

## IV. History

# Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Role in the German Resistance

by Elke Fimmen

April 11—On April 9, 1945, 80 years ago, the resistance fighter and Protestant theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer was executed in the Flossenbürg concentration camp. On the 50th anniversary of his death, the article reprinted here was [published](#) in the German weekly, *Neue Solidarität*, No. 14, April 5, 1995, by Elke Fimmen, scholar and longtime political leader in the Bürgerrechtsbewegung Solidarität (BüSo), the Civil Rights Movement Solidarity, the German political party founded by Helga Zepp-LaRouche in 1992.

On April 5, 1945, at the midday meeting with Hitler, it is discussed which of the remaining personalities of the German resistance movement should survive and who should be eliminated at all costs. On April 7, the commandant of the Berlin prison on Prinz-Albrecht-Straße, Wilhelm Gogalla, equipped with the authority of a secret Reich state matter, orders the transport of those who are to survive to the south. Among them are the former finance minister and Reichsbank chief, Hjalmar Schacht, who had arranged for British Central Bank chief Montagu Norman's support for Hitler's seizure of power; the former chief of staff of the German Army High Command Franz Halder; Bogislaw von Bonin; the family of former Austrian Chancellor Kurt von Schuschnigg; General Alexander von Falkenhausen; Vassily Kokorin (the nephew of Russian Foreign Min-

ister Molotov); the Englishmen Payne Best and Hugh Falconer; and Protestant pastor Martin Niemöller, who would play an important role in the Protestant Church in Germany after the war.

On the same day, a summary court martial begins in the Flossenbürg concentration camp against former

head of the *Abwehr* (German intelligence service) Admiral Wilhelm Canaris, Colonel Hans Oster, Gen. Karl Sack, Ludwig Gehre, a man named Strünk, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The proceedings are delayed, however, due to Bonhoeffer's absence. Bonhoeffer had inadvertently been included among those who, according to Hitler's instructions, were to survive and be taken south. He was taken from Schönberg in the Bavarian Forest back to Flossenbürg. There he was executed along with the others on Monday, April 9, 1945, at the age of 39.

It is likely that at the last minute Hitler selected those whom he could potentially use because of their reputation and connections to foreign countries, in order to gain a better starting position for himself after the capitulation. However, it should

not be overlooked that with this selection he was also acting in the interests of those forces within the British elite who had repeatedly refused to support the German resistance against Hitler throughout the entire war; the resistance would not have been in line with the geostrategic plans of those who had supported Hitler's seizure



Rotraut Forberg (Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz)

Dietrich Bonhoeffer in 1939.

of power. Germany and Russia were to destroy each other, and a weak continental Europe could then be manipulated at will.

If this seems exaggerated, let us recall the internal memorandum of Sir John Wheeler-Bennett, a well-known British political operative, written immediately after the failed assassination attempt of July 20, 1944. In it, he wrote that it was to the advantage of the British if the purges continued:

By the failure of the plot we have been spared the embarrassments, both at home and in the United States, which might have resulted from such a move, and, moreover, the present purge is presumably removing from the scene numerous individuals which might have caused us difficulty, not only had the plot succeeded, but also after the defeat of Nazi Germany.... The Gestapo and the SS have done us an appreciable service in removing a selection of those who would undoubtedly have posed as “good Germans” after the war.... It is to our advantage therefore that the purge should continue, since the killing of Germans by Germans will save us from future embarrassment of many kinds.<sup>1</sup>

One of these “good Germans” was Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He is certainly one of the most impressive personalities of the resistance movement, which consistently opposed the inhuman brutality of National Socialism from the very beginning.

## His Life

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was born in Breslau on February 4, 1906, the fifth of eight children. His father was the well-known professor of psychiatry Karl Bonhoeffer, who six years later took over the chair of psychiatry and the management of the Berlin Charité. Bonhoeffer’s mother, Paula, was born von Hase. She had passed the teacher’s exam and taught her children herself, because she believed that Germans had their backs broken twice in life, “once at school and once in the military.” The parental home was characterized by a classical humanistic education. The father read to the children from



*Dietrich Bonhoeffer (left), his friend and later biographer Eberhard Bethge (playing flute), and some young members of the Dohnanyi family, singing Christmas carols in 1940 at the Kloster Hotel in Ettal.*

the works of the great classical authors. They cultivated music intensively at home. Dietrich Bonhoeffer almost pursued a career as a concert pianist, due to his love of music and great virtuosity. Empty talk was frowned upon in the Bonhoeffer home, so the children were accustomed to making strict demands on themselves.

