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Detlef Garbe. *Zwischen Widerstand und Martyrium: Die Zeugen Jehovas im "Dritten Reich".* Munich: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 1994. 577 pp. DM 98,00(paper), ISBN 978-3-486-56074-9.

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The Jehovah's Witnesses (widely known in Germany as "[Ernste] Bibelforscher," from the official pre-1931 designation *Internationale Bibelforscher-Vereinigung*, or IBV) remain one of the more intriguing footnotes in the history of Nazi Germany. In the official Hitlerian demonology, the Witnesses ranked on a virtual par with Communists and Jews, and after 1933 they faced a campaign of sustained repression out of all proportion to their minuscule numbers (perhaps 25-30,000 active members) and social marginality. Thousands suffered arrest, and hundreds were executed or died in custody. In the camps, where they comprised a separate category of inmates, their courage and steadfastness earned them bemused admiration from some of their most zealous persecutors, including Heinrich Himmler, who was known to fantasize about enlisting them to colonize the Slavic frontiers of a future Greater Germany. Such a record gives them a considerable degree of interest, not least for scholars attempting to mark out precise configurations of conformity and resistance in Nazi society.

Detlef Garbe's occasional references to Jehovah's Witnesses as "forgotten victims" of the Third Reich (pp. 9, 26) can be taken more as rhetorical flourishes than as sober statements of fact. Garbe's own surveys (pp. 16-40, 508-25) portray an extensive and diverse tradition of scholarship dating back at least to the contributions of Friedrich Zipfel, Michael Kater, and others in the 1960s. While his book therefore breaks little new thematic ground, it certainly offers by far the most comprehensive account to date. The revision of a 1989 Hamburg dissertation, it is a monument of assiduous research – all the more impressive given the apparent disinclination of officials in the Jehovah's Witness organization to assist the inquiries of a non-member. Garbe has combed over a dozen private collections and scoured the holdings of more than a score of archives, including court, military, and concentration camp records in Germany, France, Austria, and Poland; he has interviewed, corresponded with, or otherwise tapped the recollections of some seventy *Zeitzeugen*. The result is a massive and meticulously documented narrative that leaves few themes unexplored and few issues unexamined. Working through Garbe's 2,000 densely printed footnotes, one becomes a bit nonplussed by his remark that the original scholarly apparatus has been "substantially shortened" for purposes of publication (p. 7).

This accumulation of detail in fact proves essential to Garbe's purposes, since one of his central contentions is that explanations for the behavior of both the Nazi state and the IBV must be sought less in essentialist categories than in the dynamic logic of historical events – "dass auch der Geschichte dieser religioesen Sondergemeinschaft weder etwas kaum Begreifliches noch irgendein 'Mysterium' anhaftet" (p. 15). Garbe casts his history as a dialectic of repression and response, triggered by the Nazis, in which the actions of one side served to provoke progressively more uncompromising behaviors from the other. In this respect – though Garbe himself does not choose to press the point – the case of the Jehovah's Witnesses seems to reflect in microcosm the dynamic of radicalization often invoked in functionalist models of the Hitler state.

As Garbe points out, hostility to the IBV was a staple of Nazi rhetoric since the early days of the party. This hostility was driven in large part by the Witnesses' millenarian religious ideology, which identified all "earthly" institutions with the realm of Satan and increasingly enjoined any form of civic participation, from oaths and patriotic gestures to military service. In early 1933 rhetorical hostility turned to active repression, and this persisted in various forms for the duration of the Third Reich. Initial measures targeted the IBV as an organization. As Ernst Helmreich has previously argued in *The German Churches under Hitler* (1979), the various bans and confiscations of this early phase, justified in part under the emergency provisions of the Enabling Act, represented a radical intensification of policies already proposed or implemented during the Weimar Republic – measures that enjoyed considerable support among Protestant and

