



LETTERS AND PAPERS  
FROM PRISON  
DIETRICH BONHOEFFER

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER WORKS — READER'S EDITION

Session-one on April 23, 2024

# Germany Devastated and Treaty of Versailles in 1919



- The [Treaty of Versailles](#) is presented to the German delegation on May 7, 1919. The Treaty of Versailles forced Germany to concede vast European territories and overseas colonies.
- Treaty's Article 231 - "War Guilt Clause," forced the German nation to accept complete responsibility for initiating World War I
- The Treaty required to make enormous [reparation payments](#). In addition.
- The German military was to be severely limited in size and armaments.

Platforms for radical rightwing parties in Germany, including Adolf Hitler's [Nazi Party](#), in the 20s & early 30s. promises to

- rearm
- reclaim German territory
- regain power
- regain pride - stoked ultranationalist sentiment and helped average Germans to overlook the more radical tenets of Nazi ideology.

# Scapegoats Created



German military leaders tried to shift blame for the country's defeat. A myth soon began that German forces could have won if they had not been "stabbed in the back" by disloyal German citizens who undermined the war effort.

Hitler used the term to target Jewish people. To him, they made up as a race and not a religious community.

# National Socialist German Workers Party (NAZI Party)



The Nazi Party was founded as the German Workers' Party by Anton Drexler, a Munich locksmith, in 1919. Included hostility to the Treaty of Versailles, nationalism, concern about the nation's moral standards and changing culture, and extreme antisemitism.

Hitler attended one of its meetings that year, and before long his energy and speaking skills would later enable him to take over the party, which was renamed National Socialist German Workers' Party in 1920. Responsible for recruitment and propaganda.

# 25 Point Program 1920

Key points:

- Revoke Jewish civil rights
- Citizenship only for those with German blood
- Revoke the Versailles Treaty and Saint Germaine Treaty
- Create a “Greater Germany” – based on Lebensraum
- Create national army
- Strong central government – “Führerprinzip”  
Authority flows down – authority unquestioned

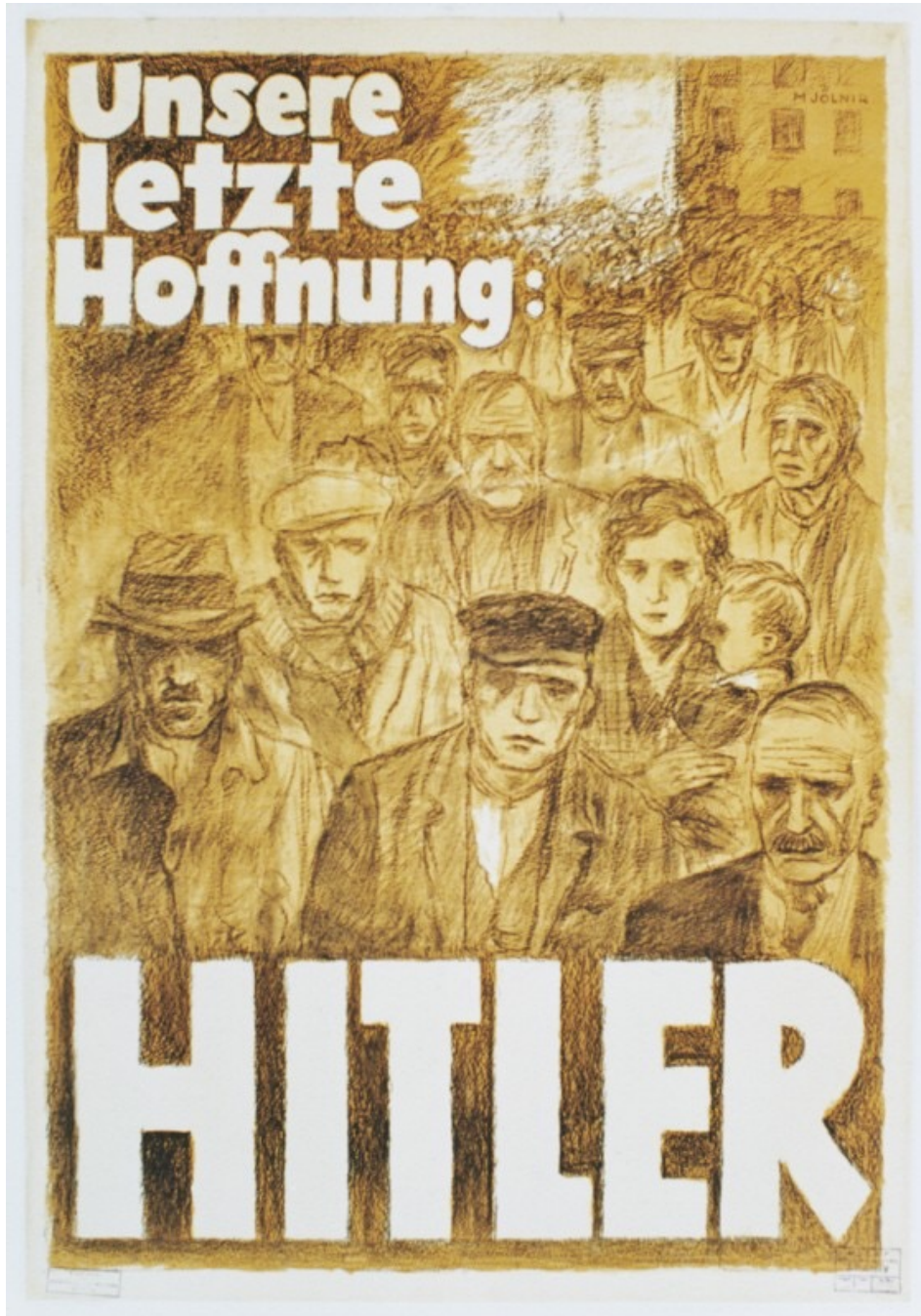
**Accused Party of being Disorganized:** Following this announcement, Hitler pushed for an overhaul of the party structure, replacing the democratic committee with a single leader who would have ultimate control. This proposal was rejected. On the 11 July 1920, over a disagreement about merging with another party, Hitler resigned.

