

THE GERMAN CHURCHES AND THE NAZI STATE

Background

The population of Germany in 1933 was around 60 million. Almost all Germans were Christian, belonging either to the Roman Catholic (ca. 20 million members) or the Protestant (ca. 40 million members) churches. The Jewish community in Germany in 1933 was less than 1% of the total population of the country.

How did Christians and their churches in Germany respond to the Nazi regime and its laws, particularly to the persecution of the Jews? The racialized anti-Jewish Nazi ideology converged with antisemitism that was historically widespread throughout Europe at the time and had deep roots in Christian history. For all too many Christians, traditional interpretations of religious scriptures seemed to support these prejudices.

The attitudes and actions of German Catholics and Protestants during the Nazi era were shaped not only by their religious beliefs, but by other factors as well, including:

- Backlash against the Weimar Republic and the political, economic, and social changes in Germany that occurred during the 1920s
- Anti-Communism
- Nationalism
- Resentment toward the international community in the wake of World War I, which Germany lost and for which it was forced to pay heavy reparations

These were some of the reasons why most Christians in Germany welcomed the rise of Nazism in 1933. They were also persuaded by the statement on “positive Christianity” in Article 24 of the 1920 Nazi Party Platform, which read:

"We demand the freedom of all religious confessions in the state, insofar as they do not jeopardize the state's existence or conflict with the manners and moral sentiments of the Germanic race. The Party as such upholds the point of view of a positive Christianity without tying itself confessionally to any one confession. It combats the Jewish-materialistic spirit at home and abroad and is convinced that a permanent recovery of our people can only be achieved from within on the basis of the common good before individual good."

Despite the open antisemitism of this statement and its linkage between confessional "freedom" and a nationalistic, racialized understanding of morality, many Christians in Germany at the time read this as an affirmation of Christian values.

Protestant Churches in Nazi Germany

The largest Protestant church in Germany in the 1930s was the German Evangelical Church, comprised of 28 regional churches or *Landeskirchen* that included the three major theological traditions that had emerged from the Reformation: Lutheran, Reformed, and United. Most of Germany's 40 million Protestants were members of this church, although there were smaller so-called "free" Protestant churches, such as Methodist and Baptist churches.

Historically the German Evangelical Church viewed itself as one of the pillars of German culture and society, with a theologically grounded tradition of loyalty to the state. During the 1920s, a movement emerged within the German Evangelical Church called the *Deutsche Christen*, or "German Christians." The "German Christians" embraced many of the nationalistic and racial aspects of Nazi ideology.

Once the Nazis came to power, this group sought the creation of a national "Reich Church" and supported a "nazified" version of Christianity.

The *Bekennende Kirche*—the "Confessing Church"—emerged in opposition to the "German Christians." Its founding document, the Barmen Confession of Faith, declared that the church's allegiance was to God and scripture, not a worldly *Führer*. Both the Confessing Church and the "German Christians" remained part of the German Evangelical Church, and the result was a *Kirchenkampf*, or "church struggle" within German Protestantism—an ongoing debate and struggle for control between those who sought a "nazified" church, those who opposed it, and the so-called "neutral" church leaders whose priority was the avoidance both of church schism and any kind of conflict with the Nazi state.

The most famous members of the Confessing Church were the theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, executed for his role in the conspiracy to overthrow the regime, and Pastor Martin Niemöller, who spent seven years in concentration camps for his criticisms of Hitler. Yet these clergymen were not typical of the Confessing Church; despite their examples, the Protestant *Kirchenkampf* was mostly an internal church matter, not a fight against National Socialism. Even in the Confessing Church, most church leaders were primarily concerned with blocking state and ideological interference in church affairs. Yet there were certainly members of the clergy and laity who opposed and resisted the regime, including some who aided and hid Jews.

The Roman Catholic Church in Nazi Germany

The Catholic Church was not as sharply divided by different ideological factions as the Protestant church, and it never underwent an internal *Kirchenkampf* between these different factions. Catholic leaders were initially more suspicious of National Socialism than their Protestant counterparts. Nationalism was not as deeply embedded in the German Catholic Church, and the rabid anti-Catholicism of figures such as Alfred Rosenberg, a leading Nazi ideologue during the Nazi rise to power, raised early concerns among Catholic leaders in Germany and at the



PHOTO

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, German Protestant theologian who was executed in the Flossenbürg concentration camp on April 9, 1945. Germany, date uncertain.

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Vatican. In addition, the Catholic Centre Party had been a key coalition governmental partner in the Weimar Republic during the 1920s and was aligned with both the Social Democrats and leftist German Democratic Party, pitting it politically against right-wing parties like the Nazis.

Before 1933, in fact, some bishops prohibited Catholics in their dioceses from joining the Nazi Party. This ban was dropped after Hitler's March 23, 1933, speech to the Reichstag in which he described Christianity as the "foundation" for German values. The Centre Party was dissolved as part of the signing of a 1933 Concordat between the Vatican and Nazi governmental representatives, and several of its leaders were murdered in the Röhm purge in July 1934.

Summary

In both German churches there were members, including clergy and leading theologians, who openly supported the Nazi regime. With time, anti-Nazi sentiment grew in both Protestant and Catholic church circles, as the Nazi regime exerted greater pressure on them. In turn, the Nazi regime saw a potential for dissent in church criticism of state measures. When a protest statement was read from the pulpits of Confessing churches in March 1935, for example, Nazi authorities reacted forcefully by briefly arresting over 700 pastors. After the 1937 papal encyclical *Mit*



PHOTO

Catholic clergy and Nazi officials give the Nazi salute

Catholic clergy and Nazi officials, including Joseph Goebbels (far right) and Wilhelm Frick (second from right), give the Nazi salute. Germany, date uncertain.

Bayerische Staatsbibliothek München

brennender Sorge ("With burning concern") was read from Catholic pulpits, the Gestapo confiscated copies from diocesan offices throughout the country.

The general tactic by the leadership of both Protestant and Catholic churches in Germany was caution with respect to protest and compromise with the Nazi state leadership where possible. There was criticism within both churches of Nazi racialized ideology and notions of "Aryanism," and movements emerged in both churches to defend church members who were considered "non-Aryan" under Nazi racial laws (e.g.,

Jews who had converted). Yet throughout this period there was virtually no public opposition to antisemitism or any readiness by church leaders to publicly oppose the regime on the issues of antisemitism and state-sanctioned violence against the Jews. There were individual Catholics and Protestants who spoke out on behalf of Jews, and small groups within both churches that became involved in rescue and resistance activities (for example, the White Rose and Herman Maas).

After 1945, the silence of the church leadership and the widespread complicity of "ordinary Christians" compelled leaders of both churches to address issues of guilt and complicity during the Holocaust—a process that continues internationally to this day.

Author(s): United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, DC

Critical Thinking Questions

What pressures and motivations may have influenced church leaders to support or accept Nazi leadership and ideology?

Investigate the connections between government and organized religion in the history of your country.

Investigate occasions when religious leaders have questioned the ideology or actions of their government.

How can knowledge of the events in Germany and Europe before the Nazis came to power help citizens today respond to threats of genocide and mass atrocity in the world?

Further Reading

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[Christian Complicity? Changing Views on German Churches and the Holocaust \(PDF\)](#)

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