Bonhoeffer’s decision to study theology was largely influenced by the First World War and the subsequent radical social and political changes in Germany, which led him to seek answers to the fundamental questions of human existence. His family was not influenced by the church; on the contrary, although there were theologians on his mother’s side of the family, including a court chaplain to Wilhelm II, the Protestant Church in Prussia was not popular due to its intellectual narrowness. Therefore, Dietrich’s decision to become a theologian was not necessarily met with enthusiasm at first. His father thought that he was “actually too clever for that.”

The First World War and the turmoil of the Weimar Republic also shook the Bonhoeffer family. One of the two brothers who had volunteered for the front was killed in action. In 1929, Dietrich commented on the social and psychological effects of this period, which had produced very different generations: “First of all, those whose developmental and maturing period occurred before the war began, then those who matured earlier or later as a result of the war, then the generation of the revolutionary youth, who came of age in the years from 1918 to, say, 1923, and finally, not to be forgotten, those who will inherit the future

1. Quoted from P. Meehan, *The Unnecessary War*, and Giles McDonogh, *A Good German: A Biography of Adam von Trott zu Solz*.

and who know only hearsay about the war and the revolution. Thus, the rapid succession of events has produced four intellectual generations in less than 20 years.”

He began studying theology in Tübingen in 1923. From 1924 he studied in Berlin, with, among others, Adolf von Harnack, who had been emeritus since 1921 but still held seminars for selected students on questions of church history in his private home. Bonhoeffer and Harnack were practically neighbors, and Dietrich quickly succeeded in gaining access to this circle. A fellow student later wrote: “Even at the first meeting, Dietrich Bonhoeffer caught my eye. Not only did he tower above us in theological knowledge and ability, but what passionately attracted me to Bonhoeffer was the realization that here was someone who not only learned ... but also thought independently and already knew what he wanted and was also willing to do what he knew.” Later, Dietrich studied the theology of Karl Barth, which was the opposite of his own. In 1927, he received his doctorate under Reinhold Seeberg with a thesis on “*Sanctorum communio*” (the communion of saints). Just three years later, he habilitated with the work, “Act and Being, Transcendental Philosophy and Ontology in Systematic Theology,” in which he discussed Rudolf Bultmann and Martin Heidegger, but also Barth.

When he began his studies, he did not see himself as a “man of the church” at all, but as a theologian—a theologian who rarely attended church services. A visit to Rome in 1924 gave him, who was always a stranger to the institution of the church itself, a “concept of church” for the first time. Equally important was his experience of specific church work during his theological studies. He decided to become a pastor and completed this training in 1930, after a vicariate in Barcelona with the local German community. However, since he was only 24 years old and therefore had not yet reached the prescribed age for ordination, he decided to take a one-year study visit at Union Theological Seminary in New York.

This stay in the United States of America at the height of the world economic crisis certainly left a lasting impression on him. He was not particularly impressed by the studies in theology, for he was accustomed to systematic interpretations. He was of the opinion that theology was rather interpreted there, as one needed it. He was more touched by his contact with the population of Harlem, with whom he came into contact through his

Black fellow student Frank Fisher. Bonhoeffer’s close friendship with Fisher was by no means a matter of course, despite the college’s open-mindedness.

Fisher took him to Howard College, the Black university of Washington, D.C. There, Bonhoeffer came across writings by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), which advocated for the civil rights of Blacks. He spent almost every Sunday in Harlem at the Abyssinian Baptist Church, where he took part in the service and in community life. He took all the recordings of spirituals he could get hold of back to Germany. Later, his pastoral candidates were to hear them in the seminary of the Confessing Church in Nazi Germany.

