

# Religion and resistance in the nazi regime essay



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From perhaps the dawn of mankind, human beings have differed from less sentient beings in many ways; not the least of which is the belief in a higher form of life, a god or creator. This uniquely human characteristic has contributed to the shaping of our concepts of “ good” and “ evil. ” The impact of such system of beliefs has been felt throughout history. Of course there have been evil acts carried out in the name of religion, but it is extraordinary how people who sincerely believe they are following God’s will are willing to put their ways of life, their social standing, or even their very lives at risk.

Therefore, the Nazification of religion during the Third Reich gives one pause, especially when looking at the Reich Concordat between the Vatican and the National Socialist government of Germany. Religion’s passivity to the government of the time is significant because of what many of us have come to expect from so-called Godly persons, and because of the massive influence of religion in Germany. Roughly 95 percent of the German population reported belonging to a religion, and although this number is somewhat discounted by the fact that there were incentives for reporting membership to a religion to the Census, it is nonetheless indicative of a widespread religious influence in the country. Not surprisingly, many people desire an explanation for how religion could possibly have not stood up to Hitler.

Before examining religious resistance, or lack thereof, it is important for the sake of clarity to draw an initial distinction between religious oppression and the extermination of Jews. The Jews were persecuted because they were Jews, not because they practiced Judaism. Anti-Semitism in Germany was

primarily racially based. The Jews had no choice whether or not they were going to be deported to concentration camps; they were forced without question.

Religious persecution was different; Jehovah's Witnesses, for example, were given the choice whether or not to renounce their faith. If they refused, they were marked for deportation to the camps. Even after arriving at the camps, they were often given an open invitation to sign a document renouncing their beliefs, which would be their ticket home. The Jews were not included in the persecution of religion because they were given no such option; they were persecuted regardless of their beliefs. The examination of resistance still cannot be conducted, however, until some definitions are established that will prevent any semantic confusion. All word or phrase meanings in quotation marks are taken from the Oxford English Dictionary.

The task begins with a definition of "resistance" and its counterpart. To resist means to succeed in standing against, or to withstand. To "withstand" means to stand or maintain one's position against, often with the implication that the resistance is successful. Without the success of the position, there is no resistance; there is only an attempt at resistance. This is confusing due to the way in which the word resistance is used colloquially.

We typically think of resisting as putting up a fight, whether it is successful or not. For this paper, however, true resistance will mean establishing a position against the Nazi regime, as well as the success of that position. It does not have to include active militaristic opposition. A position can be

made and be successful without physical confrontation as long as the position is made public.

Otherwise it is simply silent opposition. Lack of resistance, on the other hand, implies that there is no position established initially. This is “passivity,” or yielding to the will of another without resisting; it should not be confused with “pacifism,” which is a political doctrine contending that peace is always a feasible alternative to war as a means of solving disputes. Passive resistance” is the simple refusal to comply with some demand without active opposition.

Passivity carries an entirely different connotation. It is the absence of an established position against something else. Passivity cannot be successful because there exists no position to succeed. This essay examines the attempted resistance and passivity displayed by most religions during the Third Reich, and juxtaposes them to the resistance of the sect who call themselves Jehovah’s Witnesses, who, as this essay will argue, were in fact successful. As a point of preface, it is important to note that not all religious people in Germany during the Nazi era were prone to support Hitler.

Of course there were individuals who maintained their beliefs, and consequently suffered persecution themselves. Even though the vast majority of German churchmen, both Protestant and Catholic, welcomed Hitler’s accession to power, there were individuals who opposed the Nazi regime, which is evident in such documents as the Barmen Declaration. 1 However, those who stood up for the idea that the church must oppose Hitler

were in a minority within even their own church. Others simply stayed quiet, neither agreeing with Hitler, nor making a stand against him.

Those individuals lacked resistance because they failed to establish a position against the Nazi regime. In this sense even many of the individuals who did not share the views of their respective churches did not resist the Nazification of religion. More poignantly, however, is the fact that churches overtly aligned themselves with the Nazis. This essay will consider the two main confessions – Catholics and Protestants – in an investigation of resistance. It will then contrast these religious groups with the Jehovah's Witnesses.

