

The German Churches in the Third Reich

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The established Roman Catholic and Protestant (Evangelisch) churches of Germany, with their tax support and civil service ideology ratings, entered crippled into confrontation with the dynamic ideology and policies of the German Third Reich. Nazism was a populist (völkisch) movement, potentially genocidal from its beginnings. The church leaders mistook it for a political party.

Even today some scholars outside Germany write of the Nazi Party's coming to power as triumph of parliamentary maneuvering through which the Party took power legitimately. After the 1923 fiasco on Munich, the so called "Beer Hall Putsch," the NSDAP was said to have abandoned the politics of the coup (Staatsstreich). In truth, however, by assassinations and bombings and beatings and other terrorist tactics, the Party showed its fundamental disloyalty to the Republic and to constitutional government. Its outward behavior, and also inward structure, was predictive of the kind of rule it would exercise if it took control.

What wonder, then, if - in the midst of the massive unemployment, street-fighting, frenzied political demagoguery and mass meetings of the early Depression years - German church leaders were unable to read the scene as clearly as some parse it seventy years later.

The church establishments were neither equipped for confrontation with the state, nor financially able to resist, nor armed with a theoretical (theological) basis for resistance. By the time any unease set in, the Nazi Party had swallowed the State, Adolf Hitler was absolute dictator, and the vibrant program of the Führer was producing economic recovery and a series of international triumphs. The ignominy and shame that had shadowed the Weimar Republic from its beginning were lifted, and one government after another was sending emissaries to deal with "the new Germany."

While diplomats and corporation representatives sought understanding with the new Germany, at the lower level substantial sectors of the peoples of the “Christian” nations, openly antisemitic, warmed to Hitler’s ranting against “the Jews.”

It is difficult today to realize how openly antisemitic political movements and leaders – strong and unembarrassed- played an important role also outside Germany and Austria. Even in the America of Franklin D. Roosevelt (and Father Charles Coughlin) antisemitism was a powerful and dangerous political force. In France, a substantial sector was still unreconciled to loss of face in the Dreyfus Case; they greeted the first Jew ever to serve as French Premier with the bitter words, “Better Hitler than Léon Blum!” In a few short years, Marshal Pétain’s Vichy regime was to give that choice its final logic.

The Roman Catholic Story

The Roman Catholic community in Germany, with a leadership consciously international and universal, responded to the Nazi movement much differently from the Protestants. During the birth of the Empire under Bismarck’s chancellorship, with overpowering position of Prussia, the citizens of several predominantly Roman Catholic provinces were made to feel second-class subjects of the German Emperor (who was also King of Prussia).

During the short-lived Weimar republic, the Center Party, predominantly Roman Catholic in membership, and the Social Democrats held the center against extremists and splinter parties. They were also the chief centers of opposition during the two and a half years of turmoil that preceded President Hindenberg’s call to Hitler (“that Austrian corporal” as he called him) to form a government. Against the substantial force of the German Communist Party (KPD) – controlled by the Kremlin, the minor blocs more or less weakly organized (monarchists, liberals, sectional), and the populist appeal of the Nazis, the alliance of the Center Party (Zentrum) and the Social Democrats had until then held the Republic together.

Until the signing of the Concordat, which the Vatican Secretary of State (Eugenio Pacelli) negotiated with Hitler without informing them, the German bishops regularly refused the rites of the church to Nazi officials. Until then,

the major Christian resistance to Nazi ideology and political force came from the Catholic side.

The Concordant of July 8, 1933, (which governs the relations of the Vatican and Germany to this day) remains one of the debated moments in Hitler's consolidation of power. It is clear that Cardinal Pacelli (later Pope Pius XII) had long had in mind for Germany – where he served as Papal Nuncio from 1918 until called to the Vatican post in 1930 – the model of the 1929 Concordat with Mussolini. The Concordat seemed to be a means to secure the rights and privileges of the Church.

The Führer and his entourage greeted with enthusiasm the successful conclusion of negotiations. The Center Party was liquidated officially and Roman Catholics were no longer discouraged from joining the Nazi Party. Most important, the Concordat gave Hitler his first important international treaty, in the colorful German saying, the Concordat made the former demagogue and street fighter salonfähig (fit for association with decent people.)