Upon his return to Germany, he began his presentations as a private lecturer at the University of Berlin, where Romano Guardini was teaching at the same time. Bonhoeffer also took on a position as a student pastor and taught a confirmation class in the Berlin working-class neighborhood of Wedding, where his experiences in Harlem greatly benefited him. In his theological work, he also sought to combine theology and church practice, which already qualified him as an outsider at the university.

Some of his church superiors encouraged him to become involved in the ecumenical movement. In 1931, he was appointed one of three international secretaries of the Ecumenical Youth Movement at the “World Alliance” in Cambridge.

## The Church Struggle Begins

At the time, many theology students at the Berlin University were already supporters of the Nazi Party. It became increasingly difficult to hold open discussions. The Protestant church hierarchy openly sympathized with Hitler. In 1933, the General Superintendent and later Bishop of Berlin, Martin Dibelius, declared his support for Hitler’s emergency decree with the words: “When the life or death of the nation is at stake, then state power must be used vigorously and powerfully, whether it be externally or internally. The church must not hinder the rightful power of the state when it does what it is called to do. Not even when it acts harshly and ruthlessly.”

When Bonhoeffer gave a lecture on the “Jewish Question and the Church” to Protestant pastors in Berlin three weeks after the Nazi takeover, he was almost alone in the room after presenting his main theses. He had argued that the church should not stay out of



German Federal Archives

*Bishop Hossenfelder delivers the address for the grand celebration of Luther Day on the ramp of the Berlin Palace in Lustgarten, November 19, 1933.*

politics when the state suspended fundamental human rights. There were three possible courses of action: first, to question the state about its responsibility; second, to serve the victims, even “if they do not belong to the Christian community”; and the third possibility was, “We are not to simply bandage the wounds of victims beneath the wheels of injustice, we are to put a spoke into the wheel itself.” Now the time of open confrontation started, and here Bonhoeffer showed himself to be one of the spiritual leaders of the resistance, standing on the side of “the weak in spirit” of the Sermon on the Mount and thus openly declaring war on the brutal power ideology of the National Socialists.

He fought resolutely against the “German Christians.” When they won 70 percent of the vote in the German church elections of 1933 with Hitler’s support, thereby dominating the Protestant Church, Bonhoeffer, together with 2,000 other priests at the infamous “Brown Synod” in Wittenberg that September, fought with a leaflet campaign against the acceptance of the so-called “Aryan paragraph.” That paragraph forced the church into line with the Nazi state. The *Reichskirche* (imperial

church) under Reichsbischof Müller accepted this, and thus priests, vicars, and parish workers who had converted from the Jewish faith were excluded from the activities of the Protestant Church.

This untenable situation led Bonhoeffer to accept a vicariate in London with the German expatriate community. There he helped the first German emigrants to gain a foothold in England. He tried, with success, to split the German Church abroad from the Reich Church and to persuade it to support the Confessing Church, which was founded in 1934. He fought for its recognition in the ecumenical movement and for a condemnation of the

Reich Church. In April 1934, for example, he attacked the slowness of the ecumenical organizations in a letter to the General Secretary of the World Alliance for the Work of Friendship of Churches: “You just have to decide once and you can’t wait forever for a sign from heaven. Right here it’s now or never. If the ecumenical movement does not understand this, then the ecumenical movement is no longer church, but a useless



German Federal Archive

*Church election on July 23, 1933, in Berlin. Election in St. Mary’s Church on Neuer Markt.*



association in which fine speeches are made. In Germany today, commitment is required, and commitment is also required for the ecumenical movement.” The indecisiveness of the ecumenical institutions led him to resign his ecumenical offices in 1937.

When he decided to return to Germany in 1935, he had received an invitation from Mahatma Gandhi to come to India. He rejected the invitation, as well as the opportunity to stay in England, because he wanted to fulfill his obligations in Germany. At the time, he wrote to his sister, “I am leaving reluctantly, but that for very bourgeois reasons of safety. One must not let these grow, otherwise life is no longer worth anything and no longer brings joy.”

