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Hitler, Himmler, and Christianity in the Early Third Reich

Abstract

With the rise of the National Socialist movement, Germany became a hostile environment to many minority groups. Communists, homosexuals, and the Jewish community were all targets of the Nazi Party's aggressive rhetoric and physical assaults, but these actions have often overshadowed the Nazi's persecution of larger majority groups. German Christian communities, both Catholic and Protestant, would eventually be repressed by the Nazi government as well. Why did the Nazis do this? What shaped the Nazi Party's Christianity policy into one of hate and suppression? Both Adolf Hitler's and Heinrich Himmler's personal views on Christianity formed the basis of the Nazi Party's policy towards Christian churches in the early years of the Third Reich.

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With the rise of the National Socialist movement, Germany became a hostile environment to many minority groups. Communists, homosexuals, and the Jewish community were all targets of the Nazi Party's aggressive rhetoric and physical assaults, but these actions have often overshadowed the Nazi's persecution of larger majority groups. German Christian communities, both Catholic and Protestant, would eventually be repressed by the Nazi government as well. Why did the Nazis do this? What shaped the Nazi Party's Christianity policy into one of hate and suppression? Both Adolf Hitler's and Heinrich Himmler's personal views on Christianity formed the basis of the Nazi Party's policy towards Christian churches in the early years of the Third Reich.

Hitler, despite being raised in a Catholic household, was anything but the ideal Christian. His early views towards Christianity were born out of political necessity. He understood the need for the early Nazi Party to attract the majority Christian voters. In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler even states that "by defending myself against the Jews, I am fighting the Lord's Work."¹ Hitler seems to portray himself as a defender of Christianity by fighting against the Jews; this was a cornerstone of Party ideology. In 1920, Hitler and the Party proclaimed, "The Party as such stands for a positive Christianity, without binding itself denominationally to a particular confession."² This statement made it seem as if the Party would support the views of Christian churches. With the ascension of Hitler to the chancellorship in January 1933, Party policy became government policy. In a speech two months later, Hitler stated, "The rights of the churches will not be restricted, nor will their relationship to the state be changed."³ To some extent, this statement by Hitler was true. Hitler was "indifferent to all theological questions."⁴ Hitler's personal disdain for Christianity was never made public.⁵ In fact, he viewed Christian churches as political foes whose power could be used to oppose him.⁶ Hitler desired to establish government control over the Protestant and Catholic Churches and make them politically impotent. Hitler was striving for total control, and his policy reflected that. However, Hitler's view

1. Adolf Hitler, *My Battle*, trans. Edgar Trevelyan Stratford Dugdale (Boston: Goughton Mifflin Company, 1933), 25.

2. National Socialist German Worker's Party, "Programme of the NSDAP," in *The Third Reich and the Christian Churches*, ed. Peter Matheson (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1981), 1.

3. Adolf Hitler, "Policy Statement by Hitler, 23 March 1933," in *The Third Reich and the Christian Churches*, ed. Peter Matheson (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1981), 9.

4. J. S. Conway, *The Nazi Persecution of the Churches: 1933-45* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 2.

5. John S. Conway, "Between Cross and Swastika: The Position of German Catholicism," in *A Mosaic of Victims: Non-Jews Persecuted and Murdered by the Nazis*, ed. Michael Berenbaum (New York: New York University Press, 1990), 181.

6. *Ibid.*, 3.

was not the only prominent one within the Party hierarchy.

Himmler, like Hitler, was raised Catholic and remained so at least until 1924, when he began to doubt Christianity.⁷ Around this time, Himmler also became “increasingly preoccupied with works that, in his views, dealt with occult phenomena in a serious ‘scholarly’ way.”⁸ Himmler’s personal beliefs were transformed by Teutonic and Germanic myths, which supported the superiority of the German race, and many occult ideas.⁹ He was obsessed with the idea that Germans were superior to all other races by blood right. Himmler became “violently anti-Catholic and anti-Christian, substituting for the faith...those particular superstitions...that suited his Germanic prejudice.”¹⁰ He desired Germany to be restored to its mythological roots, free of Christianity. Christianity directly opposed Himmler’s “demographic revolution” and, as a result, needed to be eliminated by any means necessary.¹¹ These beliefs became the policy of Himmler’s SS and would result in the SS distancing itself from and openly attacking the Church. Overall, Himmler was prepared to purify Germany of Christianity by using the security institutions of the state.

