

Adventists and World War I - Symposium Day One

By Jeff Boyd, May 12, 2014

The international symposium, "The Impact of World War I on Seventh-day Adventism," began today at Theologische Hochschule Friedensau, an Adventist university near Berlin, Germany. The Institute of Adventist Studies is hosting the international event, which includes sixteen presenters from twelve countries and fifty registered attendees from eleven countries.

Event organizer Rolf Pöhler shared the symposium's three areas of overlapping concern; prophetic interpretation, Adventist faith and military action, and the Seventh-day Adventist Reform Movement. George Knight, a well-known Adventist historian retired from the faculty of Andrews University, was the keynote speaker at Monday evening's inaugural session, focusing primarily on the second of these areas (military service) which is at the heart of the situation that spawned the Reform Movement, today a separate Adventist denomination.

Future reports from the symposium will address the Reform Movement in more detail. Briefly, the movement began in Germany when Adventist leaders informed the government that church members would take up arms in the war, even on Sabbath. Because both positions were out of harmony with Adventist history and teachings up to that point, a portion of the membership rejected these changes and eventually formed a new denomination consistent with their convictions. This movement has since split, yet it remains the most significant group to branch from the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Knight provided a context for the forthcoming presentations by providing an overview of Adventist history regarding military service. A major theme was the struggle to live faithfully as citizens of heaven in a sinful world where Christians are also citizens of political nations. Another prominent theme was the pragmatic and flexible approach the Adventist Church has taken over the years toward participation in combat duty in times of forced conscription, or the draft, opting for institutional security over consistent and absolute pacifism.

While there have been elements of continuity to the Church's approach to the war question (e.g., favoring noncombatancy in the context of a draft, supporting Sabbath observance even in times of war), there have also been significant changes over time. For example, Knight noted that while noncombatancy remains the suggested approach, both combat duty and refusal of military service are now considered options for Adventists in good standing. Other changes include an increasingly uncritical support for governments and military action, a shift from distinct official pronouncements to personal choice by individual members, and the acceptance of Adventist clergy in the role of military chaplains.

In his concluding remarks, Knight lamented the changes that have resulted from the lack of education provided by the Church in relation to these questions: "In the void of education on the topic and lack of information about the denomination's historic position against volunteering for military service, slowly but steadily Adventist young people began to enlist with hardly anyone noticing what was happening. And with that transition Adventism lost what had truly been an important aspect of its Christian heritage."

In its first pronouncements on the issue, the General Conference in the 1860s was strong pacifist and associated Adventist teachings with those of the Mennonites and Quakers, historic "peace churches." This position changed over time and today many Adventists have no awareness of the historic roots of the faith on this topic. World War I provided the context for significant change in Adventist faith in the aftermath of the death of Ellen White in 1915, leading up to the pivotal 1919 Bible Conference and 1922 GC Session.

Adventist Today has sent one of its editors to Germany for this important symposium examining a crucial turning point in the development of the Adventist movement. Daily news reports will be published online. Jeff Boyd is assistant editor of Adventist Today.

German Adventist Leaders Release Statement on "Guilt, Failure," War

From APD, May 12, 2014

The Seventh-day Adventist Church in Germany has published a statement pertaining to actions it took in the context of the outbreak of World War I. The denomination's Southern and Northern German Union Conferences voted the statement on April and published it in German in the May edition of the Church magazine *Adventisten heute* under the title "Guilt and Failure."

The presidents of both union conferences, Pastors Johannes Naether and Günther Machel recall that many Adventists at the time saw the outbreak of World War I as "a sign of the end of the world." Before the war, a number of Adventists had served in the military but refused to carry out duties on Sabbath, risking potentially severe penalties. Others considered it part of their preparation for the imminent return of Jesus to refuse to carry weapons or to participate in the military.

However, shortly after the general mobilization on August 2, 1914, the leadership of the denomination's Central European Division in Hamburg issued an open letter recommending that enlisted Adventists "fulfill our military duties wholeheartedly and with joy," bear arms and also to serve on the Sabbath.