## Return to Germany

Bonhoeffer accepted the call of the Old Prussian Council of Brothers to lead a preaching seminar in Finkenwalde, near Stettin, which the Emergency Church League of the Confessing Church had set up. He began



German Federal Archives

*Bonhoeffer on a weekend retreat with confirmands of the Church of Zion congregation (1932).*

Evangelical Lutheran Church in Germany in opposition to the uncompromising *Bruderräte* (Councils of Brethren). The former wanted to work with the state church committees and save the privileges of a church of the people and the state. Those committees were until then dominated by the “German Christians,” and cooperation amounted to “affirming the National Socialist incarnation on the basis of race, blood and soil.” A saying of Bonhoeffer from this time clearly expresses his determination and that of his fellow campaigners not to give in: “Whoever knowingly separates from the Confessing Church separates from salvation.”

As of December 1935, any church group not under state supervision was declared illegal, and so the seminary was illegal too. Nevertheless, work continued. On August 29, 1937, all institutions of the Confessing Church were banned. The seminary in Finkenwalde, which Bonhoeffer had continued under illegal conditions, was closed by the Gestapo. For almost two more years, Bonhoeffer continued to train candidates for the ministry in so-called “collective vicariates” in the flat countryside of Pomerania, until

these too were dissolved by Himmler in 1940. He himself was banned from teaching at all German universities from 1936, and from 1938 he was banned from residing in Berlin, although this was relaxed due to his family situation. In 1940, he was banned from speak-



Rotraut Forberg (Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz)

*On his way back to Germany from the U.S.A. in 1939, Bonhoeffer visited his sister Sabine in London.*

this work in April 1935 with 23 candidates. In connection with this, he founded the *Bruderhaus* (House of Brethren) as a Protestant community.

In 1936, the Confessing Church also split. A broad compromise-minded wing formed the Council of the

ing in public, and a year later he was forbidden from publishing any of his writings.

When the synagogues in Germany were burning on November 9, 1938, Bonhoeffer's sister and her Jewish husband, Gerhard Leibholz, had already emigrated to England. In order to keep Dietrich from being drafted by the Wehrmacht and to avoid his flat refusal to serve in the face of the impending war, his family used their connections to try to obtain a short-term deferment from military service and to get him a visa to travel abroad to the United States. His friends there, who did everything they could to help him get to the United States, made it possible for him to go on a lecture tour.

He received an invitation to Union Theological Seminary in New York, where he had already studied for a year in 1929-30. However, his concern about developments in Germany, and the realization that he was fleeing from his responsibility there by taking this path, which was personally convenient, made him return after just a few weeks, shortly before the outbreak of war. At that time he wrote: "I have come to the conclusion that I made a mistake when I came to America. I must live through this difficult period of our national history with the Christians of Germany. I will have no right to participate in the restoration of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people."

As he writes in the same letter to Reinhold Niebuhr two weeks before the outbreak of war, "Christians in Germany face the terrible alternative either of consenting to the defeat of their nation so that Christian civilization may live, or of consenting to victory and thereby destroying our civilization. I know which of these alternatives I must choose; but I cannot make this choice while I am safe."

He faced this seemingly hopeless alternative in a very practical way after his return. Although he prayed "for Germany's defeat," he also worked to defeat Hitler and his clique in order to rebuild a new, just post-war order based on the principles of human dignity that

would be respected by all nations.

## Activities in the Resistance

Bonhoeffer had been familiar with the plans for resistance to Hitler since 1938 through his brother-in-law Hans von Dohnanyi. Presumably, the trip to the United States also served to explore connections for the resistance. After his return, Bonhoeffer took an active part in the resistance plans of the group, which was led by Admiral Canaris, the head of military defense intelligence. Dohnanyi, until then an advisor to the Minister of Justice Franz Gürtner, had been assigned by Canaris to his closest colleague, General Hans Oster. Oster collected evidence of the crimes of the Hitler regime for "Day X." Dietrich's other brother-in-law, Rüdiger Schleicher, and his brother Klaus, who was the legal advisor at Deutsche Lufthansa at the time, were also part of this group. Klaus and Dietrich were the contact persons for the "White Rose" underground in Munich.