Hitler stated he would only return if he was made party chairman, with dictatorial powers. Realizing the loss of their main speaker could potentially ruin the party, Drexler and the committee agreed to Hitler’s demands. Hitler became the party chairman.

## **Attempt to Overthrow the Government – Bavaria with Long-Term Goal to Overthrow Entire Country**

From November 8 to November 9, 1923, Adolf Hitler (1889-1945) and his followers staged the Beer Hall Putsch in Munich, a failed takeover of the government in Bavaria, a state in southern Germany.

In the aftermath of the failed “putsch,” or coup d’état, Hitler was convicted of treason and sentenced to five years in prison. He spent less than a year behind bars, during which time he dictated *Mein Kampf*, his political autobiography. The putsch and Hitler’s subsequent trial turned him into a national figure. After prison, he worked to rebuild the Nazi Party and gain power via legal political methods.



The market crash of 1929 impacted the world economy. Within two years, unemployment doubled in Germany.

Hitler rose from the background and revitalized the Nazi Party. He benefitted from rioting in the streets.

Fun and Belonging.

**“Our Last Hope”** An election poster for the presidential elections of 1932, created by Mjölner [Hans Schweitzer], this poster was meant to appeal to Germans left unemployed and destitute by the Great Depression with an offer of a savior.

# ELECTIONS

New direction – rise to power legally

Weimer Constitutional support

Chancellor appointed not elected

Emergency unchecked power

No checks and balance

Reichstag Elections – Nazi

percentages

1924 – 3.0%

1928 – 2.8%

1930 – 18.3%

1932 - 37.0%

1933 - 44.0%

Presidential Election – 1932

Hitler v. Hindenburg

30%      49%

Run off required

Hitler – 36%

Hindenburg – 53%

Chancellor Kurt von Schleicher was fired.

President Paul von Hindenburg appointed Hitler as Chancellor

Hitler continued to gain power out of chaos.



# REICHSTAG FIRE DECREE



- On February 27, 1933, an arsonist burned down the *Reichstag*, the German parliament building.
- The “Decree of the Reich President for the Protection of the People and the State,” known as the “Reichstag Fire Decree,” declared a state of emergency.
- With Nazi encouragement, President von Hindenburg suspended freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and the right to assemble. The government could arrest political opponents without charge, dissolve political organizations, and censor newspapers.

