

Cross and Swastika: The Nazi Party and the German Churches

To what extent did Christians support Hitler, and for what reasons? Will Saunders investigates.

When considering the relationship between the Nazis and the Christian Churches, it could be assumed that it would be one of barely concealed hostility. Many of the fundamental beliefs of the Nazis should have proved abhorrent to the Christian Churches of Germany. Nazism was a movement based on strength, military might, racial hatred and intolerance towards any forms of weakness. This contrasted starkly with Christianity's espousal of forgiveness, love, charity and humility. Hitler himself condemned the Christian faith by scathingly remarking that, 'taken to its logical conclusion, Christianity would mean the systematic cultivation of human failure'. So it would seem natural that the Christian Churches would stand up against the Nazi regime and resist it as resolutely as possible. In reality, however, the relationship between the Nazis and the Churches was much more ambiguous.

Of course, there were Christians who resisted the Nazis and who often paid for their bravery with their lives. In 1941 Archbishop Galen, the Catholic Archbishop of Munster, spoke out against the Nazi policy of Euthanasia. The ensuing storm of criticism from Catholics led to Hitler halting the killings of handicapped Germans, although approximately 70,000 had already perished. Martin Niemöller, who opposed the takeover of the Protestant Churches by the Nazis, spent many years in various concentration camps from 1937 until the end of the war. A Protestant pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, emerged as one of the leading resisters to the Nazi regime. He forged contacts with the British during the war and also communicated with other resistance groups, such as the Kreisau Circle, in an attempt to facilitate the overthrow of Hitler. He was arrested in 1943 and executed in April 1945. Numerous other priests and ministers spoke out against the Nazis, and 400 Catholic priests were incarcerated in Dachau concentration camp alone by 1945.

Weimar-Phobia

Yet the actions of these dissenters do not represent the behaviour of the main German Churches, which frequently found Nazi policies acceptable enough for them to offer only inaction, or even tacit support, as Hitler came to dominate Germany. One major reason for the appeasement of the Nazis by many Christians was the dislike they felt for the liberal Weimar Government. This can be most easily understood from the Protestant perspective. Since the Lutheran Reformation of the sixteenth century, the heads of the various states within Germany had governed the Protestant Churches. After the unification of Germany in 1871 the Churches became strongly linked to the Kaiserreich and willingly preached the political views of the pre-1914 government, including the militaristic message of the regime. For example, in 1913 the Protestant Journal *Protestantenblatt* argued that 'pacifism is blasphemy against God'. This firm support for the Kaiser's regime made it difficult for many Protestants to accept their country's defeat in 1918, and they deeply distrusted the new Weimar Republic. This was accentuated by the decision of the Weimar government to sever the relationship between the state and the Protestant Churches and stress the individual nature of religion. The Protestant Churches had to be given new constitutions and adjust to an environment in which they were no longer protected by the State.

This upheaval, and the way that socialists and Catholics seemed to benefit most from the new political order, encouraged many Protestant clergy to drift towards the right-wing fringes of politics. Paul Althaus, President of the Luther Society, attacked some of the core liberal values of the Weimar state when he announced he was 'against irresponsibility, contraception and abortion, against the liberal-capitalism and Marxist spirit in economy and society, against deflation of the state, against pacifist effeminacy of political ethos, against the destruction of penal law and the surrender of the death penalty'. Such a hatred of the values espoused by the Weimar state was common amongst Protestants and led many to be involved in attempts to subvert the socialist leanings of the Weimar Republic. In the 1925 Presidential elections, the pastor of a Berlin Church exhorted his parishioners to vote for the nationalist candidate, Hindenburg, rather than a socialist rival, by announcing: 'Today is a day of decision for the German people. Today it must show whether it will return to the old faith'.

On the surface the Weimar Republic could have expected to receive the backing of the Catholic Church. The

Weimar Republic ended the unofficial hostility of the national government towards Catholicism that had been allowed to fester since the time of Bismarck, and the Zentrum (the Catholic political party) became a leading member of every coalition government in the 1920s. The Catholic Church was given the freedom to create new bishoprics, abbeys and over a thousand new religious settlements. However, it still viewed the Weimar constitution with hostility, which can be explained in two ways. Firstly, it appears that the majority of Germans were shocked at their defeat in 1918 and the subsequent Treaty of Versailles. Catholics were no different from other Germans in finding it difficult to accept the Weimar regime, and Archbishop Faulhaber of Munich said the founding of the regime was 'characterised by perjury and high treason'. Secondly, as with many Protestants, it seems that the Catholic Church could not accept the liberal Weimar policies on education, abortion and civil marriages, which offended so many core Catholic beliefs. The Catholic Church found itself unable to support the Weimar Republic despite the political advantages it brought to the Catholic community.

