attitudes of the social environment, we find—for all our necessary criticism—a certain sympathy for our fathers and mothers. It is at least clear that in their published material the Baptists and Brethren were quite typical of their time. Whether consciously or unconsciously, in their public reactions to the many dead soldiers from their own circles they saw to it that the First World War was religiously purified. There could therefore be no question of penitence, not even of an insight into the un-Christian nature of war, contemptuous of humanity. On the contrary, the actions of the dead soldiers were for the most part seen as heroic exploits, to be admired and praised, not lamented. And further, through the use of particular Bible verses, the perpetrators were aligned with Christian martyrs and their death paralleled with the sacrificial death of Jesus.

This approach was the best breeding-ground for another war. For whoever honours a dead soldier as a hero, honours also the work of his hands and justifies the war as legitimate conflict management. It even went to the point of interpreting the military virtues of fearlessness, loyalty, self-sacrifice, and obedience as Christian virtues. Thus it was that General von Viebahn could not be contradicted when he said, 'There is no profession which has so much congruence with Christianity as that of a soldier'.⁵⁰

Was this the reason why the Brethren were also well-represented in the armed services of the Second World War? Was it the reason why Brethren and Baptists were then unwilling to admit to military crimes even in it? From personal experience, as son of an army

50. Quoted in Lange, *Hauptmann Willy Lange*, 113.

officer, I can say that I was never able to imagine that my father was in any way an accomplice in the crimes of the Nazis.

My engagement with this topic has reinforced my pacifist viewpoint. For me soldiers are no heroes. Their death is not sacrifice. The First World War showed that wars are senseless bloodbaths. Many a soldier came back from it and said that he had experienced hell. But in our congregations there was no ‘Never again’, not even in the name of Jesus the Prince of Peace. The reactions I have described to the many dead soldiers from our free-church circles certainly saw to that.⁵¹

51. And so I am not aware of a case of a young Christian from our Freikirchen becoming a convinced pacifist through war experiences. Pacifists from Brethren circles were Julius Anton von Poseck, Georg Müller and other men of the Brethren movement in Britain: see: August Jung, *Julius Anton von Poseck. Ein Gründervater der Brüderbewegung [Founding Father of the Brethren Movement]* (Wuppertal 2002), 27–36; and id., ‘Julius Anton von Poseck (1816–1898) and Brethren Origins in Germany’, in Neil T. R. Dickson and Tim Grass (eds.), *The Growth of the Brethren Movement: National and International Experiences* (Milton Keynes, 2006), 133–44. But there were also British Brethren who had high military ranks: see Timothy C. F. Stunt, ‘Brethren and the Armed Services’, in Neil T. R. Dickson and T. J. Marinello (eds.), *Culture, Spirituality, and the Brethren* (Troon, S. Ayrs, 2014), 79–100.