

The Nazis and the Churches

In the year that the Nazis came to power the vast majority of Germans identified themselves as Christians - 67% Protestant and 33% Catholic. All other faiths, including religious Jews, comprised no more than 1% of Germany's population. Protestantism had been central to Germany's identity for several hundred years, especially in the North and East of the country. In 1517 **Martin Luther** had founded Protestantism in Saxony, and Germany's great composer **J. S. Bach** had set Luther's hymns to music in the first half of the Eighteenth Century. When Germany was unified by a series of wars in the years 1864-1871, the new royal family and its chief minister, **Otto von Bismarck**, were staunch Protestants. Germany's Catholics were concentrated in the South, especially in Bavaria, and in the Rhineland, which bordered with France. Catholics had been second class citizens in the years of the monarchy (1871-1918) but during the Weimar Republic (1918-1933) there was greater equality.

For many German nationalists (both Catholics and Protestants), patriotism and religion went hand-in-hand. Traditional conservative moral values were upheld by both Protestant and Catholic Churches, and both had strongly supported the German Armed forces during World War I. But Germany's high levels of religious loyalty became a major problem for the Nazis, especially once they were in power.

Adolf Hitler had been brought up in a deeply Catholic-conservative area on the German-Austrian border, but he had abandoned his faith long before becoming Germany's ruler. Hitler's own views on religion were not particularly central to his development of Nazi ideology. However, many of the other leading Nazis were **pagans**, especially the SS Chief Heinrich Himmler, and Alfred Rosenberg (later Nazi government minister in charge of German-occupied Russia). They had a messy and unconvincing mixture of belief in the German blood and soil (**Blut und Boden**), and a fascination for the myths of the Norse Gods, as celebrated in the operas of **Richard Wagner**. They believed in a mythical ancient race called **The Aryans**, and sent archaeologists to look for evidence of lost cities. Furthermore, many Nazis attacked Christianity for its **Jewish** origins, and also saw the Christian message of forgiveness as being useless for a militarily strong and proud nation. For those German nationalists who had signed up to supporting the Nazi state, but who wished to retain their religious faith, the attitudes of radicals such as Himmler and Rosenberg, were a real concern.



20 July 1933: The signing of the Reich Concordat, allowing freedom of worship to Germany's Catholics, in return for the Catholic Centre Party abolishing itself. Franz von Papen is seated second on the left., Cardinal Pacelli (later Pope Pius XIII) second on right.

Although radicals such as Himmler, Rosenberg, and Martin Bormann (chief secretary of the Nazi Party) wanted to destroy religion, Hitler himself realised that the Nazi project was unachievable without some form of accommodation with the churches. Indeed, the Nazis' disappointing performance in the March 1933 election meant that he would not have got the **Enabling Act** passed by the necessary majority in the Reichstag if the Catholic Centre Party had not voted to support it, joining with Hitler's conservative DNVP allies. Six months later Germany's Catholics were rewarded with the **Reich Concordat**, a deal that allowed Catholic Churches, schools, hospitals and charities to remain open provided that they stayed out of politics. (See text box above.) Below—Hitler and Pope Pius XI.



The structure of the Catholic Church was **hierarchical**, which meant that once the Pope had approved the Reich Concordat, all German Catholic Cardinals, Archbishops, Bishops, Priests and ordinary Catholics had to accept it too.

But the Protestant Church in Germany was far harder for the Nazis to manage because there was no single supreme authority. Each of the 28 districts of the Protestant Church had the freedom to have their own public position towards the Nazis. Various attempts were made to bring all Protestants together, including the appointment of Government Minister, **Hans Kerrl**, and also a "Reich Bishop" **Ludwig Muller**, who tried to create a pro-Nazi Church called **The German Christians**. Kerrl argued that the Old Testament should be abandoned because it was Jewish, and that a more military and heroic version of Jesus should be promoted.

However, Nazi interference in the Protestant Church was totally counter-productive, as a new anti-Nazi group was formed called **The Confessing Church**. The word "Confessing" in this sense means a Declaration of Faith, and it was a deliberate echo of an event in 1530 when the early Protestant Church refused to bow to Emperor Charles V. The Confessing Church and the Nazis were on a collision course.

Division and opposition— The Confessing Church vs The DC

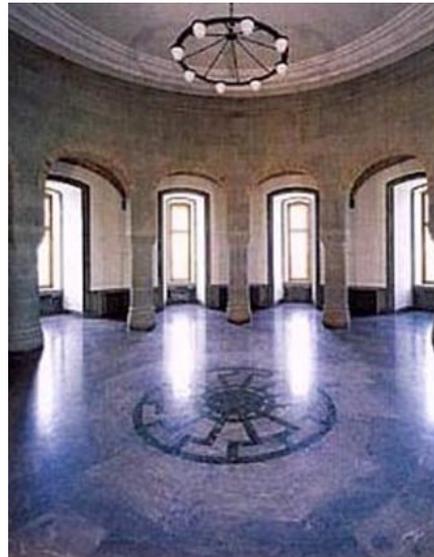


By 1934 German Protestantism had been torn apart between the Pro-Nazi “German Christians” (DC) above and the Anti-Nazi Confessing Church (left).

On 29 May 1934 the **Confessing Church** put itself on a collision course with the Nazi regime through its **Barmen Declaration**, which included the statement “*We reject the false doctrine that the State should and could become the single and totalitarian order of human life.*” Its author, Karl Barth, fled Germany in 1935. A key figure in the Confessing Church was **Martin Niemöller**. Hitler was infuriated by Niemöller as he had been a national war hero in WW I (as a U-Boat captain he had sunk 55,000 tonnes of British shipping in 115 days). From 1936 until the end of World War II Niemöller was held in various concentration camps, but on strict orders that he was not to be executed. Niemöller survived WW II and in the 1950s he co-authored a document accepting the German people’s guilt for Nazi crimes. He admitted that he had supported Hitler back in 1933.