Dietrich officially remained in the service of the Confessing Church, while at the same time being employed as a civilian in Abwehr intelligence. He was assigned to the Munich office, where Josef Müller (known as

"Ochsensepp," who later became Prime Minister of Bavaria) also worked. Officially, it was said that Bonhoeffer was needed because of his good international ecumenical relations. Now he was no longer registered with the Gestapo or the military and was able to move around freely again and travel to Sweden, Switzerland, and Rome as a courier for the Abwehr. During his stays in Munich, he lived and worked in the Benedictine Abbey of Ettal.

Since all previous plans for a coup against Hitler had failed, and Hitler had all the successes on his side—partly because of the "appeasement policy" of the West—it had become urgent for the resistance to make new contacts abroad and to explore the peace objectives on the Allied side. In the Spring and Fall of 1941, Bonhoeffer traveled to Switzerland to estab-



Photographie Tita Binz

*Admiral Wilhelm Canaris*

lish contacts with England through his church connections. However, these were not taken up by the English side. At the time of his return, the first major deportations of Jews began. Together with F.J. Perels, the legal advisor of the Confessing Church, Bonhoeffer wrote a report for opposition military leaders to urge them to speed up their preparations for a coup. He also helped in an action by Canaris to bring a small group of Jews to Switzerland.

In 1942, Bonhoeffer and Helmuth von Moltke visited Norway on behalf of Canaris to encourage the church resistance there. That same year, he met his old friend, Bishop of Chichester George Bell, in Sweden. He gave him exact details of an upcoming coup. In the event of a coup, the English leadership was to give the rebels the opportunity to form a government. Bell, who passed this information on to Foreign Minister Anthony Eden, received a refusal. They did not want to have anything to do with it. A subsequent trip to Rome together with Dohnanyi, where they had hoped for an answer from London, was also unsuccessful.

In 1943, Bonhoeffer became engaged to Maria von Wedemeyer. Shortly before, Gerhard Schmidhuber, the consul in Munich and Bonhoeffer's superior at the local defense office, had been arrested for irregularities in foreign exchange transactions. The Reich Security Main Office (RSHA, *Reichssicherheitshauptamt*) and Himmler personally, who had long been looking for a pretext to thoroughly examine Canaris's Abwehr and bring it under their control, now had a convenient opportunity. The investigations were also extended to Berlin. Finally, on April 5, Bonhoeffer, Dohnanyi, and Müller were arrested. Bonhoeffer was taken to the Wehrmacht prison in Berlin-Tegel.

At first, Canaris managed to cover his tracks. Dohnanyi, Müller, and Bonhoeffer had already agreed on what they would say in the event of arrest. They



*Hans von Dohnanyi*

hoped for a resolution of the case and prepared for the repeatedly postponed trial. The chief court martial investigating councillor, Manfred Roeder, was eventually removed from the proceedings by promotion. His successor declared that he would not investigate the matter further.

With the failure of the assassination attempt of July 20, 1944, however, there was little hope left for the resistance. Those directly involved in the July 20 plot were executed immediately, including Bonhoeffer's uncle, the city commandant of Berlin, Paul von Hase. In early October, Klaus Bonhoeffer and Rüdiger Schleicher were arrested for their involvement. Bonhoeffer then dropped an escape plan so as not to endanger his family further. Meanwhile, to make matters worse, Abwehr files had been found that proved, among other things, that Oster, Dohnanyi, and Bonhoeffer had also been involved in the conspiracy since 1938. Hitler revoked the order for immediate liq-



German Federal Archives, Bild 151-58-16 / CC-BY-SA

*Carl Goerdeler, former mayor of Leipzig, in 1944 before the People's Court. Goerdeler, who had turned away from Hitler and tried to protect Leipzig's Jews, was one of the conspirators against Hitler.*

uidation in order to pursue the spread of the conspiracy more carefully.

On October 8, 1944, Bonhoeffer was taken from the military prison in Tegel by the Gestapo and transferred to the prison of the Reich Security Main Office on Prinz-Albert-Straße. Those who had been able

to protect him in the military justice system, such as the military judge Karl Sack, Canaris, and Oster himself, were now sitting just a few cells away. Hans von Dohnanyi and Carl Goerdeler were also there.