## FEBRUARY 28, 1933

# ENABLING ACT



- The German parliament passed the “Law for Rectification of the Distress of Nation and Reich,” commonly called the “Enabling Act.” The law allowed Hitler to propose and sign legislation into law without consulting the parliament.
- This law effectively created a dictatorship in Germany.
- This propaganda flyer exclaims, “The Reichstag in Flames!” and urges, “Choose Hitler!”

MARCH 23, 1933

## More Significant Events

President Paul von Hindenburg died in 1934. Hitler Consolidated power.

That year Nazis killed SA soldiers. People were shocked but thought it must be necessary.

Persecutions and murders of Jewish people and several other groups intensified.

1939 WWII officially began.

# Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Background



One of 8 children. His parents were well connected to the German elite. Born in 1906.

Education: Humboldt University of Berlin (1927),  
Eberhard Karls University of Tübingen, Union Theological  
Seminary

Pastor at a German congregation in Barcelona

Dietrich Bonhoeffer studied in the year 1930 at the Union Theological Seminary in New York. His time in New York became a formative experience that expanded his horizons. He made many life-changing friendships, traveled the country and Cuba, and worked with the African-American Abyssinian Church in Harlem, learning about gospel music.

# Public Resistance

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was most likely the first victim of Nazi censorship. On February 1, 1933, just a couple of days after Adolf Hitler was appointed chancellor of the German Republic, 26-year-old Dr. Bonhoeffer gave a radio address entitled, “The Younger Generation’s Altered view of the Concept of the *Fuhrer*,”

From the beginning of Hitler’s rule, Bonhoeffer warned people against following leaders who set themselves up as gods. On the radio he said that such leaders mock God.

Bonhoeffer warned that if a leader surrenders to the wishes of his followers, “then the image of the Leader (*Fuhrer*) will gradually become the image of the misleader (*Verfuhrer*).” Although his microphone was mysteriously switched off before is unmistakable evidence of the clarity with which Bonhoeffer viewed the Nazi threat

# Pro-Nazi Reich Church

Hitler wanted to control the church.

1933 – a group called German Christians began to promote the Nazification of German Protestantism

A pro-Nazi “Reich Church” was created - promoted state “Aryan laws” within the churches.

Declared that Jews were a “separate race” and could not become members of an “Aryan” German Church through baptism.

# The Confessing Church

Church leaders opposed the Aryan Clause because on theological grounds. It contradicted teachings about baptism and ordination.

Bonhoeffer – the clause surrendered Christian precepts to political ideology. If “non-Aryans” were banned from the ministry their colleagues should resign in solidarity and establish a new “confessing church that would remain free from Nazi influence.

Backlash among more moderate Protestants led to the formation of the Confessing Church in May 1934.

Some focused only on protecting theology and were silent about the persecutions of German Jews and other groups. Some also spoke up.

# 1933 Essay

## “The Church and the Jewish Question”

National Socialism was an illegitimate form of government.

Three stages of opposition:

1. The church was called to question state injustice
2. The church had an obligation to help all victims of injustice, whether Christian or not.
3. The church is called to “put a spoke in the wheel” to bring the machinery of injustice to a halt.



# Isolation and Outreach

- He became isolated with his political opinions and went abroad. He reported regularly on events in Nazi Germany to ecumenical Protestant leaders in Europe and U.S.
- Attended the ecumenical World Alliance meeting in Sofia, Bulgaria – spoke about the Jewish question. Delegates passed a resolution condemning Nazi action against Jews. He took the resolution to the German consul in Sofia.
- The German Evangelical in Berlin demanded that he withdraw from ecumenical activities. Bonhoeffer refused.
- 1933-1935, he was a pastor to several German-speaking congregations in London, leading them to break with the official German church and join the Confessing Church.

# Divisions from all Sides

In 1935, Bonhoeffer returned to Germany, where the Confessing Church was under increasing pressure from the Gestapo.

Most leaders refused to openly oppose the Nazi regime and criticized their colleagues who did.

More radical Confessing Christians found themselves embattled on all sides.

Bonhoeffer began training young clergy at an illegal Confessing Church seminary, Finkenwald, closed by the Gestapo in 1937. Spent two years travelling throughout eastern Germany to supervise his students. Most of whom were working illegally in small parishes. The Gestapo banned him from Berlin in January 1938 and issued an order forbidding him from public speaking in Sept. 1940.

