

Hitler's Rise to Power: Party and Church Reactions in the GDR

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Readers of the GDR press during the early weeks of 1983 could not but realise that its coverage of the events of fifty years before was not a matter of historical analysis only, but also a commentary on current affairs. Scholars and journalists maintained that the basic conditions were already present for a re-enactment of the terrors of 1933-45 on an even more dreadful scale, and simple proposals were given for avoiding such an outcome. At the same time, an immense and painful amount of research into the basic causes of Hitler's rise to power was published in the Federal Republic, much of it questioning the GDR version, but coming to no unanimous conclusion. Both in East and West the question was asked: who and where are Hitler's heirs in 1983? GDR churchmen, even if they wished to, could not stand aside from this enquiry. Could East German Christians accept the official analysis current in their own State? What had Christians learned in the years of struggle against Hitler that was still relevant and contemporary? Should the Church (reflecting the attitude of many believers to the Third Reich) regard the Marxist State as essentially satanic, or as a God-given institution to which the allegiance of Christians is rightly due?

We shall not attempt to summarise the complicated events of 1932-33 here. 1932 was a year of intense political conflict, leading to the appointment of Hitler as Chancellor on 30 January 1933, despite the fact that the Nazi party did not command anything like a majority in the Reichstag. Indeed, in the Reichstag elections of 5 March 1933 (when the Nazis held immense advantages) Hitler's share of the vote amounted to only 43.7 per cent.

How could such a party, supported at the polls by little more than a third of the voters, achieve such a resounding success? The Socialist Unity Party in the GDR (and Erich Honecker in his autobiography) put the blame squarely on the forces of "monopoly capitalism" as manipulated by the "international bourgeoisie".¹ Certainly GDR scholars have had little difficulty in finding evidence that Hitler was assisted in his bid for power by German industrialists and bankers,² but few if any historians would deny that he received financial support from them, and from those

in other European countries also. However, there is no evidence to support the Marxist view that there was orchestrated international financial support. The contributors acted as individuals. The facts also suggest that — at any rate before 1932 — the Nazis were not successful in all their approaches to German captains of industry, and that not a few preferred to support other parties.³

Whatever the difficulties in demonstrating its truth, the doctrine of Hitlerism as the “tool of monopoly capitalism” is universally propounded by official spokesmen in the GDR. There are religious believers who appear to share this interpretation. An official booklet states:

The defeat of Nazism and the construction of Socialism freed us from those forces who stir up war and hatred among the peoples, who set themselves up as a master race and enslave other nations, who gear their policies to the interests of capital and who place profit above human dignity. Our Church has also been freed from the shackles of fascist oppression and persecution.⁴

On the 44th anniversary of the “Kristallnacht” (9 November 1938) Helmut Aris, the President of the League of Jewish Communities in the GDR, wrote:

When I look back over the past forty-four years and think of the awful murders carried out during the twelve years of the Hitler regime, I am filled with joy and thankfulness that we now live in a German State in which anti-semitism has been extirpated root and branch, a State that has met the needs of all Fascism’s victims. The small body of Jews in the GDR shares this thankfulness with me.⁵

These statements undoubtedly represent minority religious viewpoints. Before considering attitudes held more widely in the GDR, it may be relevant to refer to western church pronouncements. A declaration issued by the Roman Catholic Bishops of the Federal Republic, by no means the first on the subject of the Hitler regime, states:

There are two fundamental facts which have far-reaching consequences for today: firstly, disregard of the inviolable rights of individuals and of peoples; secondly, the denial of personal responsibility and guilt. In this respect we have said, and we repeat, “We know that the Church too has its share of guilt”. Many members of the Church allowed themselves to become involved in injustice and violence. However we can once more testify that the Church and the Christian faith made up one of the most powerful forces that opposed Nazism — in certain respects, indeed, the most powerful of all.

The declaration then outlines the lessons, or rather guiding principles, to be learnt from the Hitler regime:

The individual's human dignity and his right to exist must be universally recognised; our State's rule of law must not be undermined for the sake of any aims, however idealistic they may sound; concern for the survival of humanity does not relieve us of the duty of protecting those values which alone guarantee the continuance of society based on justice and freedom; economic and social interests do not excuse us from the duty of giving priority to the welfare of mankind as a whole.⁶

The Roman Catholic Church has also produced a series of maps which show that the main Roman Catholic districts (the Rhineland, Bavaria and Eastern Silesia) had comparatively few National Socialist voters in 1932-33.⁷ The parallel declaration made by the Protestants (*Rat der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland*) emphasises that the past should not be forgotten. It repeats part of the 1945 Stuttgart Confession of Guilt:

Through us untold sorrow has come upon many peoples and countries [. . .] We confess that we did not confess the faith more bravely, we did not pray more earnestly, we did not believe more joyfully, and we did not love more strongly.