Bonhoeffer was now considered someone from whom important information about foreign church relations could still be obtained. He was assigned to the group that was to be saved for further interrogation. After heavy air raids, he was taken to Buchenwald in February 1945 for this purpose, along with other prominent prisoners. In Berlin, Klaus Bonhoeffer and Rüdiger Schleicher had meanwhile been sentenced to death. They were shot by an SS death squad on the night of April 23. Canaris, Oster, Gehre, Sack, Strünck, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer were hanged in Flossenbürg on the morning of April 9; Hans von Dohnanyi was also killed that day in Sachsenhausen.

### **‘A New Order in Europe’**

Bonhoeffer and the resistance movement for which he spoke were far from regarding Hitler and National Socialism as an internal German “sociological phenomenon” and natural consequence of the “authoritarian character of the Germans,” as was propagated after the war by the occupying powers and the post-war Evangelical Church in Germany (*Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland*, EKD) in the context of the “collective guilt” thesis. Rather, they held the conditions of the Versailles Treaty, which had ruined Germany and the entire world economy with its imposition of an impossible debt on Germany, as well as the appeasement policy of the West toward Hitler, to be largely responsible for the rise and seizure of power of National Socialism.

In 1941, during his second trip to Switzerland, Bonhoeffer wrote in a memorandum on “The Church and the New Order in Europe,” addressed to church circles in England:

Realism demands that the world be protected from a repetition of National Socialism, but the same realism demands that we protect the world from a repetition of the psychological process that took place in Germany between 1918 and 1933. The Compiègne Wagon [train car site in France of the signing of the Treaty of Versailles, where Hitler ostentatiously accepted the French surrender—EF] is virtually the symbol of this

camouflage of injustice [that is, of Nazism—EF]. It is just sufficient to serve as a relative vindication of some of Germany’s claims, to give Hitler the opportunity to introduce himself as a prophet who came to restore justice. This is the chief source of the present moral confusion.

Further:

And it must not be forgotten that the statesmen of other countries, by making concessions to Hitler which they refused to his predecessors, became his accomplices against the resistance groups in Germany. In this way it is comprehensible that it has become more and more difficult for the German nation to understand the true character of their regime and that only relatively few remained unwavering in their conviction that it represents Satan in the mask of the angel of light.

Like the other leaders of the resistance, Bonhoeffer categorically rejected the demand for “unconditional surrender” made by Churchill, who had been British Prime Minister since 1941. The document quoted above states:

The disarmament of Germany should certainly not be mentioned as the main peace objective, as it is all too often. Rather, it should be mentioned as part of a broader program that includes the granting of a certain degree of political and economic security for a disarmed Germany and the acceptance of a certain degree of supranational control over the armaments of all nations. In any case, the ideas of economic reconstruction and social reform should be given greater emphasis in all propaganda (especially in radio broadcasts to Germany).

After the surrender, the question arises “how can Germany find her way to a system of government that could be accepted by the Germans and that would allow her to become a proper member in the circle of nations.” This system of government, according to Bonhoeffer, could not lie in the transfer of the British model of “old liberalism, which, because of its failures, is largely responsible for the development of



state absolutism.” Of course, “civil religious liberty, freedom of speech, or equality before the law must be safeguarded in the new order. But there is far more at stake than words. The whole orientation of the post-war states will depend on this ideological question. We believe that the concept of an order limited by law and accountability, an order that is not an end in itself but recognizes the imperatives that stand above the state, has greater intellectual substance and validity than the emphasis on individual rights.”

Bonhoeffer feared that,

in a number of European countries an immediate return to full-fledged democracy and parliamentarism would cause even greater disorder than that which existed before the authoritarian era. In these countries (Germany, France, Italy), where all centers of political creativity and all order have been vilified or even destroyed, a strong, centralized power will be needed for a considerable period of time. But that does not mean that we must continue to accept forms of state absolutism.

This memorandum, which he sent to England together with Willem Visser 't Hooft, General Secretary of the Ecumenical Council of Churches in Geneva, must have put Bonhoeffer on the list of “good” Germans, if he was not already on it. The policy of the occupying powers in Germany after the war shows that they did the exact opposite of everything that was demanded in the memorandum.

