

Violence, or Another Way?

When one is dealing with a dictator like Hitler, what can one do but go to war? Is that the question?

In 1943 in the midst of the war, Jews in Berlin, the capital of Nazi Germany, were rounded up and taken to collection centers. Here those with “Aryan kin,” or non-Jewish spouses, were sorted out and placed in a separate, unidentified holding center. No one knew what would happen to them.

Heinz Ullstein, one of the Jewish husbands, describes what followed. “At this point the wives stepped in. Already by the early hours of the next day they had discovered the whereabouts of their husbands and as by a common consent, as if they had been summoned, a crowd of them appeared at the gate of the improvised detention center. In vain the security police tried to turn away the demonstrators, some 6,000 of them, to disperse them. Again and again they massed together, advanced, called for their husbands...and demanded their release.”

“...A few salvos from a machine gun could have wiped the women off the square, but the SS did not fire, not this time. Scared by an incident which had no equal in the history of the Third Reich, headquarters consented to negotiate. They spoke soothingly, gave assurances, and finally released the prisoners.” The lives of some 6,000 Jewish husbands were spared.

Daniel J. Goldhagen in *Hitler's Willing Executioners – Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (1996) cites this as the only case of large-scale protest in Germany against Nazi Jewish policies. However, it was not the only instance where the Nazis changed their policies when people spoke up. He cites other instances where opposition and protests on matters of public policy, including religious oppression, led to successful changes during the Nazi era. Indeed, he argues, the regime was sensitive to public opinion. It placed “thousands of agents around the country to report on the mood of the people,” and moved in accordance with what it thought the people would support.

Goldhagen's book, though controversial, became a bestseller in Germany during the 1990s as it motivated another look at what happened during those awful years.

If Goldhagen is correct, what power might the church have had in Nazi Germany if it had stood united against Hitler? Christian ethicist David P. Gushee (*The Righteous Gentiles of the Holocaust – a Christian Interpretation*) observes that more than ninety percent of the non-Jewish population of Germany and Nazi occupied countries during this time considered themselves to be Christian. A formidable force. Yet, in Germany itself, only a small minority of the church called the Confessing Church stood up against Hitler. And even the Confessing Church pastors, when eventually drafted, obediently fought in the German army. That was their tradition growing out of their understanding, or misunderstanding, of the relationship between church and state. And, as Eberhard Bethge, biographer of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, has reported: Almost all its [Confessing

Churches'] young pastors went to the front, and most of them were sooner or later killed in action.”

In 1995, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II, Mennonites of Germany met together at Thomashof, Germany and apologized for their silence under the Nazis. They issued a statement in which they acknowledged that German “Mennonites of all occupations were entangled in the political system at that time, and almost all Mennonites were silent in regard to the National Socialistic [Nazi] crimes against Jews and others.”

So, what is the question? Hitler? And, perhaps, the faithfulness of the church?

One person alone is easily silenced. But when 6,000 German women found their voices and stood united as one body in the city square, the Nazis listened. Even dictators can't rule if enough people refuse to cooperate.

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