There are a number of readily understandable factors which explain — if they do not excuse — the average Churchman's support of the Nazi movement, at least up to and during the early months of 1933. The movement's very title — the *National Socialist German Workers' Party*, gives evidence of its chameleon-like qualities. It would, for example, not be difficult to find dozens of passages in *Mein Kampf* which (only slightly modified) sound as if they are taken from contemporary Marxist-Leninist textbooks. We read:

The battle against international finance- and loan-capital is the most important feature of the German people's struggle to achieve its economic independence and freedom.⁸

And further:

International capitalism was not only the most powerful agent for fomenting the recent war, but even now — since the end of the armed struggle — strives to turn peace into hell.⁹

Or again, as regards Zionism:

The Jews do not plan to set up a Jewish State in Palestine in order to have somewhere to live. What they want is to have an

organising centre, protected by its own sovereign rights and free from interference by other Powers, for their international swindling activities.¹⁰

During the period of Weimar Republic democracy these elusive aspects of Nazism were skilfully exploited by the party's spokesmen in order to appeal to different electoral groups. Some trends in society which became more pronounced after January 1933 were far from unwelcome to believers. The permissive aspects of society under the Weimar Republic, which seemed to many to be decadent and unchristian, were replaced by a sterner ethical code. Young members of the Church were called upon to face discipline and hardship, and many senior churchmen felt that this was no bad thing. Of course, for Christians who did not or would not look too closely into the realities of the new regime, the advent of a new party which proclaimed itself irrevocably opposed to Marxism-Leninism could not fail to be welcome; the experience of religious bodies in the USSR, particularly since 1929, had shown that Communist opposition to religion was not just empty posturing. Many Protestants, at least, were convinced that the Church had lost its way since the dissolution in 1919 of the historic "Throne and Altar" partnership; the prospect of a united Protestant Church, facing a whole host of new challenges and guided by a single national bishop, attracted a considerable number of people. Christians of all traditions could not fail to be aware of the new spirit of national pride. A considerable list could be compiled of later confessors and martyrs, who admitted that — for a brief time at least — they had been admirers of the Führer.

As 1933 progressed, the struggle within Germany intensified but the lines of battle could be more clearly distinguished. Open opponents of Hitler vanished, often to unknown destinations. Public opposition to the regime became almost impossible. Direct violence was accompanied by intimidation. Society was permeated with informers and spies; the "German glance"¹¹ became a feature of everyday life, since nobody could trust his neighbour. Many an ordinary conversation was in the form of "double-speak", being punctuated for safety's sake with party slogans. Censorship increasingly cut off access to great works of art and literature. Obedience, readiness for sacrifice, militarism were all glorified. Worrying trends appeared in the educational system. For the churchman, things were particularly troublesome. Many Christian youth organisations were amalgamated with the Hitler Youth. Children at school were exposed to teaching which many parents found quite irreconcilable with the Gospel. The Nazi official was in many cases a regular churchgoer, doing his best in his own locality to win over his own congregation to new doctrines; although he no doubt alleged that these doctrines arose out of the need to express the old faith in a new way to meet a new situation, they were seen by many believers as totally irreconcilable with the teachings of Jesus

Christ. There was no suggestion that Hitler was intending to persecute Christianity. He aimed to keep the Protestant Church intact as a useful instrument to aid his policies and proclaim a suitably nazified Christianity. It is not surprising that the second half of 1933 saw various decisive developments. In July came the "Concordat", signed by the Roman Catholic Church and the Hitler regime, by means of which the Führer hoped to relegate Roman Catholics to the fringe of society. In the autumn the Protestant Church movement that was later to become known as the "Confessing Church" (*Bekennende Kirche*) came into being when Martin Niemöller founded an "emergency union of ministers" (*Pfarrernotbund*). In November a mass meeting was held in Berlin at which Dr Krause outlined the basic principles of the "German Christians"¹² in such a way that the total support of this movement for Hitler could no longer be in doubt.