The tragedy of the German resistance remains that, despite all their own insights into the British sell-out, they continued to desperately hope for England’s help. This partly understandable wishful thinking also sealed their own fate.

### Following Christ

The moral dilemma of participating in what he called “the great masquerade of evil” was a very real one for Bonhoeffer. As a member of the Church resistance against Hitler, he officially worked for the Nazi counterintelligence under Canaris—and thus, on the surface, for the other side. Only a few knew of his real activities. How did he cope with it? The key to this is provided by his understanding of what it means to “follow Christ.” This was the main theme he addressed in

his life—in his theological works, such as *Discipleship* (*Nachfolge*, 1937), the unfinished *Ethics*, and the prison letters, as well as in his personal actions.

In his essay, “After Ten Years,” written at the turn of the year 1942-43 for friends such as Hans von Dohnanyi and General Oster, he spoke out against “the short-circuiting of unhistorical and irresponsible thinkers” who shirk responsibility when evil suddenly prevails and things become dangerous:

In the face of such a situation, we learn that neither a theoretical point of view, nor a critical and opinionated one, nor a refusal to face facts, nor opportunism, nor self-abandonment and capitulation in the face of success, can do justice to our task. We do not want to be offended critics or opportunists, but we must be co-responsible for the historical process, from case to case and in every moment, as victors or as the defeated. Talk of heroic demise in the face of inevitable defeat is basically very unheroic, because it does not dare to look to the future. The last responsible question is not how I can extricate myself heroically from the circumstance, but how a future generation should live. Only from this historically responsible question can fruitful—albeit temporarily very humiliating—solutions arise. In short, it is much easier to persevere in principle than in concrete responsibility.

Bonhoeffer was sustained by a deep optimism rooted in his belief in divine natural law, in an “immanent justice.” He writes:

It is one of the most astonishing but at the same time irrefutable experiences that evil often proves to be stupid and inexpedient, and that within a surprisingly short period of time. This does not mean that every single evil deed is followed on its heels by punishment, but that the fundamental suspension of the divine commandments in the supposed interest of earthly self-preservation counteracts precisely the interest of this self-preservation. I believe that God can and will bring good out of everything, even out of the worst. To do that, he needs people who let all things serve for the best. I believe that God wants to give us as much resilience as we need in every

emergency. I believe that God is not a timeless *fatum* [fate], but that he waits for and answers sincere prayers and responsible deeds.

Bonhoeffer did not believe at all in a conception of Christianity in which the “worldly side of life” and thus the destiny of man are prematurely abandoned, and one steals away into the “other world.” Both belong together. He speaks of “the last things” (of God), which determine the “penultimate things” (our life). We are placed in this life to act on earth in the footsteps of Christ. “It may be that Judgment Day dawns tomorrow, in which case we are happy to leave the work for a better future, but not before.” This is how faith shows itself, and not by creating “niches” for religious acts with which one calms oneself and uses God as a “spiritual pharmacy.”

At the same time, discipleship meant rejecting all those who, as Bonhoeffer put it, wanted “cheap grace,” those who came to terms with the existing conditions and invoked the grace of God that is given





**Executive Intelligence Review**  
January 2012 Vol. 32 No. 4 [www.executiveintelligence.com](http://www.executiveintelligence.com) \$10/ISSUE

*Prof. Francis Boyle: South Africa Is Right at World Court  
Hedge-Fund Lobbying: UNICEF and the More  
Iowa Votes Against the Anglo-U.S. Establishment*

**'We See No Genocide Here'**

automatic monthly  
billing for its intelligence  
package. Receive *EIR's*  
weekly magazine and its  
*Daily Alert* in your inbox  
for \$50/month, billed  
monthly. Cancel anytime.  
Subscribe today!

**Details at:**  
[store.larouchepub.com/  
EIR-Daily-Alert-p/eirpk-  
0000-000-00-001-std.htm](http://store.larouchepub.com/EIR-Daily-Alert-p/eirpk-0000-000-00-001-std.htm)

to every human being. This applied to a large part of the Protestant Church, which had come to terms with National Socialism. Bonhoeffer countered that it was true that God shows mercy to every human being. “But he who wants to use this mercy to exclude himself from discipleship [*Nachfolge*] is deceiving himself,” he said.