The Protestant Story

There was no period of restraint during which the Protestant established churches (Landeskirchen) denied the rites of the church to Party bonzes, although the first martyr of the Confessing Church (Paul Schneider) fell foul of the Party precisely for refusing to allow the rites of the church to be used for a local functionary. Since the 16th century division of the Latin Church, the Protestants theologians and functionaries had defined the Gospel in the vernacular and shaped Christian culture in obedience to the political authority, Obrigkeit. Martin Luther, the 16th Century reformer, had tied the direction of the religious establishment to the princes, and the several Protestant territorial churches never found a secure emotional footing after the Kaiser fled to Holland at the end of World War I.

Most of the Protestant leaders, including a number who like Otto Dibelius and Martin Niemöller quickly became disenchanted, as first greeted Hitler's coming to power with genuine satisfaction. Like all good Germans, they resented the unfair attribution to Germany of sole guilt for the war. Like all

Germans, they recalled the bitter months of starvation and disease that followed the cease-fire, with the deaths of hundreds of thousands who perished between the Armistice of November 11, 1918, and the Versailles Treaty (January 10, 1920) because of the Allied blockade. Even though the United States refused to sign the Versailles Treaty, in their desolation the Germans remembered they had agreed to cease hostilities with specific reference to President Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points – and included America in their view of a hostile surrounding circle of nations.

Like the Roman Catholics, the German Protestants feared the Communist danger. But far more than was the case with the Catholics, on the boundaries between their religious identity and their patriotic loyalty few fences had been erected. Since the 16th century, the divisions in the Latin Church of the West between those loyal to Rome and those loyal to political rulers who functioned as lay bishops had hardened in culture and style of political life.

Each of the established churches in Germany attempted, in its own way, to defend the interests of the institutional church and to “winter through” (durchwinter) the volatile years of the rise and fall of the Third Reich. The early attempt of Hitler to unite them in a National Church, with a single head, was thwarted- the first significant frustration of the program of consolidation and coordination (Gleichschaltung) by which all dimensions of the society were to be brought under Party supervision and the dictatorial control of the Führer. However, although there were worthy individual cases of resistance during the twelve and a half years of the Thousand Years' Reich, and some individual martyrdoms, both establishments fulfilled their expected patriotic duty in support of the regime and its programs.

Although Bishop Theophil Wurm (Protestant) and Cardinal Bertram (Roman Catholic) intervened vigorously in defense of the elderly and handicapped against euthanasia (August 1940), no such firm positions had been taken in defense of the Jews. Beginning in 1935, German citizens who were Jews were systematically deprived of their civil rights and – if they had not gone into exile by 1939 – of their lives.

Neither in the Six Articles of the “Barmen Confession of Faith”, May 29, 1934, issued by the Confessing Church (Bekennende Kirche), nor in the papal

encyclical “Mit brennender Sorge” (“With Deep Anxiety,” March 21, 1937), was the plight of the Jews mentioned. The German Jews were comparatively few in number (less than 5% of the population), and many of them had the resources to flee on time. The massive Nazi genocide of the Jews (“the Holocaust”) followed upon the German invasion of Poland, September 1, 1939, and fell primarily upon the Jewry of East Central Europe. By then the large number of Protestant and Roman Catholic clergy were in the chaplaincy, a few hundreds were in concentration camps, and the work of the local parishes was in the hands of lay people (chiefly older women).

Finishing Unfinished Business

The issue most important for the credibility of Christianity, the relationship to the Jewish people – is the unfinished business of the churches during the Third Reich.

The Roman Catholic change began with Vatican II (1961-65), and with intermediate steps has resulted in the fine encyclical, “We Remember” (March 12, 1998). Carrying on the Barmen tradition, the German Protestants of one territorial church (the Rheinland) released in January 1980 a powerful statement, “Toward the Renovation of Christian-Jewish Relations,” which has been followed subsequently by a dozen other territorial churches in Germany. The Roman Catholic message transcends national boundaries, giving it the same advantage the German Catholics enjoyed in 1933-45. The World Council of Churches, which has developed into a worldwide expression of the concerns of Protestant and Orthodox churches, has issued nothing comparable to “We Remember.” Nor have other Protestant denominations besides the German Protestant Landeskirchen officially acted, although there is an important study document before the United Church of Canada (“Bearing Faithful Witness”).

The awareness that memory of the Shoah remains a deep and unmastered tragedy for Christians and not simply “a Jewish affair”- has yet to find lodging in most Christian churches.

Source: Carol Rittner, Stephen D. Smith & Irena Steinfeldt, *The Holocaust and the Christian World*, Yad Vashem 2000, pp. 44-47