

THOUGHT PROVOKING IDEAS OF THE GLOBAL ESSAY COMPETITION 2023

The passing on of responsibility in the sign of world peace: A Preservation of the UN Charter through a New Kind of Education

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The abstract flashback

It's April 2022 and I'm sitting on the couch in the living room of my grandfather's house, a few days after I said goodbye to him for the very last time on the night before he died.

On my lap is a box full of old letters: field mail that my grandfather wrote to his parents after his forced enlistment as an 18-year-old boy. Also, there were letters with poems that his little sister wrote to her parents in her death throes after her parents had to leave her behind before fleeing the war due to her serious lung disease that made the grueling journey impossible for her.

The contents of these letters tell in an unembellished and harsh way about the

reality of the Second World War, a brutal and inhuman time that I and my generation of grandchildren did not experience. Nevertheless, it was made conscious and tangible to me in an abstract way through narratives from my grandparents about the privations that accompanied this hard time.

In April 2022 and even now, while I am writing this essay, a war in Europe takes place not only in the past but unfortunately also in the present. As I lie in bed later on the said evening of April 2022, scrolling through Twitter on my phone and seeing the pictures of killed Russian soldiers as well as their corresponding ID cards, a feeling of an abstract flashback hits me. The birth dates of the killed boys written on the ID cards shocks me: *1999, *2001, *1998,

*2002, most of them younger than me and about the same age as my grandfather when he was forcibly recruited for war. The boys remind me of him, torn from their daily lives, from their academic training, from growing up. For what? To die in a militarily escalated conflict?

79 years lie between the year 2022, the year of these terrible events, and the year 1943, the year my grandpa was forcibly conscripted, trained in the use of a machine gun in a crash course and sent to the front line. 79 years in which the generations before us, humanity, had time to process, to learn how to create and maintain peace and how to keep it. For peace is the most precious treasure that mankind can possess.

The powerful voice from the past – Our best legacy

The Charter of the United Nations, signed on June 26, 1945, the month after the surrender of the Wehrmacht and the accompanying end of the Second World War in Europe, gives the generations before us a meaty voice in its first sentences. Testifying to their terrible experiences, bloody privations and the conclusions drawn from them at the time:

“We the peoples of the United Nations determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind, and to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small, and to establish conditions under which justice and respect for the obligations arising from treaties and other sources of international law can be maintained, and to promote social progress and better standards of

life in larger freedom” (United Nations a, 1945)

And further in Article 1 and 2, as the first two listed objectives:

“1. To maintain international peace and security, and to that end: to take effective collective measures for the prevention and removal of threats to the peace, and for the suppression of acts of aggression or other breaches of the peace, and to bring about by peaceful means, and in conformity with the principles of justice and international law, adjustment or settlement of international disputes or situations which might lead to a breach of the peace;

2. To develop friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples, and to take other appropriate measures to strengthen universal peace;” (United Nations a, 1945)

These written words and their implication, the association of the United Nations, meanwhile grown to 193 members (United Nations b, 2023), stand symbolically for a community of values of mostly different states. They are unified in sharing the common mission of creating and guaranteeing a peaceful world community. What a wonderful idea for a concept of a global world community and what a valuable legacy.

And yet, the current war in Europe shows us how quickly conflicts can escalate within this community and that the words just quoted can lose their cautionary sound, indeed their voice from the past. At the time of the founding of the UN, the people of the world were united above all in the pain of what sorrow had shaken the world through war. The words of the UN Charter provide witness to this state of

affairs and the resulting desire to establish a correspondingly peaceful democratic world order.

How to keep a voice alive

We are currently experiencing that the peace and the opportunities that come with peace, which my generation in the West and in Europe grew up taking for granted, are not self-evident but fragile and need to be nurtured. This requires a new vitality to the words of the UN Charter. The contemporary witnesses of the two wars mentioned by the Charter, like my grandfather, are becoming fewer and fewer. We grandchildren are more or less shaped by their narratives and have a special sensitivity in appreciating peace through these passed on stories as reminders. This sensitivity comes from intergenerational exchanges in the family, from a form of education and upbringing that automatically takes place or took place in many families. This transfer must leave the exclusivity of the family level, the personal transmission and become more of a social norm. Fewer and fewer can speak directly of the experiences based on which the UN Charter was written, and passing them on through people like me, who have heard the stories firsthand, is inferior to hearing them from eyewitnesses. The question regarding preserving the UN charter as the best legacy from previous generations equals the question, how to preserve a voice whose background few living people have experienced and whose drama and seriousness is weakened by lack of experience. Even more, we must ask ourselves, how to make the respective voice sound more forceful, so that it gains stronger entry into our society.