On the margins of the Nazi leadership there was a group interested in establishing a new pagan religion. The “**German Faith Movement**” rejected all forms of Christianity and believed that Germany’s salvation could be found in a mixture of the Occult, Paganism and Old Norse myths. SS Chief Himmler dabbled in this and from the late 1930s he had the Castle at Wewelsburg re-decorated along pagan lines. The “Black Sun” symbol below was laid into the marble floor of a special meeting room where the SS leadership would congregate, and this would become the centre of the world. In reality, Wewelsburg was little more than an oddity and it never became the centre of the Nazi State, although an SS training school was established there.



The Nazis clash with the Catholic Church

In the early years of the Reich the Confessing Church was the main focus for religious opposition to Hitler, while the Reich Concordat with the Catholics appeared to function well in its opening few years. However, from about 1941 anti-religious radicals within the Nazi State, especially **Martin Bormann** wanted to break the Concordat and drive Catholic symbols such as crosses out of state schools.

This Nazi activism played very badly by local Catholics. From the summer of 1941 Germany was at war with Communist Russia, which the Nazis had labelled as an “atheistic enemy of civilisation.” Traditional Catholics in Bavaria (especially women with sons in the army) could not understand why their sons were fighting “Communist atheism” in Russia while Churches were being attacked by the Nazi state in Bavaria.

In his *Popular Opinion and Public Dissent* (1983) the British Historian Ian Kershaw discovered evidence in the German archives that showed the Nazi government being so worried about losing Catholic support that there was a reluctance to prosecute women who broke the law by putting crucifixes back into school rooms and churches.

Hitler’s view appeared to be that a showdown with the churches could be postponed until the war had been won.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer - Protestant theologian and anti-Nazi spy

Bonhoeffer was born into a well-connected and highly educated family. After training as a Protestant Pastor he worked in Latin America, and in the mid 1930s as a minister to German Protestants in London. As early as 1933 he attacked Nazi Anti-Semitism, and unlike some of the churchmen who opposed Hitler, he saw no positive aspects of the Nazi State. A strong supporter of the **Confessing Church** Bonhoeffer also joined organised resistance groups against the Nazi regime, through his brother-in-law, **Hans von Donhanyi**, who was an official in the Foreign Ministry.

From 1940 onwards, Bonhoeffer worked for the Chief of the Intelligence Service of the German Armed forces, Admiral Wilhelm Canaris. This government agency was packed full of plotters against Hitler, and was deeply suspected by the Gestapo. Bonhoeffer and Donhanyi used their positions working for Admiral Canaris in order to try to smuggle Jews from Germany to Switzerland using false papers and illegally acquired foreign currency. In 1943 both were arrested as the Gestapo tracked down and broke up this operation. However, the Gestapo only had an incomplete picture of their resistance activities, and at this stage there was not enough information to try them for treason. However, following the failed army coup attempt against on Hitler on 20 July 1944, the large amounts of documents left by the plotters, including the names of sympathisers, brought Bonhoeffer, Donhanyi and Canaris to the attention of the Gestapo again.

Bonhoeffer and many of his closest associates were transferred to Flossenburg Concentration Camp in February 1945. In April 1945 Hitler instructed that none of those connected to the 1944 plot should be allowed to survive. Bonhoeffer and all his associates were killed in a frenzy of hangings two weeks before the camp was liberated by the US Army.

“Jesus Christ lived in the midst of his enemies. At the end all his disciples deserted him. On the Cross he was utterly alone, surrounded by evildoers and mockers. For this cause he had come, to bring peace to the enemies of God.”

Churchmen who opposed Hitler



Above: Dietrich Bonhoeffer; below the Luebeck Martyrs: top row—Stellbrink and Prassek; bottom row—Lange and Mueller.



The Luebeck Martyrs

In 1942 the German city of Luebeck was one of the first to be bombed by the RAF, as it was easy to locate on the north German coastline. Much of the historic city was destroyed, and as a result the Gestapo became highly alert to any behaviour in the city that showed defeatism or disloyalty.

Johannes Prassek was a Catholic Priest in the city who learned Polish in order to minister to the forced labourers working in the city who had been brought in by the Nazis. He also spoke out against the murder of the mentally disabled, and killings of Jews in the East.

Hermann Lange was another Catholic Priest, his uncle was a Cathedral Dean. He urged young men to reject conscription into the army as it he said it was against their faith to serve the Nazi State.

Edward Mueller, also a Catholic Priest, came from a poor background. He preached to young men against the values of the Hitler Youth, an organisation which he had rejected when it attempted to recruit him.

Karl Friederich Stellbrink was a Protestant Pastor in Luebeck. He had initially been a supporter of the Nazi State but by 1942 he realised that Christianity and Nazism were incompatible. Following the bombing Luebeck on Palm Sunday 1942, he preached that God had spoken to the people of Germany.

In the summer of 1943 all four were tried before the *People's Court* and convicted of defeatism and aiding the enemy. They were guillotined in Hamburg on 10 November 1943.

On that day Stellbrink wrote to his wife: “ I wish all our German compatriots that after these dark, difficult times another time will dawn, where a holy peoples communion will live in love and peace, to heal wounds, comfort the bereaved and to begin the wonderful task of Rebirth in a long, long time of peace!”