As the Nazi Party emerged as the main opponent of the Weimar regime, Christians had to choose whether to accept it as a viable alternative. Many Christians were sceptical of the Nazis and disliked their association with street violence, aggression and even paganism. However, there was always enough ambivalence about the Nazi Party for it to appear credible, and during the 1920s an increasing number of Christians offered their support to the Nazis, including even Martin Niemöller, who voted for the Nazi Party from 1924 onwards.

One factor behind this was genuine confusion over what the Nazis stood for. One Protestant pamphlet asked, 'What opinion is not represented in National Socialism? Woden worshippers and Lutheran Christians, patriotic agnostics and believing Catholics, conservatives and liberals, aristocracy and proletariat ... nobody knows where it will go'. Hitler was keen to exaggerate the traditional aspects of Nazi policies in order to win the support of the Churches. When necessary he stressed the value he placed on religion's role in defining German values, and in 1933 he described the Churches as the 'most important factors for the preservation of our nationality'. Many Christians were well aware that some Nazis were opposed to their doctrinal beliefs and even favoured neo-paganism. However, Christians were encouraged by the refusal of Hitler to allow these elements within the Nazi Party an influential voice. The Nazi Party ideologue, Rosenberg, was forced to publish his criticism of Christianity, *The Myth of the 20th Century*, privately. Once the Nazis had come to power they recognised seven Catholic feast days as legal holidays and made the teaching of religion in schools compulsory. Storm troopers were encouraged to attend Church services and the numbers of baptisms rose sharply. Despite this there was still scepticism amongst some Christians towards the Nazi Party but enough were prepared to give the new regime the benefit of the doubt for all the main confessional faiths to give it their backing.

The Nazis in Power

The Protestant 'German Christians' were the most passionate supporters of the new regime. The movement had arisen out of the Protestant dislike of the Weimar Republic and represented extreme nationalistic views within the Protestant Church. Its leading theologians were determined to Germanise Christianity and debated issues such as whether Jesus was an Aryan or a Jew, and whether to eliminate the Old Testament as an overtly Jewish book. Although they seem far-fetched, such ideas proved popular and 'German Christians' won a majority in Protestant Church elections throughout Germany in July 1933. Hitler decided to use the 'German Christian' movement to help him 'co-ordinate' the Lutheran Churches, and he secured the election of Reich Bishop Müller as the leader of all 28 Protestant Churches.

There was a bitter backlash from moderate Protestants. The radical theology of the German Christians was attacked and in 1934 Martin Niemöller organised the creation of the Pastors' Emergency League, later known as the Confessional Church. At first Hitler attempted to break the resistance of the rebellious Protestant pastors, and two bishops were arrested. However, the continuing storm of protest led Hitler to back down and the bishops were released. The 'German Christians' remained as a sect within the Protestant Church but their importance declined over the following years. Interestingly, however, this incident does not prove the impossibility of an accommodation between Lutherans and the Nazis. Members of the Confessional Church still approved of some Nazi policies but they had objected to Nazi attempts to control their Church. The Leader of the Confessional Church in Saxony later admitted, 'As much as I sympathised with National Socialism, I felt the bringing of politics into the sphere of the church was wrong.'

The Roman Catholic Church was especially aware of the need to work with the Nazis. The Catholic establishment was conscious that it would always be possible for the Nazis to paint the international Catholic Church as a destabilising force within the German nation, as Bismarck had done during the Kulturkampf of the 1870s. This concern led Rome to fully co-operate with the new government. The Zentrum gave enough support to the Nazis for them to pass the Enabling Law in March 1933. In return the Nazis signed a Concordat with the Vatican in July, which ended organised Catholic participation in politics in return for Church control over its schools and youth organisations. There were factions in Rome who doubted the wisdom of signing the Concordat but others, including the Pope, felt that a clash between Nazism and Catholicism was inevitable and that the Concordat would give the Church a stronger position when that clash finally came.