The statement and other publications provoked a complex protest in Adventist congregations, leading to tensions and divisions within the denomination. In 1915 this state of affairs led to the formation of a separate organization, the self-designated "Reform Movement," which accused its mother church, the "greater church" of a "Babylonian apostasy from the true Advent faith."

"Today we recognize and concede," said the two German leaders, "that during these disputes our fathers often did not act in the spirit of love and reconciliation demonstrated by Jesus." Out of concern for the survival of the denomination in Germany, advice contradicting the Word of God was given which led to division and profound hurt. The former Adventist leadership did not adequately fulfill their responsibility to the Church. They unjustly accused members who contradicted them of having "fallen" from the truth, and in individual cases went as far as having people pursued by the authorities.

During post-war negotiations with the Reform Movement on June 21 to 23, 1920, in Friedensau, Germany, Pastor Arthur G. Daniells, president of the denomination's General Conference (GC), objected to the position of the German church administrators regarding military service and emphasized, "We would not have made such a declaration." At a pastors meeting which took place immediately prior to the negotiations in Friedensau, those directly responsible for the documents had rescinded their statements as "erroneous" and on January 2, 1923, again expressed regret "that such documents had ever been released."

Today, Pastors Naether and Machel again apologized in the name of the Seventh-day Adventist denomination. "Even though none of those directly involved are still alive, we ask their descendants and relatives along with the still existing groups of the Reform Movement for forgiveness for our failings. From these painful experiences we have learned that the children of God are called to be people of peace, and to reject every form of violence against the innocent. We believe that disciples of Jesus are truest to the statements of the Holy Scriptures when they act as ambassadors for peace and reconciliation."

The two Church Leaders recall the "Declaration of Peace" released by the GC in June 1985: "In a world full of fighting and hatred, a world of ideological and military conflicts, Seventh-day Adventists want to be known as peacemakers, and want to advocate for global justice and peace under Christ as the head of a new humanity."

The Adventist Reform Movement

In August 1914 as the First World War began and 3,000 of the 15,000 German Adventists were called up to military service, many came to different conclusions when considering how to behave in response to the crisis. While the majority followed the directives in the open letter circulated by denominational leaders in Germany and became fully-fledged military servicemen, critics of this decision clearly expressed their disapproval.

From amongst these critics, some of whom explained their opposition by their expectation of Jesus return in the early summer 1915, a group established itself over the course of the year. Some later found a place back in an established Adventist congregation, but the majority of the objectors remained part of the Seventh-day Adventist Reform Movement which rejected any form of military service altogether.

The withdrawal of the open letter and other post-war attempts at reconciliation failed. As a result, two Adventist denominations existed during the time of the Weimar Republic, the original Adventists and the newer Reformed denomination, which subsequently divided into a number of further smaller groups due to internal conflicts.

Most of the splinter groups had come to an end prior to the Nazi regime, and the remaining groups soon came to the attention of the new rulers, since they refused to participate in elections. In 1936 the Gestapo dissolved the Reform Movement. Most of the smaller groups were outlawed in the same year, the remainder in 1937 and 1942.

Today, the Seventh-day Adventist denomination is comprised of more than 18 million adult, baptized members around the world and perhaps as many as 30 million adherents. In Germany there are around 35,000 members. The Reform Movement experienced a schism in 1951, and since then exists as two groups, each with about 30,000 members worldwide. In Germany, the Seventh-day Adventist Church Reform Movement, International Missionary Society (IMS) reports 350 members. The Seventh-day Adventist Reform Movement (SDARM) is slightly smaller with about 200 members in Germany. More information is available from several published and Internet sources about the Reformed Seventh-day Adventist denominations.

The Adventist News Agency (APD) is operated from Basel, Switzerland, on behalf of the Seventh-day Adventist denomination's organizations in Europe.

Adventists and World War I - Symposium Day Two

By Jeff Boyd, May 13, 2014

The second day of the symposium on the impact of World War I on the Adventist movement at Friedensau Adventist University's (FAU) began by focusing on prophecy, specifically how failed prophecies relating to the Ottoman Empire during WW1 affected Adventist evangelism. The day finished with a consideration of Adventists and military service; however, I will wait to report on these war questions until after the remaining papers on the topic are presented tomorrow (Wednesday).

