



Heinz Huerten, ed. *Akten deutscher Bischoefe ueber die Lage der Kirche 1918-1933. Vol. 1: 1918-1925; Vol. 2: 1926-1933.* Paderborn: Ferdinand Schoeningh Verlag, 2007. 2 volumes. xxxiv + 1299 pp. EUR 168.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-7867-0686-1.

Reviewed by Kevin P. Spicer, C.S.C. (Stonehill College)

Published on H-German (September, 2010)

Commissioned by Benita Blessing

## The German Catholic Bishops during the Weimar Republic

Heinz Hürten's edited collection of German bishops' records on the status of the German Catholic Church is a welcome addition to the six previously published volumes spanning the years 1933-45.[1] Following in the footsteps of noted predecessors Bernhard Stasiewski and Ludwig Volk and sponsored by the German Bishops' Conference's Commission for Contemporary History (Bonn), Hürten has culled together 591 documents. He draws primarily from the archival collections of the archdioceses of Cologne, Munich and Freising, and Wrocław (formerly Breslau), which include the *Generalia* files of the Cologne archdiocese and the *Kabinettsregistratur* of Cardinals Felix von Hartmann and Karl Joseph Schulte of Cologne and the *Nachlässe* of Cardinals Michael von Faulhaber of Munich and Adolf Bertram of Breslau. Hürten has been mindful not to reprint documents already found in previously published collections and directs the reader to these works in his annotations.[2] Interestingly, Hürten does not acknowledge the current location of the Bertram papers (*Nachlass*), the Archiwum Archidiecezji we Wrocław, but consistently refers to it by the archive's former German name, Erzbis-tumsarchiv Breslau (EA Breslau). It is unclear whether he used the original files located in Wrocław or the poorly filmed microfilm located in the offices of the commission in Bonn.

By centering primarily on the German bishops, Hürten offers a top-down approach to German Catholic Church history at the expense of furthering our knowl-

edge of grassroots issues and pastoral concerns. At the same time, Hürten is realistic about the goals he sets for his edited work, primarily to alert readers to key events in the life of the German Catholic Church during Weimar Germany and to provide references for further archival research. The selected documents cover a wide spectrum of political and societal issues in which the Catholic Church was engaged and confirm Hürten's choice to center primarily on the archival collections of the key episcopal dioceses of Breslau, Munich, and Cologne.

The documents reveal that immediately after the war, the German bishops had to adjust to the new political conditions of that time. Although historians have often labeled many members of the hierarchy as staunch supporters of the monarchy, a November 16, 1918 letter from Augustin Kilian, bishop of Limburg, to Cardinal Hartmann of Cologne reveals a refusal by Hartmann and Archbishop Faulhaber of Munich to issue a statement advocating support for the monarchy. Nevertheless, the state of revolution that existed in postwar Germany unnerved the German bishops. The calls for separation of church and state that might have led to the end of church tax, the removal of religious education from public schools, and the dismantling of theology faculties in public universities particularly concerned them. In their 1918 Pastoral Letter, the Prussian Bishops even warned of a coming *Kulturkampf* (culture war) that would be "of a much worse nature" than that experienced under Otto von Bismarck (p. 43). The bishops would express a simi-

lar fear numerous times under National Socialism.

The establishment of the Weimar Republic and the passing of its constitution on August 11, 1919 did not immediately alleviate the concerns of the German episcopacy. In particular, in October 1919, the Fulda Bishops' Conference wrote to Reich President Friedrich Ebert to express its concern over articles 10, 137, 138, and 143 through 149—all centering on the question of the freedom of the Church to operate in the state. Still there were bishops, such as Kilian of Limburg, who saw in the new constitution a means to ensure that Catholics would no longer be treated as “Prussians of second class status” (p. 113). Similarly, even the conservative Cardinal Bertram saw in the discussion about women's emancipation a whole new bloc of voters who could support Church concerns in local and national elections if educated properly.