Eberhard Bethge, Finkenwald student and  
future Bonhoeffer biographer



# Resistance Plans at Home & Travel to New York

1938 – Learned of resistance plans through his brother-in-law, Hans von Dohnanyi, who worked in the Justice Ministry and was one of the earliest opponents of the regime.

Bonhoeffer traveled to New York a second time in 1939 at the invitation of old friends. In 1939 the second World War was imminent. Dietrich Bonhoeffer feared his conscription into the military. In order to avoid the growing danger, friends and family organized another trip for him to New York; yet, already after six weeks in New York, immediately before the beginning of the war, Dietrich Bonhoeffer returned to Germany.

He wrote to Reinhold Niebuhr – “I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I don’t share the trials of time with my people.”

# Back in Germany

In October 1940, Dohnanyi used his connections to help Bonhoeffer avoid military service, obtaining an assignment for him in the office of Military Intelligence. That office became the center of the German military resistance groups that eventually culminated in the July 20, 1944 attempt to overthrow the regime, while Bonhoeffer was in prison.

Before his arrest, Bonhoeffer made several trips outside the Reich between 1941 and 1942, informing ecumenical contacts in Geneva and the Vatican of the resistance plans.

The first deportations of Berlin Jews to the east occurred in October 1941. A few days later, Bonhoeffer and Friedrich Perels, a Confessing Church lawyer, sent a memo with details about the deportation to foreign contacts and trusted German military officials, in the hope that it might move them to action.

Operation Seven – Bonhoeffer became peripherally involved in a plan to help Jewish people out of Germany by providing them papers as foreign agents.

Arrested in April 1943 after Gestapo uncovered the “Operation Seven” funds that had been sent abroad for the emigrants.

# Criminal Charges

Charged initially for conspiring to rescue Jewish people, using his foreign travels for non-intelligence matters, and misusing his intelligence position to help the Confessing Church pastors evade military service.

After the failed coup attempt, his connections to the broader resistance circles were uncovered and he was moved to the Gestapo prison in Berlin. In Feb. 1945, he was taken to a concentration camp.

April 9, 1945: Bonhoeffer was hanged for his resistance activities.

April 30, 1945: Hitler killed himself.

on May 7, 1945: Germany surrendered.

# An Account at the Turn of the Year 1942-1943

## Just before Prison

### The Responsive Life

- “Only the one whose ultimate standard is not (one’s) reason, (one’s) principles, conscience, freedom or virtue; only the one who is prepared to sacrifice all of these when, in faith and in relationship to God alone, (that one) is called to obedient and responsible action” page 6
- Failures of each value:
  - Reasonable ones—thirst for justice but get so crushed by the world’s unreasonableness that they resign themselves or fall victim to those more powerful
  - Ethical fanaticism—believes in purity of one’s principles but is outsmarted by those who are cleverer i.e. a bull attacking the red cape vs. the person holding it
  - Conscience—similar to the failures of the one who has ethical fanaticism; is tormented by fear when evil approaches and is unable to interpret that evil properly because of relying on one’s conscience alone
  - Duty—will clasp onto what is commanded of him and that can lead to one doing the work of the devil
  - Freedom: will not be bogged down by inaction due to clinging to principles but in one’s action, may lose proper discernment in choosing the best option
  - Virtue: one can obtain private virtue but they shut themselves off from injustices in a way that involves self-deception
- Responsible one: interprets evil as one responds to God alone
- The problem with Germany: holding to duty and to freedom and in the process losing both by misjudging the world and submitting to evil authority

# Small Group Questions – Please write down

1. What kind of “patriotism” led Bonhoeffer to speak so passionately about trusting God above all?
2. When considering his prologue and letters part, where did Bonhoeffer find hope?
3. What is an example of a contemporary problem in society that calls your attention?



# Sources

Most of these slides were created or taken directly from the following sources:

- The U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum (slides and information on the USHMM website)
- “A Testament to Freedom,” a biography on Dietrich Bonhoeffer edited by Geoffrey B. Kelly and E. Burton Nelson
- ”Letters and Papers from Prison,” Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Victoria J. Barnett (Editor), John W. Gruchy (Introduction)
- ”Hitler, a Career” Documentary
- The Holocaust Research Project