Jón H. Stefánsson, a research assistant at Andrews University originally from Iceland, set the stage for the prophetic analysis by tracing the development of Adventist interpretation of Bible prophecy relating to the Ottoman Empire. William Miller and Josiah Litch, two influential leaders in the early Adventist movement of the 1830s and 1840s in the United States, viewed the end of the Ottoman Empire as an important future step toward Armageddon and Jesus' return. In 1838 Litch predicted the empire would end on August 11, 1840.

When Egyptian forces were advancing on the Ottomans, European powers intervened, stopping Egypt on August 11, 1840. Stefánsson explained that "this acceptance of European protection and intervention was regarded by many as the end of Ottoman sovereignty. Thus the day-year principle appeared vindicated, and the ... movement gained great momentum." Consequently, the last plagues, Armageddon and Jesus' return were imminent.

After the Great Disappointment of 1844, those remaining in the movement revisited this chain of final events. By the 1850s Uriah Smith had connected the Ottoman Empire with the sixth trumpet of Revelation 9 and the sixth plague of Revelation 16. In 1871 Smith declared "the king of the north" ([Dan. 11:40-45](#)) to be Turkey. By the 1880s, the Ottoman theory had become "the unanimous consensus among Seventh-day Adventists," reported Stefánsson.

Bert Haloviak, former head of the denomination's archives at the General Conference (GC), explained that this prophetic interpretation addressed an important issue of the time; "The Eastern Question," or the concern by European powers regarding their national interests in the territories of the Ottoman Empire. Haloviak summarized how Adventists believed the Eastern Question would be solved in light of their views on Daniel 9, 16, and 11:40-45, as described by Stefánsson. The solution "involved Turkey losing all its possessions and being forced to retreat to Jerusalem where the events of the final confrontation in the Great Controversy would take place." Haloviak described how important this idea was to Adventists at the time. "By the outbreak of the Great War, the theme of the predicted fall of Turkey as a nation had become so dominant in Adventist thought that the entire church ... amassed its full resources in support of the idea and seemed prepared to proclaim the Eastern Question as its central message of warning of the nearness of the end-time to the world."

The only problem with this prediction was that it did not come true. Rather than move its capital to Jerusalem, ushering in Armageddon and Jesus' return, the Ottoman Empire dissolved into the present country of Turkey. Stefánsson stated bluntly that "World War I did not cause the Turk to leave Istanbul," but instead "quickenened his departure out of Adventist eschatology."

Given this failed prediction at the heart of the evangelism of the time, what was the church to do? Rolf Pöhler, director of FAU's Institute of Adventist Studies, offered a number of potential responses; disbelief there is a problem demanding new insights, cautionary restraint, silence, disagreement and reinterpretation. With the view that reinterpretation was deserved, Pöhler noted seven troubling areas for reflection: soft time-setting, sensationalism, classical historicism, literalism, an unconditional view of prophecy, misinterpretation of signs of the times, and semi-rationalism. Given these areas of concern, Pöhler asked, "Have we learned from our history?"

Adventists and World War I - Symposium Day Three

By Jeff Boyd, May 14, 2014

The overlapping themes of military service and the Seventh-day Adventist Reform Movement were the focus of the third day of Friedensau Adventist University's symposium on the impact of World War 1 on the Adventist movement. The event involves careful, prayerful reflection after one hundred years.

As an international conference for an international denomination, it was fitting to have presentations on the experience of Adventists in a number of countries involved in WW1, including Australia, Britain, Denmark, France, Germany, Norway, Russia, South Africa, Sweden & the United States of America. When the collection of papers is published, chapters on Canada and Romania will also be included.

Although the Adventist Church advocated non-combatant status and Sabbath observance by those drafted into the military, the actual experience of Adventists was different in each context. What the denominational leaders did in each nation depended on factors such as how strict the draft was (were exceptions allowed), government acceptance of non-combatant status, the if alternative service was available, and the level of nationalism.