How and why did the Nazis’ policy towards Christian churches change from a carefully played political game into an all-out ideological assault? Hitler’s politically pragmatic approach to the churches would prove to be rather unsuccessful. In 1933, two important moves were made: the negotiations of the Reich Concordat with the Roman Catholic Church in Rome and the creation of the German Evangelical Church. The initial reaction of the Catholic Church to Hitler’s accession to power was unenthusiastic, at best. They had been denouncing the Party and its ideology for a while and faced the prospect of coming into direct conflict against the legitimate German government.¹² Vice-chancellor Franz von Papen, with the approval from Hitler, spearheaded negotiations for a concordat with the Catholic Church to ease any existing tensions.¹³ Negotiations were successful and the concordat was signed on July 20, 1933.¹⁴ The concordat proved to be extremely useful to the Nazi Party as article 31 of the concordat failed to define the role of Catholic organizations. The article promised that “the property and activities of those Catholic organizations and the associations whose aims are purely religious, cultural, or charitable...will be protected.”¹⁵

7. Roger Manvell and Heinrich Fraenkel, *Heinrich Himmler: The Sinister Life of the Head of the SS and Gestapo* (New York: Fall River Press, 1965), 9.

8. Peter Longerich, *Heinrich Himmler*, trans. Jeremy Noakes and Lesley Sharpe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 77.

9. *Ibid.*, 80-81.

10. Manvell and Fraenkel, *Heinrich Himmler*, 50.

11. Longerich, *Himmler*, 267.

12. Ernst Christian Helmreich, *The German Churches under Hitler: Background, Struggle, and Epilogue* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1979), 237.

13. *Ibid.*, 240.

14. *Ibid.*, 245.

15. The Catholic Church and The German Reich, “Concordant Between the Papacy and the Third Reich, 20 July 1933,” in *The Third Reich and the Christian Churches*, ed. Peter Matheson (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1981), 32.

However, the same paragraph did not define what qualified as purely religious; the Nazis would take advantage of this loose definition in later moves against Catholic organizations.¹⁶ The concordat on the whole did little more than appease the Catholic leadership both in Germany and abroad. Overall, Hitler “saw [the concordant] as a way of ending the church’s meddling in politics.”¹⁷ Ultimately, the Reich concordant reduced the Catholic Church’s power to resist the Nazi government.

Hitler’s plans for the Protestant churches of Germany also fit his politicized view of Christianity. German Christians themselves deemed it necessary to reorganize in 1933.¹⁸ These changes resulted in the creation of a German Evangelical Church, otherwise known as the Reich Church. Although a united church could prove to be a political opponent, Hitler’s plan was that “once that leadership was established, political control could then be applied to make the whole Church an instrument of the Nazi party.”¹⁹ In line with this policy, Ludwig Müller, a confidant of Hitler’s, was eventually installed as Reich Bishop after a long period of infighting amongst the Evangelical churches.²⁰ Following Müller’s installment, German Christians “were determined to press ahead with their programme of revival and renewal within the Church.”²¹ This program entailed becoming more radical and in line with the Nazi Party’s ideology, which resulted in unrest throughout the Evangelical Church and in opposition of the Party-supported Reich Church by some factions.²² Overall, politically reorganizing the Evangelical Church was no longer serving Hitler’s needs. There was too much squabbling and discontent within the churches for them to be reliable puppets of the state. Now the ideological leadership of the people would have to fall on the Party itself. Thus, the local organizations of the Nazi government were now free to intensify its propaganda against the churches.