3 Catholics Perhaps the most vivid example of alignment with Hitler is the Reich Concordat, an agreement signed between the Vatican and the National Socialist government of Germany. Responsible for the Concordat was the Cardinal Secretary of State Eugenio Pacelli, who would later become Pope Pius XII. Pacelli, who believed in the unchallenged authority of the Pope over the Catholic Church, desired to establish a relationship with local clergy that essentially gave the Vatican power. This could be achieved by broadly imposing the Canon Code of Law, an interpretive definition of church laws published in 1917, which encouraged the supremacy of the pontiff over the local clergy. As far as Pacelli could determine, the only feasible way to accomplish such an ambitious goal would be a formal alliance between the Vatican and government. Why such a hunger for Germany? The German Catholic population was one of the most powerful, influential and wealthy in the world.

Outwardly, Pacelli's reasons for signing the Concordat were the protection of the Catholic minority and Catholic interests. However, there was no ground for such fears of Nazi persecution due to the historic success of Catholic resistance in Germany. 4 Regardless of Pacelli's true motives, the Reich Concordat destroyed any political opposition to the Nazis by the Catholic Church, leaving the Nazis free to pursue their anti-Semitic policies. 5 Although Hitler promised to allow the churches to retain much of their power, he broke his contract on many occasions.

It is clear that Hitler did not intend to allow the church to interfere in his plans, as is evident with the German Faith movement and the Reich Church Committee. During April 1933 Hitler developed a policy towards the church consisting of three basic principles. First he aimed to prevent the church from having any political influence; secondly, he wanted to avoid a Kulturkampf, i. e. , an open confrontation between church and state; and thirdly, he sought to treat the two confessions (Catholicism and Protestantism) in strict parity.

6 Hitler set out to achieve fruition of this policy by catering to the whims of church leaders while almost covertly indemnifying the promises he made to them. In a speech to the Gauleiters at Nuremberg on September 12, 1938, Hitler's deputy fuehrer Rudolf Hess promised that the government would stay out of church affairs. The purpose of the speech was to make the government seem benign so as to gain support for National Socialism from potential silent opposers. 7 In the meantime, various attempts were being made to find an alternative to the Christian faith. The most notable of these

attempts was Hauer's German Faith movement, which was full of anti-Semitism and adulation of Hitler.

Although such movements gained supporters, they did not have the impact that was hoped. <sup>8</sup> More efficient was the Reich Church Committee, spearheaded by Hanns Kerrl, head of the Reich Ministry of Church Affairs. Kerrl set up committees to administratively filter the agendas of the German Christians, the Confessing Church, and the moderates. The goal of this committee was a state church that would in effect be a synthesis of National Socialism and Christianity. Hitler never fully realized this goal either, but perhaps due to a combination of all of his efforts to Nazify the church, he effectually succeeded in gaining the support of most churchgoers.

The Nazification of Protestantism was not so blatant as that of the Catholics with the Reich Concordat, but for the most part, Protestants also came to align themselves with the German government. The first step in this process was a unification of Protestant churches. Protestants Before Hitler, Germany was quite a religiously diverse nation. According to the 1925 census, 40,014,677 Germans were members of Protestant churches including Evangelical Land churches, Evangelical Lutheran Free churches, Evangelical Reformed Free churches, Moravian Brethren, Mennonites, Baptists, Methodists, various New Apostolic groups, Adventists and other Evangelical religious organizations. <sup>10</sup> In an effort to deal more efficiently with all of these different groups, Hitler suggested that the Protestant churches elect or appoint a national bishop of sorts who would sit in the religious affairs department of the national government.

This idea was met with ecstatic approval, as can be seen in a statement made by the Lutherans to the other churches: Through God's intercession, our beloved German Fatherland has experienced a mighty exaltation. In this turning point in history we hear, as faithful evangelical Christians, the call of God to a closing of ranks and a return, the call also for a single German Evangelical Church...

. The Confessions are its unalterable basis...

. A national bishop of the Lutheran confession stands at its head....