The danger of initially appeasing the Nazis in return for official recognition was that the Catholic Church found itself trapped into a situation whereby it became determined to defend the rights granted to it under the Concordat against Nazi encroachment but was not willing to endanger the Concordat by standing up to other Nazi policies. In 1936 the Catholic establishment protested about Nazi orders to remove crosses from classroom walls and in 1937 the Pope issued an encyclical, *With Burning Concern*, against Nazi infringements of the terms of the Concordat. Most famously of all, Archbishop Galen preached against the Nazis' euthanasia programme in 1941, leading the Nazis to abandon the large-scale murder of handicapped people. However, the Catholic Church would not condemn the wider excesses of the Nazis, especially when the pro-German Pope Pius XII was elected Pontiff in 1939. Pius condemned the Soviet invasion of Finland in 1939 as 'a cold, calculated crime without parallel', but no statement was made about the Nazi attack on Catholic Poland, even after the murder of four Polish bishops and over 2,000 clerics and nuns. Infamously, the Catholic Church would only offer very vaguely worded condemnations of the Holocaust, such as the Pope's Christmas message of 1942 that mentioned the hundreds and thousands who had been unjustly put to death but blamed neither side in the war for this situation. The Vatican did help many Jews escape from Nazi Europe by providing them with passports and sanctuary and some priests and bishops worked to undermine the Nazis. However, the Catholic authorities would not endanger their relationship with Hitler's regime by openly condemning Nazi policies.

The Evangelical Churches, representing groups such as the Baptists and Methodists, were in a similar position to the Catholics in the early 1930s. They had also faced prejudice under the pre-1914 regime, such as the routine refusal of local authorities to issue passports to Baptists in the 1870s. As a result the Evangelical Churches, like the Catholic Church, had used the First World War as an opportunity to prove their loyalty to the nation, and this course of action left them unwilling to welcome the more tolerant Weimar regime in the 1920s. Gustav Nagel, a leader of the German Evangelical Alliance, which included the main Baptist and Methodist churches, wrote a number of books from 1920 to 1935 that all reflected a desire to see Germany ruled by a single strong leader, who would hold firm against socialism and bolshevism.

The Evangelical Churches were certainly prepared to welcome the Nazi regime in 1933. Pastor Möbius, a clergyman from Schleswig-Holstein, estimated that the majority of evangelicals supported the Nazis by 1932. Another evangelical, Dr Kertz, wrote about the Nazis in 1933 that 'We really have to thank God for the determined will of the government to purify and encourage family life ... Moreover it is a blessing for young people that there is now much more understanding for [the values of] order and discipline, self-denial and dedication to the Fatherland'. The Nazis offered official recognition to the Evangelical Churches in 1933. However, like the Catholic Church, this hindered the ability of the Evangelical movement to criticise the Nazis later in the 1930s, as it was more concerned to maintain this recognition than attack Nazi excesses. At an evangelical conference in Oxford in 1937 German delegates responded to condemnation of the Nazis by other speakers by stating that within Germany they were 'grateful for the full liberty of proclaiming the gospel and for the service to render the ministry of evangelisation, pastoral nurture, social endeavour and the constructive building up of their churches'.

Fear of Bolshevism

As well as desiring to protect Church institutions, many Christians shared at least some of the ideology of the Nazis and welcomed their accession to power. The Catholic Bishop Bürger felt strongly enough to announce that 'The aims of the Reich government have long been those of the Catholic Church'. Foremost amongst those shared aims was a hatred of communism. From 1922 the Bolshevik regime in Russia had systematically eradicated Christianity and thousands of priests and bishops had been executed or imprisoned, whilst monasteries had been completely eliminated. The policies of the Bolsheviks appalled most Christians and these

feeling were heightened during the 1930s because of events in Spain. In the summer of 1936 an extreme left-wing government came to power in Spain and immediately revealed a harsh anti-clerical streak. It is estimated that 12 bishops and over 5,000 priests were executed in the next few months, which was startlingly reminiscent of the persecution that the Church had suffered in Russia.

A hatred of communism became a major point of agreement between all the Churches and Nazism. In 1936 relations between the Catholic Church and the Nazis were deteriorating and so events in Spain and the USSR were used to pressurise the Catholic leadership. An important meeting was held on November 4th 1936 between Hitler and Archbishop Faulhaber of Munich, who was determined to convince Hitler that he should obey the terms of the 1933 Concordat. However, the conversation took a very different course and Hitler informed Faulhaber that 'If National Socialism does not defeat Bolshevism, this will mean the end of Christianity and the Churches in Europe'. The Archbishop accepted the basic tenets of Hitler's arguments and his attempts to protest against Nazi harassment of the Church were brushed aside by the Führer. The consequence of the meeting was the publication of a pastoral letter by Faulhaber which, far from criticising the Nazis, claimed that

Bolshevism has begun its march from Russia to the countries of Europe, especially to our country ... Adolf Hitler saw the march of Bolshevism from afar and turned his mind and energies towards averting this enormous danger from the German people ... The Reich Bishops consider it their duty to do their utmost to support the leader of the Reich with every available means in this defence.