Hitler’s policy of political support had accomplished its goal; both the Catholic and Protestant Churches in Germany were deprived of their political power. The Party’s ideology was now to be forced upon all of Germany. The Party’s hostility towards Christianity would become more apparent as “anti-clerical attacks were no longer discouraged, and lip-service ceased to be paid to Christian traditions.”²³ The Party and its organizations began to undergo a process of deconfessionalization.²⁴ It was time to “rid Germany of all ‘Jewish’ filth and priestly twaddle.”²⁵ This new policy aligned more with Himmler’s per-

16. Ibid.

17. Helmreich, *German Churches*, 256.

18. Ibid., 133.

19. Conway, *Nazi Persecution*, 34.

20. Ibid., 37.

21. Ibid., 36.

22. Helmreich, *German Churches*, 150-1.

23. Conway, *Nazi Persecution*, 56.

24. Helmreich, *German Churches*, 217.

25. Conway, “Between Cross and Swastika,” 180.

sonal beliefs. From the beginning, he took steps to purge the SS of any Christian elements. In 1934, he insisted that active members of the clergy must quit the SS.²⁶ In September 1935, he banned SS members from holding leadership roles in religious communities.²⁷ He also banned the SS from sponsoring lectures on Christianity and the practices of any confession.²⁸ Overall, Himmler wanted his SS to be free of Christian influence and to stay true to the Germanic traditions he idolized.

The Nazi Party as a whole began to significantly distance itself from Christian churches. All church services were placed under regular surveillance by the Gestapo.²⁹ On July 20, 1934, the Ministry of the Interior decreed that church newspapers were banned from describing themselves denominationally and that “no longer was there to be a Catholic press or an Evangelical Press, but only a German press.”³⁰ The Churches were subjected to a law against attacks on state and Party in December 1934.³¹ Party member withdrawals from the churches peaked from 1937 to 1939.³² The state also targeted the Catholic Church in trials which were largely for alleged sexual misconduct and homosexual activity.³³ These cases were used widely as propaganda by the government.³⁴ By 1938, all clergy who were members of the Party were required to give up their positions in their church.³⁵ The *Röhm Putsch* in June 1934 was used by the SS as a pretext for assaults on the Catholic Church, which resulted in the murder of many of the Catholic Church’s anti-Nazi leaders.³⁶ The greatest assault by the Nazis on the churches took place in education. The regime launched a program to transform denominational schools into secular institutions. Catholic organizations that targeted youth were banned during 1937 and 1938.³⁷ Crosses and crucifixes were removed from all schools.³⁸ By 1939, it was said that all denominational schools had been eliminated.³⁹ As a whole, the Nazi persecution of the Churches resulted in the weakening of each churches’ ideological control of the German people.

The Nazi’s persecution of Catholic and Protestant churches was a classic power struggle. At first, the Party followed Hitler’s politically pragmatic policy of placating the Churches while undermining their political power. Once politi-

26. Longerich, *Himmler*, 219.

27. *Ibid.*

28. Helmreich, *German Churches*, 218.

29. Conway, *Nazi Persecution*, 69.

30. *Ibid.*, 62-3.

31. Helmreich, *German Churches*, 286.

32. *Ibid.*, 220.

33. Longerich, *Himmler*, 221.

34. *Ibid.*, 222.

35. Conway, *Nazi Persecution*, 160.

36. *Ibid.*, 92-3.

37. *Ibid.*, 173.

38. Helmreich, *German Churches*, 289-90.

39. Conway, *Nazi Persecution*, 182.

cal dominance had been achieved, the churches were no longer needed, and the Party turned to a more radical and aggressive policy spearheaded by Himmler. This policy sought to eliminate Christianity from the Party and Germany and these policies would only continue to escalate in their severity throughout the early years of the Second World War. With the fall of the Third Reich, the German Christians were left, along with all the others who were persecuted by the Nazis, to deal with the scars and memories of Nazism.