## Germanism or Christianity

By emphasizing the necessity of following Christ, which he essentially traced back to the Sermon on the Mount, Bonhoeffer not only challenged his own fellow believers, but also threw down the gauntlet to National Socialism in particular. After all, in Germany at that time there should only be one “leader” who “was allowed to call the people to follow him.”

Furthermore, for the National Socialist “cult of strength,” the Sermon on the Mount was the epitome of powerlessness, or, as Max Weber put it, “the ethics of indignity/disgracefulness.” With their invention of a kind of Hegelian “spirit of the people” that was not subject to the judgment of Christ, the “German Christians” had practically abolished Christ. Moreover, Nazi propaganda made Charlemagne the central target of their religious hatred. Among other things, they accused him of having carried out a massacre among the Saxons during his Christianization campaign. In his Finkenwalde seminars, Bonhoeffer placed great emphasis on explaining to his candidates that Charlemagne had introduced the “filioque” (the doctrine according to which the Holy Spirit proceeds equally from the Father *and the Son*). This doctrine, which had become the basis for understanding between the Western and Eastern churches at the 1439 Council of Florence, defines man as “in the image of God” and capable of following Christ.

This concept of God and the associated image of humanity were a thorn in the side of National Socialism. In his work *Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer wrote: “A Christianity in which there is only the Father God, but not Christ as a living son, virtually abolishes discipleship. Here is trust in God, but not discipleship. Only because the Son of God became man, because he is the *mediator*, is discipleship the right relationship with him. Only the mediator, the God-man, can call to discipleship.”

This is the linchpin of his thinking, as becomes clear repeatedly in his prison letters, for example in

his references to music. Bonhoeffer speaks of music as providing “the keynote of joy” in life. He calls God the “*cantus firmus*,” to which all the other voices of life resound as counterpoints.

Where the *cantus firmus* is clear and distinct, the counterpoint can unfold as powerfully as possible. Both are “unseparated and yet separate,” as in Christ’s divine and human nature. Isn’t it perhaps because polyphony in music is so close to us and so important that it is the musical image of this Christological fact and therefore also of our *vita christiana*? When one stands in this polyphony, then life becomes whole, and at the same time one knows that nothing disastrous can happen as long as the *cantus firmus* is maintained.

In 1942, Bonhoeffer wrote in “After Ten Years,” published in the collection of his letters and notes titled, *Resistance and Surrender*:

Optimism is not, in essence, a view of the present situation, but it is the vital force, a force of hope where others resign, a force to hold your head high when everything seems to fail, a force to endure setbacks, a force that never leaves the future to the opponent, but claims it for itself. There is certainly also a foolish, cowardly optimism that must be condemned. But no one should look down on optimism as a will to the future, even if it is mistaken a hundred times. It is the health of life, which the sick should not infect.

In 1944, on February 23, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote

in a letter from the Wehrmacht prison in Berlin-Tegel:

It probably only depends on whether one can still see from the fragment of our life how the whole was actually conceived and thought and what material it consists of. There are ultimately fragments that belong only on the garbage heap (even a decent “hell” is still too good for them), and there are those that are significant for centuries to come, because their completion can only be a divine thing, that is, fragments that must be fragments. I am thinking, for example, of the *Art of the Fugue*. If our life is even the most distant reflection of such a fragment, in which, at least for a short time, the various themes, which accumulate more and more, are in harmony and in which the great counterpoint is sustained from beginning to end so that after the interruption, at most the chorale *Before Your Throne I Stand Here Now* can be played, then we will not complain about our fragmentary lives, but will even be glad of them.

### Recommended Reading

Eberhardt Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, Fortress Press, 2000. In German, Chr. Kaiser Verlag, Munich, 1970.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Resistance and Surrender: Letters and Notes from Prison*, Harper & Row, 1966.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, Harper & Row, 1968.

Richard Grunow, *Bonhoeffer Auswahl*, Chr. Kaiser Verlag, Munich, 1964.

Renate Wind, *Dem Rad in die Speichen fallen: Die Lebensgeschichte des Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, Beltz & Gelberg Verlag, Weinheim und Basel, 1966.