For example, in South Africa the denomination successfully campaigned for an exemption from compulsory military service. Nevertheless, Adventists still faced pressure in places where local authorities disregarded the exemption, leading to the imprisonment of several young men, explained Jeff Crocombe, senior lecturer at Pacific Adventist University. In contrast, both French and German governments did not recognize conscientious objection or religious freedom of worship. Instead, the military "expected strict performance of duties at all times and considered refusal to carry weapons as an attempt to undermine military morale, punishable by imprisonment or execution," reported Denis Kaiser in his presentation on Britain, France and Germany.

Similar policies were followed by other European nations, a reality that set the stage for a break with the traditional Adventist position by many national denominational leaders and then the emergence of the Reform Movement. It was initially simply a protest among church members, sometimes termed the German Reform Movement, but later became a new denomination, a fact rarely acknowledged today and unknown to most Adventists.

With the outbreak of war in Europe in the late summer of 1914, German church leaders met to establish guidance for members facing the draft. At an August 2 meeting, "a decision was taken that in the present context the demands of military service and the bearing of arms were the rightful prerogatives of the civilian authorities and Adventist Christians should cooperate and do their duty," explained Gilbert Valentine, a professor at La Sierra University and established historian. This position supporting patriotic duty was communicated to the German War Department. It specifically included using weapons and engaging in regular military service on the Sabbath. This change in Adventist teachings was accepted by most Adventists in Germany at the time. Only a small faction refused to comply. This symposium at Friedensau marks the 100th anniversary of this schism.

After the war, with oversight from General Conference (GC) officers, German leaders would rescind these pronouncements. However, division in the denomination would prove difficult to overcome. The continued schism was at least partly due to actions taken against the dissenting minority. Many were kicked out of the church. In some cases Adventists informed authorities about the dissenters, even testifying against them. Woonsan Kang and Antonino Di Franca, both members of the Reform Movement, reported that some dissenters were imprisoned and beaten, while others were killed for following their convictions. Understandably, some people fled in an attempt to avoid such abuse. Given this war-time abuse, it is little wonder that reunification proved illusive.

The most significant group of surviving dissenters (with members from 14 to 16 countries) began to coalesce, and in 1925 this group organized in Gotha, Germany, as the Seventh Day Adventist Reform Movement. The Gestapo would later dissolve the denomination in 1936, which meant it would remain an underground network until it re-established as a recognized religious body in the United States in 1936.

Administrative conflicts led to another split in 1951. This resulted in the formation of a 3rd denomination, the International Missionary Society Seventh-day Adventist Church Reform Movement (IMS). Today, the two small denominations have approximately 70,000 members all together, with a presence in 120 countries, reported Dr. Idel Suarez, Jr., president of IMS. Although the early members were German former Adventists, this is no longer the case because the church has grown internationally.

While mainstream Seventh-day Adventists and the Reform Movement have had notable conflicts and accusations of being "Babylon" have gone both ways, members on both sides expressed appreciation for the positive tone of the dialog this week in Friedensau. In the context of the recent apology by German Adventist leaders regarding the treatment of pacifists during WW1, participants in the symposium called for continued dialogue and study. Adventist Today published a story about the statement on Monday (May 12).

Adventists and World War I - Symposium Last Day

By Jeff Boyd, May 16, 2014

Over four days (May 12-15) academics, pastors, and other leaders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church and the International Missionary Society Seventh-day Adventist Reform Movement (IMS) have discussed the impact of World War 1 on the Adventist movement. The IMS is one of the two small denominations that emerged from the Reform Movement which started during the war because Adventist leaders changed the historic position of the Adventist faith on pacifism. The other is the Seventh Day Adventist Reform Movement (SDARM).