Christ comes again and brings an eternal completion in the majesty of His Kingdom. <sup>11</sup>Most of the Protestant churches jumped on the bandwagon, ignoring the protests of isolated individuals who warned that Hitler was not to be trusted. Not much later, the Central Office of the Federation of Protestant Churches released a memorandum that was indicative of growing anti-Semitic sympathies within the Christian churches. The statement stands as evidence of the churches' allowing themselves to be used as political propaganda by the Nazi regime. <sup>12</sup> Some outcry from members who were able to foresee the consequences of supporting Hitler led to a rethinking of the situation; however, it was too late to do anything about the warnings.

Sensing a reticence on the part of the Lutheran Landeskirchen, the national body of Lutherans, Hitler sent Ludwig Mueller, Reich Bishop, to speak to them. As a result of threats made by Mueller, the Lutherans hastily voted for an unconditional yes to the National Socialist movement and to the new Reich. However, before any action could be taken, a new bishop of the Lutheran federation, Bodelschwingh, was brought in who pledged to make no

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concessions to the new government. However, he eventually fell to pressures from the state, which led to the concession of the church's principles, and a condoning of the Reich as a means of appeasement. 13 Within a short time, the Protestants officially relented in a declaration, the last sentence of which was: " The assembled church leaders stand firmly behind the Reich Bishop and are determined to carry out his measures and decrees in the way in which he desires, to hinder any church-political opposition to them and to confirm the authority of the Reich Bishop with all the constitutional means at their disposal.

" 14The number of individual religiously classified persons besides the Jehovah's Witnesses who suffered persecution to the extent of being seen as a threat to the regime and being sent to concentration camps as a result is essentially nil. This is indicative of the fact that the vast majority of religious people either failed in their attempt at resistance to Hitler, i. e. , relenting their principles to appease him, or failed to make any attempt at resistance in that they never took a stand in opposition to him; they supported Hitler from the beginning, or were silent opposers, too frightened to voice their beliefs. Of the 62, 410, 619 people in Germany excluding the Saarland who were counted in the 1925 census, 1, 140, 957 claimed to be of no religion whatsoever.

15 Subtracting this number to find the total number of religious individuals, 61, 269, 662, it becomes interesting that most of this number of people yielded to Hitler's regime. In contrast, by 1933 the sect known as Jehovah's Witnesses, an organization which at that time was only a few years old, numbered approximately 20, 000 in Germany, and the vast majority of them

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maintained their beliefs to the point of continuing an underground ministry, facing the tortuous camps, or even death. It is even more fascinating when one considers that the sect was given the option of returning to their previous way of life if they would sign a statement renouncing their beliefs.

16 Few took advantage of it. Jehovah's Witnesses The fact that so few renounced their way to freedom is especially significant when one considers that a higher proportion of Jehovah's Witnesses (97 percent) endured some type of persecution than any other religious group.

The forms of persecution ranged from prohibition – membership in the sect was prohibited in: Bavaria on 13 April 1933, Thuringia on 26 April, Baden on 15 May, and Prussia on 24 June – to seizure of property; in April 1935 the Gestapo seized the assets of the Jehovah's Witnesses publishing company in Magdeburg. 17 In 1934 the government formally proscribed the Witnesses to being taken into custody by releasing the following statement: The International Bible Students Union, together with its subsidiary organizations, is prohibited in accordance with par. of the decree of the Reich President for the Protection of People and State of 28 February 1933. ...

This has been necessitated by the agitation of the Jehovah's Witnesses against the institutions of church and state ... 18 In 1935 the government established the harsh principle that it was in the nation's interest to confiscate the children from Jehovah's Witness parents to be brought up as National Socialists. 19 Why, though, did the Nazis choose the Witnesses for such ruthless persecution? Although the Witnesses sent a letter to the German government stating their principles and intentions not to participate in political affairs, 20 they were not believed.