The Nazis were thus able to use the Catholic Church's fear of Bolshevism to limit their opposition to other Nazi policies. This relationship was heightened during the war. As Operation Barbarossa was launched in 1941, Archbishop Jäger condemned the Russians as 'people who had almost degenerated into animals', due to their lack of faith in God. In Rome, Jesuit, Capuchin and Basilian missionaries were made ready to enter the Soviet Union and begin the work of converting the Russians to the Catholic faith. The German embassy in the Vatican reported that the Pope believed it was 'the providential will that Bolshevism should be defeated'.

The Churches and the Jews

All the main Churches in Germany continued to believe that baptism could redeem the soul of a Jew. This undermined the racial policies that Hitler fervently believed in, and so Judaism was constantly linked to Bolshevism to try to win Christian acceptance of Nazi racial ideology. In 1936 Goebbels described Bolshevism as

a pathological criminal madness thought up and led by the Jews for the annihilation of civilised European nations and the establishment of international Jewish world domination ... In fact Bolshevism is the most extreme reign of blood and terror ever seen in the world. Jews thought it up to make their rule unassailable and Jews practise it today.

Far from rejecting this message, the inherent anti-Semitism of many Christians allowed them to accept the racial policies of the Nazis more easily than might have been expected. In April 1933 the Lutheran general superintendent of Brandenburg, Otto Dibelius, made a radio broadcast in which he praised the arrest of 'communist agitators' and defended the removal of Jews from government offices as necessary to reduce their disproportionate influence over German life. The Nazi opponent Bonhoeffer felt that a Jewish question existed, 'which our state must deal with, and without a doubt the state is justified in adopting new methods here'. Bonhoeffer later admitted that he had viewed the Kristallnacht pogrom as 'proof of God's curse on the Jews'. Ever members of the Confessing Church agreed with the Nazis' early stance towards the Jews. Bishop Wurm, who had been arrested by the Nazis in 1934 for opposing the 'German Christian' movement, wrote in December 1938: 'I would not for one moment dispute the state's right to fight Jewry which is a dangerous element. Since my youth I have agreed with the judgement ... about the destructive influence of Jewry on the religious, moral, literary, economic and political spheres'. Martin Niemöller felt legal measures against the Jews were 'tolerable' because

the Jews bore partially the responsibility for the establishment of the Weimar Republic. However, the Confessing Church always maintained that baptism was enough to allow admission into the Church and many of its members rejected the racial emphasis of the Nuremberg Laws of 1935. Whilst it appears that anti-Semitism did lead many German Christians into a tacit acceptance of fascism, it must be remembered that there were many individuals who protested against Nazi policies and were persecuted as a result.

Conclusion

It thus seems that many Christians living in Germany during the 1930s were prepared to appease fascism due to their dislike of the other alternatives. The threat of the virulently anti-clerical bolshevism was a constant reminder to Christians of the calamity that might befall them if their nation was not observant. However, a large proportion of Germany's Christians also disliked more moderate systems of ruling, such as liberalism and socialism, as they promoted values that seemed unacceptable to the major Christian Churches. Faced with this dilemma many Christians were won over by the conservative face of fascism, often in the hope that its more radical policies would never come to pass. This was to prove a terrible error of judgement but one that only hindsight could have helped Christians avoid.

Issues to Debate:

- In what ways did dislike of the Weimar Republic generate support from the Christian churches for the Nazis?
- Which of the Führer's policies were calculated to appeal to Christians?
- What degree of support did Hitler receive from the different Christian denominations in Germany?

Further Reading:

- R. Grunberger, *A Social History of the Third Reich* (Penguin, 1974)
- M. Kitchen, *Nazi Germany at War* (Longman, 1995)
- J. Cornwell, *Hitler's Pope* (Penguin, 1999)
- J. Noakes and G. Pridham, *Nazism 1919-1945*, Volume 2 (Exeter University Press, 2000)
- I. Kershaw, *Hitler, 1889 – 1936: Hubris* (Allen Lane, 1998)

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