The nebulous nature of the "fascist" ideology and the confusion in the minds of many Christians during 1933 are very significant. Some contemporary Marxist thinkers label as "fascist" not only Nazi Germany and Mussolini's Italy, but also Franco's Spain and Salazar's Portugal, to say nothing of the regimes of Finland, Norway and several countries of Eastern Europe during the early 1940s, and, for good measure, a number of contemporary regimes in Africa, Central and South America and the Caribbean. Marxist writers make much of the fact that West German historians have no single theory to account for the triumph of Hitlerism. These historians are accused of allotting far too much importance to the character and personality of the Führer himself. Dr Wolfgang Ruge writes:

The origin of fascism is traced by some to the instinct of aggression that is supposed to be inherent in human nature itself, by others to a forced march into an industrial society of the future (the "modernising theory"), by yet others as a regression to a mediaeval age that cannot be resurrected (the "anti-modernising theory"), and there are many other interpretations.¹³

The number and variety of these theories give further weight to the view that "fascism" cannot be analysed in the manner of a straightforward, unified ideology. Furthermore, the term "anti-fascist" must cover a whole range of different — one may say contradictory — attitudes. What is clear is that both the Confessing Church and the Roman Catholic opponents of Hitler recognised his regime as a pagan philosophy, satanic in origin and totally opposed to the teachings of Jesus Christ.

It may be best to conclude by referring to the work and witness of two outstanding German Protestant Christians of the twentieth century: Bishop Albrecht Schönher¹⁴ and Dietrich Bonhoeffer.¹⁵ Both suffered in different ways during the Hitler regime. On several occasions¹⁶ Bishop Schönher has hinted at his answer to the question: why did Hitler

manage to gain power? In the years before 1933 socialism in its Marxist-Leninist form, according to Schönherr, was normally presented in Germany as a fearful monster. Many people who were critical of Hitler thought of Nazism, with all its terror and brutality, as the lesser of two evils. The German middle classes never contrived to be aware of or to do justice to the struggles of the working class, and through their apathy, their escapism and their inactivity the middle classes forfeited any right they had to be the leaders of society. They had given their support to the dream of a German super-state, based on the will to dominate of an allegedly superior race bent on enslaving and liquidating other nations. Religious socialists were few and far between and the few that there were made little impact on the Church's life. Bishop Schönherr regards the Declaration of the exiled German Communist Party (1 February 1939) as significant:

One great hindrance in unifying Hitler's enemies in a popular front is the fear among certain Christians, and especially in Catholic circles, of what might happen to the Church in a future Germany governed by a popular front. Just as today Catholic and Marxist workers help each other in their struggle against the common foe, so tomorrow's Church will be rescued from destruction at the hands of the fascists provided it stands by the people and does not, as in Franco Spain, join the darkest forces of reaction in a merciless war against its own people, or, as in old Russia, cast its lot with Tsarism. Provided the Church stands by the people it has nothing to fear from a popular front government. The new democratic republic will guarantee freedom of conscience and will protect the Church's property. . .¹⁷

Failures by Christians in 1933-45 are also emphasised by reference to the 1947 Darmstadt Declaration:

We erred as we overlooked the fact that the Marxist concept of materialism in the economic sphere could have awakened us to the Church's call to promote man's life in true community on this earth. We failed to champion the cause of the poor and exploited and, in accord with the good news of the coming Kingdom, to put the Churches firmly on their side.¹⁸

Bishop Schönherr is well aware of the widely-held conviction that, in 1945, the Church in Eastern Germany was delivered from the rule of one anti-Christian totalitarian government, only to be subjected to the tyranny of another. He concedes that Marxism-Leninism springs from a materialistic view of life and cannot fail to be atheistic; on the other hand he believes that the GDR regime (unlike National Socialism, in whose brutal and corrupting theory and practice there were no positive ele-

ments), has objectives and achievements which deserve the respect of the Christian. Therefore, as the GDR is a State subject to the gracious ordinances of God, it provides opportunities which Christians should grasp. The Church in the GDR, according to Schönherr, enjoys an astonishing degree of freedom, but at the same time problems are constantly arising because of the different attitudes of Marxists. At one end of the scale Marxists demonstrate a friendly, peaceful readiness to live and work together; at the other, they believe that religion, if not quite dead, should at least not be taken seriously by a younger generation which has been trained for years in the unquestionable truths of scientific socialism. Socialism is with us, Schönherr insists, not simply to make high-sounding proclamations about freedom, justice and peace, but to turn these goals into practical realities.