The key to achieve this and to preserve the democratic and peaceful world order designed by the UN is awareness. My generation must create the opportunity to

enter into a new and fruitful dialogue with the UN charter. We are trained to run at an incredibly high speed with the economic growth-driven world and to develop technical innovations and make them commonplace. All of this progress will be worth nothing if we do not drive social innovation with the same determination and investment. Presently, peacemaking and peacekeeping in the sense of the UN Charter need more than treaties. It needs intelligent actions and projects with wisely designed commitments that are made one with the heart of societies.

Dirk Helbing and Peter Seele propose to use an open and scientific approach to avoid the repetition of warlike conflicts by transferring the concept of war rooms (focused data-based project management to manage conflicts or corporate activities) to the concept of a peace rooms, in which interdisciplinary and international teams work with different stakeholders to find the best methods to keep peace (Helbing/ Seele, 2017; Helbing/Seele 2018). In order to keep the UN Charter alive for my generation and for future generations, we need to cast this approach into a framework that reaches many young people, who will soon be in responsible decision-making positions in politics, economics and civil society.

Bring the action – a framework for manifesting the UN Charter in the contemporary world

1. The database

The possibilities of digitization and the experience of virtual spaces must be fully used to create a tangible database for the experiences of contemporary witnesses from the past to make them comprehensible and experienceable. The result is an interactive educational

program that preserves the memory of the origin of the UN Charter in all languages. In addition, all member states should contribute with materials for war prevention and peace, which are reviewed and approved by a neutral and international body within the UN. The result is a modern, digital approach to the UN Charter that makes it communicable and its roots comprehensible.

However, that alone is no more than the database that now needs to be anchored in society.

2. The importance of peace as a compulsory part of school education

Teaching the cautionary voice from the past must be integrated into mandatory educational programs. Mathematics, the national language, history, at least one foreign language, many schools have mandatory modules that are considered indispensable for the education of young people. In order to keep the UN Charter alive for my and future generations, its value and goal, namely world peace, must be elevated to the same essential role in the education of young people.

3. The importance of peace as a compulsory part of university education

In addition, universities must also include the teaching of the value of world peace as a compulsory module for all subjects of study. Because nothing, no progress in academic disciplines promoted by university education, can develop fully if the foundation of a peaceful world order does not exist.

4. Adult education offer

People who are no longer in the traditional education system must also be given the

opportunity to participate in the new era of peace mediation. This is where it becomes critical to promote the novel messaging of the UN Charter and make it available at touchpoints where people from diverse backgrounds and walks of life encounter it. Free news sources focused on trade agreements, treaties, and cooperation actions between countries should be as known as the conflicts carried in the news. The masses need to be reminded that we need to take care of our friends and cultivate new friendships to keep peace.

5. Strengthen international exchange, at all levels

Every participant the education program reaches is invited to share ideas about peacebuilding and peacekeeping in virtual spaces in international and randomly matched groups: the peace rooms. International buddy systems facilitate friendships and build early bridges across cultural differences in the spirit of living people-to-people understanding.

Conclusion

The UN Charter manifests peace as the first goal of the world community. This is the best legacy that the generations before us have left us and it gives hope for a sustainable peaceful international understanding and a thoughtful approach to conflicts, which we urgently need both now and for the future. For the value of this goal to remain comprehensible and understandable for young people, it must be kept alive and maintained in accordance with modern standards. We have the technical possibilities to set up an appropriate program that can reach billions of people. We have an educational mechanism that is obligatory for many young people and whose slight

modification in terms of achieving world peace is justifiable and implementable with the right determination. We are currently seeing our system crumble in unexpected places that frighten many of us. We should not fall exclusively into actionism, but also use existing structures and invest into social innovation and civic engagement.

Preserving the UN Charter for my generation and further generations is only possible through a new kind of education on a fundamental level, that can sustainably bridge that soon there will be no more contemporary witnesses of the wars addressed by its founders. Education is the key to peace.

References

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