

Written by Barbara Diggs

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Man of Principles



Portrait of Dietrich Bonhoeffer in *Happier Times*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was born on February 4, 1906, in Breslau, Silesia (Breslau used to be in Germany but is now part of Poland), but he grew up in Berlin, Germany. In many respects, Bonhoeffer was an ordinary boy who liked to play with his seven brothers and sisters, and read adventure stories. But he was also a very intense child, preoccupied with complex concepts like eternity and death.

When Bonhoeffer was seventeen, he decided to study theology – the study of the nature of God. He was fascinated with the church and wanted to understand what it meant to live a Christian life. After completing his studies in 1927, he worked in Barcelona, Spain, then two years later, went to New York to study at

the Union Theological Seminary. While there, he befriended a French pastor named Jean Lassère, with whom he enjoyed debating the church's role in politics and war. Bonhoeffer, like many German pastors of that time, believed that the church shouldn't be involved in matters of politics and that war was a necessary evil. Lassère disagreed, arguing that "one can't be a Christian and a nationalist at the same time" and that God should be "valued higher than the fatherland." These arguments deeply impressed Bonhoeffer, and when he returned to Berlin in 1931, he carried these new ideas with him.

A New Germany

When Bonhoeffer returned to Germany, he found the country in an economic depression and political distress. The Weimar Republic, Germany's first democratic state, was in shambles, and the Communists and the National Socialists (Nazis) were fighting for power. Many Germans longed for a strong, authoritarian figure to lead them and viewed Adolf Hitler, head of the Nazi party, as the perfect person to do so. Hitler promised to make Germany powerful – rich with jobs and filled with only Aryan (non-Jewish Caucasian) people.

Bonhoeffer, now working as a pastor in Berlin, was alarmed at Hitler's message but was even more alarmed to learn that the Nazis supporters were trying to take control of the church through a so-called faith movement. Supporters of this movement believed that religion was rooted in the "soil of the country" and the "blood of its people." To Bonhoeffer, it was obvious that these people valued Germany higher than God.

Hitler Comes to Power

In January 1933, Hitler became chancellor of Germany. The next day, Bonhoeffer gave a radio address that pointedly discussed how a *führer* (leader) should be aware of the limits of his authority and not allow himself to be made into an idol. The broadcast was cut off before Bonhoeffer finished.

Months later, a law (known as the Aryan Paragraph) was passed barring non-Aryans from working for the government, teaching, or holding religious positions. Bonhoeffer was outraged on behalf of all Jews and called on the church to refuse to implement the paragraph with respect to church pastors of Jewish descent. He gave a lecture to a group of Berlin pastors, arguing that the church had a duty to fight political injustice.

The lecture was not a success – most of the pastors left the room before he had finished. In the end, the church voted to implement the Aryan Paragraph. All the pastors of Jewish descent were fired. Disgusted, Bonhoeffer quit his job in protest. He decided to take a pastoral post in London, England, instead.

The Confessing Church

Bonhoeffer was not the only pastor to be horrified by Hitler's unjust racial policies and attempt to dominate the church. A group of pastors banded together to create another church, called the Confessing Church, which sought to remain free of Nazi influence. The Nazis immediately banned the Confessing Church, but Bonhoeffer ignored this. He unreservedly discussed the new church with his English colleagues and tried to convince them that the German Evangelical Church (now known as the Reich Church) was under Nazi control and held principles incompatible with the Christian faith. The Confessing Church, he argued, should be the only German church acknowledged abroad.

Unfortunately, few people took him seriously. Many of Bonhoeffer's international religious contacts viewed the dispute as merely between two church factions, and could not see the dangerous implications of Nazi influence on the church.

In 1934, Bonhoeffer returned to Germany to head a seminary created by the Confessing Church. Bonhoeffer was delighted to return, but the Confessing Church was in trouble. Members were under increasing pressure from the Nazis to pledge their allegiance to Hitler, and many, fearing for their safety, were giving in. Bonhoeffer and a few other radical church members refused to submit. Within a few years, the Reich Church shut down the seminary. Bonhoeffer told his students they were free to leave, but all insisted upon staying. The seminary continued operating illegally.

Discussion or Essay Questions

Pastor Jean Lassère convinced Dietrich Bonhoeffer that one "cannot be a Christian and nationalist at the same time." What do you think this means? Do you agree? Why or why not?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a Christian minister and yet he participated in a plot to have Adolf Hitler killed. Do you think his participation in this plot was unethical? Think of three reasons why it might have been unethical, and think of three reasons why it might have been ethical.

After Adolf Hitler came to power, Dietrich Bonhoeffer warned against a political leader allowing himself to be made into an idol. What do you think he meant by that? What do you think the dangers are?





Bonhoeffer Memorial Plaque in Berlin

By 1939, Germany was on the brink of war. Times now were dangerous for radical Confessing Church members – it was even illegal to pray for peace – but Bonhoeffer continued secretly training his young seminarians, who were placed in small villages throughout Germany.

As war approached, Bonhoeffer feared he would be conscripted into the army and forced to fight for the Nazis – an intolerable thought. He obtained a position with the Union Theological Seminary and left for America in June 1939. But upon arriving in the United States, he felt guilty for leaving his friends and colleagues. He wrote, “I made a mistake in coming to America . . . I shall have no right to take part in the restoration of Christian life in Germany after the war unless I share the trials of this time with my people.” Within weeks, Bonhoeffer returned home. But this time, he decided to fight the Nazis in a different way – undercover.

Secret Agent

Before Bonhoeffer left for America, his brother-in-law, Hans von Dohnanyi, who was a lawyer for the Reich Ministry of Justice, had approached him about becoming involved in the German resistance. At the time, Bonhoeffer declined. But after he returned from the United States, he decided that as a Christian, he had an obligation to try to rid the world of Hitler.

To the rest of the world, it looked like Dietrich Bonhoeffer had finally given up. But in reality, he was using his international contacts to communicate secret information about the plans of the German resistance to kill Hitler and overthrow the Nazi regime. He also was critically involved in a mission called Operation 7, in which he helped smuggle fourteen German Jews into Switzerland.

A few years later, the Gestapo, while scrutinizing irregularities in accounting, came across traces of Operation 7, and the names Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Hans von Dohnanyi. They were arrested shortly thereafter.

Imprisonment and Deaths

Upon his arrest in April 1943, Bonhoeffer was thrown in prison. Prison life was horrible: it was freezing cold and the thin blanket he had stank so badly, he could not use it. Bonhoeffer was afraid – not of death, but of being tortured into revealing information about his coconspirators. The plan to kill Hitler was still underway and he feared jeopardizing it.

Although Bonhoeffer’s fears were never realized, the news came on July 20, 1944, that the attempt on Hitler’s life had failed. In October 1944, the Nazis found papers that implicated Bonhoeffer, Dohnanyi, and others for their roles in the scheme. Many of the people involved were promptly executed, and Bonhoeffer could only wait to see what would happen.

The blow came on April 8, 1945. On that day, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was sent to Flossenbürg concentration camp and was condemned to death for high treason. Shortly before his death, he left a message to be passed on to a colleague in England: “This for me is the end, but also the beginning . . . I believe in the principle of our universal Christian brotherhood which rises above all national interests and that our victory is certain.” Ever faithful, he was right. He was hanged on the morning of April 9 – only three weeks before Hitler killed himself and the Germans surrendered.



About the author

Barbara Diggs is a freelance writer living in France. She graduated from Stanford Law School and practiced law in New York and Paris for several years before changing careers.