Besides being regarded as a prophet by many GDR churchmen, Bonhoeffer is respected by many Party members. Dr Klaus Drobisch has summarised his work and message from a Marxist standpoint.

He began to hope for the defeat of the Hitler regime. In the fascist attack on the Soviet Union he saw the "beginning of the end" [. . .] He expressed his view about post-war society as follows: "It cannot just be a restoration of the political and economic system that obtained before the war. In particular, the economic security of the masses must be guaranteed." As early as 1930-31 he recognised that the German peace movement had its roots in the German working class, and that the interests of the German working class were more bound up with the interests of the French workers than with other classes in Germany. After his arrest in 1943 he wrote: "The Christian is prepared to work and to fight side by side with the non-Christian, when it is a matter of realising common goals".¹⁹

Bonhoeffer's ideas were worked out during the struggle with the Nazis, Bishop Schönherr reminds us, but they are not valid only for the society in which he lived. This is no place to summarise the doctrines of Bonhoeffer in any detail, but we may relate them to the Church in the GDR. Bonhoeffer held that until modern times man has tended to see himself as weak and helpless in the face of natural forces. "God" was a periodic saviour, to whom — when human powers of understanding failed — he might appeal. Technological progress has made this kind of theology obsolete; man has come of age and must make his own decisions and take responsibility for his own fate. The kind of God who exists only on the fringe of man's activities (to say nothing of the "religion" that places Him there) no longer has any meaning. It follows that atheism (however the term may be understood) is the normative condition of man, in the West as well as in the East. This progress, however, does not spell the end of

the Christian faith. The figure of Jesus, particularly as the Suffering Servant, should not simply influence “religious” aspects of life; it should dominate the whole of a believer’s existence. The relevance of such an interpretation of Christianity to a Marxist society is clear enough, and it is not surprising that many GDR Christians find it helpful and inspiring. Moreover, the fact that the Church in the GDR is divorced from the centres of power, and does not seek to undermine the structure of society, accords well with the mission of the Christian disciple. He is free to follow the example of the “Man for Others” who is found alone in poverty on a Cross, by witnessing for social justice and taking the side of the poor, the oppressed, and the underprivileged. In promoting the teachings of Bonhoeffer, Bishop Schönherr — and other Protestant theologians of the GDR — certainly do not overlook the fact that (for the believer) the Crucified Jesus is also the Lord to whom all power on heaven and on earth has been given.

On 1 February 1933, the young Dietrich Bonhoeffer was giving a radio talk. As he reached the words, “Should the image of the Führer become that of a *Verführer* (Tempter), [. . .] should the Führer and the Führer’s high office become objects of worship, God Himself would be mocked”, the microphone was switched off.²⁰ Nonetheless, Bonhoeffer still speaks powerfully to Christians in the GDR.

¹Erich Honecker, *Aus meinem Leben*. Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1982, p. 86.

²See *Neues Deutschland*, 20-21 November 1982, 12 January 1983.

³This line of argument is worked out in detail by James and Suzanne Pool, *Who Financed Hitler?* London: Macdonald and James, 1979.

⁴*Christians and the Churches in the German Democratic Republic*, Wolfgang Heyl. Berlin (GDR): 1975.

⁵*Neues Deutschland*, 8 November 1982.

⁶Roman Catholic publication *Erinnerung und Verantwortung*, 30-1-33 – 30-1-83. Bonn: Sekretariat der deutschen Bischofskonferenz, 1983.

⁷*Wahlverhalten der katholischen Bevölkerung Deutschlands 1932-33*. Bonn: Arbeitskreis für zeitgeschichtliche Fragen e. V., 1983.

⁸*Mein Kampf*, German ed. p. 233.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 233.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 356.

¹¹A glance over the shoulder before speaking.

¹²Movement founded by Hossenfelder in 1928 which attempted to incorporate much of Nazi racial philosophy into Christianity.

¹³*Neues Deutschland*, 11-12 December 1982.

¹⁴Member of the Confessing Church during the Hitler regime, and imprisoned. More recently Bishop of Berlin-Brandenburg in the GDR. Now in retirement.

¹⁵Protestant pastor, hanged at Flossenbürg in April 1945.

¹⁶Many of Schönherr’s views are quoted from a lecture he gave in November 1972.

¹⁷Bonhoeffer as quoted by Schönherr in lecture, *op. cit.*

¹⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁹*Neues Deutschland*, 4 February 1981.

²⁰Incident quoted in *ibid.*