

The German Resistance and Dietrich Bonhoeffer

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On Monday 9 April 1945 seven leading figures in the German resistance movement were executed by hanging. Among them were the Lutheran pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer and his brother-in-law, the lawyer Hans von Dohnanyi, who was married to Dietrich's sister Christine. Orders to execute the seven were issued on 5 April, apparently at Hitler's direct order. An officer in the Reich Security Service who came to take Hans away described him as "the mastermind behind the 20 July plot." This refers to 20 July 1944 when a bomb placed by Count Claus von Stauffenberg exploded but failed to kill Hitler, the last in an long series of attempts by the resistance to replace the National Socialist regime. Hans and Dietrich had been arrested on 5 April 1943, more than fifteen months before the 20 July attempt. Nevertheless this description accurately describes Dohnanyi's role in the resistance.

The leadership of the German resistance was based in the counter-intelligence service of the armed forces, the *Abwehr*. Admiral Walter-Wilhelm Canaris, head of the *Abwehr*, had fostered a resistance unit in its central Military Intelligence Office headed by Colonel (later General) Hans Oster. On 25 August 1939, as war approached, Dohnanyi was hired as a special leader in this Office. Dohnanyi and Oster, both of whom had long been working against the National Socialist regime, would now work together in the *Abwehr*. In addition to Bonhoeffer, Dohnanyi, Canaris, and Oster, the others executed were Dr. Karl Sack, head of the army's legal department, Theodor Strünk, an attorney, and Colonel Ludwig Gehre.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer had fled to the USA to avoid the military call-up. He arrived in New York on 12 June 1939 with a career in the USA rapidly unfolding before him. After eight days he cancelled all of these plans by announcing his decision to return to Germany. On 26 June the daily scripture from 2 Timothy 4:21 read "Do your best to come to me before winter." Bonhoeffer wrote in his diary

That has followed me throughout the day. . . . we . . . return because that is where our life is, and because we leave our life behind, we destroy it, if we are not back there. . . . "Do your best to come to me before winter" – it is not a misuse of scripture if I apply that to myself. If God gives me grace to do it.

Arriving back in Berlin on 27 July, he returned to Pomerania in Eastern Germany to continue courses which were, in effect, continuations of the education he had offered at the nearby seminary in Finkenwalde that had been closed by the Security Service in 1937. As Ribbentrop arrived in Moscow on 23 August to conclude a pact with the USSR, Bonhoeffer received word that war was imminent and broke off the summer courses, returning to Berlin on 26 August.

Dohnanyi had been working against the regime since Hitler's accession to power. Serving as assistant to the Minister of Justice from May 1933 until September 1938, he had provided Bonhoeffer with access to confidential information about the situation in Germany. After August 1939 Dohnanyi drew closer to Dietrich than to anyone else in the resistance. Dohnanyi introduced him to the inner circle of the resistance and Bonhoeffer became directly involved in its decisions. To keep him from military service, Dohnanyi and Oster had Bonhoeffer officially declared indispensable for intelligence work. In late 1940, to avoid increasing restrictions the Security Service was placing on him in Berlin, Bonhoeffer was officially assigned as an (unpaid) agent to the Munich office of the *Abwehr*.

Bonhoeffer was remarkably free during this period and continued work on his "Ethics." In addition

to being the culmination of his theological efforts, it also addresses issues relevant to National Socialism and the resistance. He described, as “one of most astonishing experiences,” how leading resistance figures, who had been, until recently, far from the Church, “had now, suddenly and surprisingly, come very near indeed to the Christian standpoint.” This is a description of people like Hans von Dohnanyi, as well as other members of Dietrich’s family, his brother Klaus, and his brother-in law Rüdiger Schleicher, both of whom were executed on 23 April 1945 for their involvement in the resistance.

Although raised in a nominal Christian environment, such people had come to regard the Church as, at best, irrelevant, if not actually hostile to the liberal values they espoused. Then came National Socialism. “The Children of the Church, who had become independent and gone their own ways, now in the hour of danger returned to their mother.” Bonhoeffer became central to them because of the One who was central to him. “It is an experience of our days that the spoken name of Jesus alone exercises an unforeseen power.” He spoke of “all those who in their struggle for justice, truth, humanity and freedom have learnt once again to speak the name of Jesus Christ, even though it is often with hesitation and with genuine fear.”

Bonhoeffer possessed, as his biographer has written, “an unusual capacity to help other people arrive at decisions.” He enabled resistance leaders to make decisions on the issues they faced. It is this, together with his powerful theological perspective, that made Bonhoeffer central to the resistance. As he advanced more deeply into the resistance, he drew closer to the theology and life of Martin Luther. This is evident in his discussion of vocation “which has come to be of almost unique significance for the history of ethics.” Bonhoeffer emphasized the two sided nature of vocation or calling.

The calling, in the New Testament sense, is never a sanctioning of worldly institutions as such; its “yes” to them always includes at the same time an extremely emphatic “no,” an extremely sharp protest against the world. Luther’s return from the monastery to the world, to the “calling,” is, in the true New Testament sense, the fiercest attack and assault to be launched against the world since primitive Christianity. Now a man takes up his position against the world *in* the world, the calling is the place at which the call of Christ is answered, the place at which a man lives responsibly.

As Luther gave up the structured life of the monastery to plunge in the to the uncharted world of religious reform, so Bonhoeffer gave up the life of church theologian to plunge into the uncharted world of political resistance. By the spring of 1944, after a year in prison, he was awaiting with great anticipation the coming attempt to replace the National Socialist regime. The failure of this attempt on 20 July 1944 did not deter him. He affirmed the path he had chosen in a letter written the following day.

During the last year or so I’ve come to know and understand more and more the profound this-worldliness of Christianity. . . . By this-worldliness I mean living unreservedly in life’s duties, problems, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities. In so doing we throw ourselves completely into the arms of God, taking seriously not our own sufferings but those of God in the world – watching with Christ in Gethsemane.

I think Luther lived a this-worldly life in this sense.