Although relations between the larger denomination and these two groups have been strained at times, the open dialog this week about this difficult history demonstrated a spirit of respect. On Wednesday evening after Rolf Pöhler, a faculty member at Friedensau Adventist University (FAU), read the German Adventist Church's official apology for its treatment of conscientious objectors 100 years ago, members of the IMS and the larger denomination had an impromptu embrace. This gesture cannot necessarily be taken as a sign of solidarity, but at a minimum it was an indication of a desire to recognize the value of the other party despite some enduring differences of perspective.

On the fourth day of the symposium hosted by FAU near Berlin, Germany, two papers were presented addressing ethics and what is to be learned for the future. Using a virtue theory approach, Dr. Michael Pearson, professor of ethics at Newbold College, provided a reflection on the players involved in the WW1 Adventist situation. He explained that virtue theory focuses "not on the action itself but on the character of the agent," and is concerned with "well-being, prospering, excellence, living well, blessedness and success." This ethical approach has one eye on the individual and the other on the community, employing narrative to evaluate both.

With this methodology, Pearson considered the character traits of church members, conscientious objectors, and church leaders in Britain, Germany and the United States. This approach demonstrated how each participant pursued virtue in relation to various reference groups. Despite attempts to act with virtue, Pearson noted seven problematic areas, four of which most obviously relate to the broader church. These include (1) systemic rather than individual failure, that is pragmatic Adventism had no adequate model to guide a response; (2) a focus on Adventist corporate self-interest that lacked a view of the broader moral scene; (3) a singular emphasis on Jesus' second coming, which left Adventists unprepared for the moral dilemma; and (4) a focus on "doing our duty in the context of obedience to authority" that diminished "our capacity to think for ourselves." These issues will be present again as other issues confront Adventists in many contexts.

Dr. Reinder Bruinsma, who retired recently from a number of denominational administrative positions over the years, gave the final presentation. He addressed the question, "Where do we go from here?" He pondered the future by reviewing three significant themes of the conference; the prophetic disappointment regarding the "Eastern Question," how Adventists view military service, and the split among Adventists in Germany and other European countries involved in WW1.

Bruinsma then reflected on issues that could divide Adventists in the future, including ordination, homosexuality, definition of biblical creation, and other persistent theological controversies. If one (or more) of these factors leads to a split, Bruinsma saw the fundamental issue underlying all of these as "the way we read and interpret the Bible."

However, Bruinsma did not see these as the greatest threat to the vitality and unity of the Adventist movement in the future. He suggested "today the greatest danger is not that large groups will leave our ranks with the purpose of creating their own organization." Rather, he said, "It appears that ... the more urgent threat to the unity of the church is the exodus of large numbers of young and not so young people" who fail to find in the Adventist church what they are looking for.

After highlighting characteristics of modern and postmodern segments within the Adventist community, Bruinsma called all Adventists to deal with conflict and controversy in a Christ-like manner. In this vein, he addressed concerns relating to how Adventists go about interpreting scripture.

Painting a vision for a positive way forward, Bruinsma called Adventists to deepen their understanding of stewardship, promote true Sabbath rest, and get involved with initiatives of hope. In this context he invited the church to "revive the radical option for peace and reconciliation." Bruinsma named Adventist Peace Fellowship as a meaningful initiative consistent with the need for Adventists to promote peace. [For more information see www.adventistpeace.org.]

Bruinsma connected peace initiatives with a concern for welcoming and retaining church members. "It would seem to me that large numbers of contemporary Adventists will find a new relevancy in their faith if they see their church at the forefront of helping people and in efforts for peace and justice."

The symposium's final hour was an open discussion. Topics included how to balance or reconcile modern and postmodern elements among Adventists, pragmatism versus idealism in ethics and church governance, the desire of some present to make non-combatancy a fundamental belief of the Adventist Church, and how to deal with conflict and separation.

Two statements made on the final day of the symposium summarize well key features of the gathering. Speaking of the quality of the engagement at the meeting, Pearson shared from the heart, "This event is bursting with integrity, and I'm proud to be part of it." Acknowledging that not all of Adventist history is as virtuous as one might wish, Pöhler reflected on God's presence even during difficult experience such as WW1, "God is faithful even when we fail to be faithful. Praise be to God."