Catholic church leaders, who were inclined to regard the zealous proselytizing of the Witnesses as a threat both to public order and to their own institutional prerogatives. Ironically, the formal success of Nazi policies, designed as they were to neutralize official functions and intimidate ordinary members into inactivity, in effect opened the way for the most radical oppositionists within the now-banned organization to set the terms for members' future "witness," which after 1935 grew more confrontational (protest leaflets, refusal to give the Hitler salute or participate in party-mandated functions) and conspiratorial (secret meetings, smuggling of proscribed literature). Garbe discusses the regime's increasingly brutal countermeasures in detail; he also provides insightful explanations for the movement's remarkable ability to continue regenerating itself, via familial networks and flexible cell-group connections, despite waves of imprisonment, surveillance, economic harassment, and the like. By 1939, to be sure, coordinated action had been rendered virtually unthinkable. The war years, to which Garbe devotes a particularly lengthy chapter, were primarily a time of small-scale actions by isolated grouplets or individuals, many of them confined in concentration camps or facing draconian sanctions for refusing or attempting to avoid military service.

The broad outlines of this account are familiar from earlier studies. A host of details are, of course, new, and along the way Garbe provides a good number of important corrections and refinements to previous analyses. His painstaking review of comparative statistics (pp. 479-88) suggests, for example, that the percentages of Witnesses detained, imprisoned, or killed may well have been lower than often asserted. He also adduces membership data to suggest that the social composition of the IBV may have been less heavily proletarian than previously believed. Garbe pays considerable attention to the administrative mechanisms of Nazi repression; his emphasis on the legal wrangles and shifting power relationships between judicial and extra-judicial *Instanzen* (pp. 130-48, 260-314) yields a finely calibrated analysis of the interplay between contingency and ideology typical of quotidian practice in the SS state.

Garbe spends considerable time describing the growth of the IBV prior to 1933. Except for occasional footnotes, however, he chooses to say little about the parallel growth of the movement during the postwar Occupation era. One hesitates to suggest lengthening an already lengthy book. Yet it could be argued that the history of the Jehovah's Witnesses during the Third Reich is inseparable from postwar construals of that history; the Witnesses' own appropriation of a particular narrative of persecution, for example, clearly provided a powerful source of legitimation for resurgent proselytizing after 1945. This postwar legacy is also relevant, arguably, to the question of how best to situate the IBV within the larger framework of Third Reich historiography. Garbe directly addresses such questions only at the very end of his book (pp. 502-29) – a debatable decision, since it tends to deprive the basic narrative of a possibly useful interpretive context. Garbe may also be a bit too quick to dismiss some aspects of other interpretations, such as Michael Kater's observations about the sectarian affinities between Witnesses' theocratic beliefs and Nazi conceptions of the *Fuehrerstaat.* The book's general conclusions, however, should repay careful consideration. The ethos of the IBV, Garbe suggests, resists conventional interpretive schemata; it was "mehr als 'nur' Nonkonformitaet, grundsaetzlicher als Dissidenz, aktiver als Verweigerung; fuer Gegnerschaft fehlte die oppositionelle Zielsetz-ung und fuer Konspiration jeder weitergehende Verschwoerungs- oder Umsturzplan" (528). In the end he elects to describe it as a species of *Resistenz*, an uncompromising but intrinsically religious and apolitical mobilization against Nazi ideological claims coupled with an aggressive "Verteidigung des eigenen religioesen Handlungsraumes gegen konkrete Eingriffe eines Omnipotenz beanspruchenden Staates" (p. 529).

In sum, and with suitable apologies to Fritz Stern, the Jehovah's Witnesses would appear to represent a peculiar case of the political consequences of unpolitical Germans: if they took the path of confrontation vis-a-vis the Nazi state, they did so out of a fundamental desire simply to be left alone. Detlef Garbe's fair-minded account does much to illuminate the logic of that path. His understated conclusions, and the wealth of evidence deployed on their behalf, will clearly constitute an indispensable point of departure for future studies in this area.

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