The Nazis saw the sect as a genuine threat politically due to both their international connections (the Witnesses were and are a highly centralized organization; their religious propaganda was disseminated from New York all over the world) and to their messages of apocalyptic prophecies. This was seen as evidence of their alleged following of the Jew Karl Marx and their being proponents of Bolshevism. 1 The Witnesses were almost treated like Marxists, but this categorization was never fully realized due to such adamant denials by the sect, coupled with a shortage of evidence to support the accusation. However, the Witnesses were truthful in their statement about their stand on political affairs. The group believed that they were God's chosen people, and that the Bible warned God's people not to become involved with the affairs of the "superior authorities," as the Bible refers to earthly governments. However, God's people were to obey the "superior authorities" to the extent that the governments did not infringe on their ability to carry out God's will.

They cite the parable of "pay back Caesar's things to Caesar, but God's things to God" 22 as one example of why it is necessary to obey the government. The Nazi government, though, wanted the Witnesses to participate in war and to hail allegiance to Hitler. The Witnesses felt that both of these requests contradicted their beliefs. According to the Witnesses, God was the only one deserving of worship or allegiance, and it was a sin to give oneself to earthly governments. As for war, the Witnesses felt that they were already living forever as the Bible promises God's faithful followers. Therefore, when the Bible says, "

.. And they will have to beat their swords into plowshares ...

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They will not lift up sword, nation against nation, neither will they learn war anymore,” 23 the Witnesses take it literally to mean that they are being commanded by God not to participate in war. Furthermore, when Jesus says, “ ...

all those who take the sword will perish by the sword,” 24 the Witnesses believe that they will be punished by God with death if they disobey that commandment. Since death at the hand of God is eternal, it was more frightening to the Witnesses than death at the hand of Hitler, because they believe God promises to resurrect His martyrs and give them eternal life. The sect believed these tenants so strongly that they refused to give in to Hitler even in the face of death. Still, did the Witnesses resist? Some argue that the Witnesses were pacifists. Many confuse the term pacifists with passivists.

The Witnesses were in a way informally pacifists in that they did not believe in earthly war. However, the term is not appropriately applied to the sect because they do believe in war as long as God wages it, and they have no official doctrine condemning war per se. The Witnesses were also not passivists because they did indeed take a position against Hitler as is evident in the statement of principles they sent to the government as well as the continuance of their missionary work. There are some scholars who argue that the Witnesses were passive because they agreed to work in the concentration camps without putting up a fight. This is not indicative of passivism due to the fact that the Witnesses believed it was God’s will for them to obey the “ superior authorities” as much as they could do so without disobeying God.

Although they quite happily agreed to obey the German government when it came to working in the camps, they refused to comply with orders to discontinue their evangelism. In their literature, the sect denounced the Nazi party, the tone of which becoming sterner as the persecution against them progressed. New devices were found to place their literature with people, such as taking up a peddling license or leaving it on doorsteps in the middle of the night. They also attempted to spread their teachings to the military. The Nazis became aware of the Witnesses' covert ministerial campaigns; according to government sources "the subversive irregularities of these religious fanatics" could be seen to be on the increase. 5 The resistance of the Jehovah's Witnesses continued until the end of the war.

In 1944 fourteen Witnesses were prosecuted before the Berlin Supreme Court for "vicious attacks on the leadership of the National Socialist state" which were supposedly in a writing being distributed by the group entitled "Look the Facts in the Face." 26 After the conclusion of the war and the downfall of the Nazis, the Witnesses, although enormously battered, rose up out of the ashes as victorious in the face of defeat. Conclusion The Catholic Church was passive because it did not take a stand against Hitler. The Protestant Church took a stand initially, but its position failed. It then capitulated to Hitler formally, and thus surrendered any claim to resistance to which it may have otherwise laid claim.

There was indeed no true resistance on part of the two major confessions because their actions did not meet the two requirements for resistance: taking a public stand in opposition, and somehow seeing the realization of the opposition succeed. That the Jehovah's Witnesses took a public stand

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against Hitler in their literature, in letters to the Nazi government, and by organized word of mouth, and that they continued to carry out their religious work underground without compromising their principles, however, is resistance. The success in their attempt at resisting Hitler is seen in the fact that the Nazis were not unable to change the Witnesses, nor were they able to completely defeat them; after the war, the underground movement resurfaced, eventually with even more vigor.