While the bishops negotiated their positions with the Weimar Republic, they also joined their fellow Germans in lamenting the June 28, 1919 Versailles Treaty. For example, the 1919 Pastoral Letter of the Fulda Bishops' Conference proclaimed that while “the sufferings of the war are over, now begins the sufferings of the peace settlement” and assured Germans that they would “be for many long years burdened with new concerns, troubles and afflictions” (p. 98). By 1922, the bishops expressed their concerns over Versailles even more strongly in their greeting to Pope Pius XI: “Allow us, Holy Father, to express our concern and our sorrow regarding the extremely sad and degrading situation in which our Volk finds itself. Defeated by the cruel and severe so-called Peace of Versailles, it will hurtle from disaster to disaster into ruin. Contrary to all law and justice, the claim is made that Germany is alone to be blamed for the war. Large areas in full bloom of secular and Christian culture are occupied by men lacking any human culture; for example, heathens and Muslims have been assigned the task of forcing Christians, and even Catholics, to preserve public order” (p. 440). Amazingly, by the following year, the bishops who gathered at Fulda changed their stance, admitting that “the worst of all world wars lies behind us. It left in the souls of all peoples an authentic abhorrence against war and a voracious craving for a peace that earns the name peace” (p. 527). In turn, the bishops exhorted Catholics to combat poverty and hunger and free themselves of any notions of revenge against the victors. This spirit of reconciliation is also present in the November 26, 1922 letter of Cardinal Schulte to Cardinal Désiré-Joseph Mercier, archbishop of Mecheln, Belgium, in which Schulte lamented

the treatment of Belgian Catholics by German soldiers during the war. By contrast, Christian Schreiber, bishop of Meißen at the time, displayed significant insensitivity toward Belgium's suffering by expressing overt German nationalism in his 1929 letter to Cardinal Faulhaber in reference to events surrounding the publication of details of German war atrocities in a special issue of *Allgemeine Rundschau*.<sup>[3]</sup> In his reply, Faulhaber sharply corrected Schreiber by acknowledging the atrocities committed by German soldiers, especially toward Belgian Catholics.

The documents show that the Great War and its remnants were of significant concern to the German bishops. In August 1919, the Fulda Bishops' Conference called on the Allied powers to release German prisoners of war, especially those still imprisoned in France. By February 1920, German bishops contemplated issuing a statement that called for clemency toward military leaders, statesman, soldiers and civil servants whom the Allied powers considered trying for “alleged perpetrated crimes” (p. 201). At the last minute, however, Cardinal Bertram, the leading prelate, withdrew the protest from publication, fearing that its dissemination might cause the occupying powers to place restrictions on or compromise the pastoral freedoms of individual bishops. The German hierarchy made similar calls of clemency for Nazi criminals following the Second World War, especially during war crime trials and the denazification process.

Aside from the important issues and events above, the documents generally show that during much of Weimar, the German bishops primarily concerned themselves with questions about pastoral issues, especially Catholic schools and religious instruction. Campaigns against indecency, pornography, modern dance, and nudism were also discussed at length in many of the documents. The bishops regularly exhorted the Catholic press to defend Catholic interests and to combat “trash and filth” (p. 862). At the same time the bishops also cautioned editors about devoting too much space to sports at the expense of issues closer to the “spiritual life and care of the soul” (p. 906). Pastoral care also included concern for the soldiers' spiritual well-being. The volumes are also full of correspondence concerning the army's military chaplaincy. A clear tug-of-war took place between the bishops and the military leadership, the latter seeking a self-standing head of the military chaplaincy who would be free from the jurisdiction of his local ordinary. Interesting is Cardinal Bertram's acceptance of *Reichsminister* Wilhelm Groener's candidate, Franz Justus Rarkowski, to succeed the out-going head of military chaplaincy Paul Schwamborn. Bertram refers to Rarkowski as “impec-

cable, inwardly pious, and in every respect obedient toward the episcopacy and a dedicated pastor who through his tactical wisdom possesses full confidence of the military leadership” (p. 903). As Heinrich Missalla and Gordon Zahn have shown, Rarkowski became a devout supporter of Adolf Hitler and of annihilative warfare during the Second World War.[4]

Concern for the pastoral care of Catholics also led the German bishops to challenge the influence of right-wing groups, at least during the Weimar Republic. In November 1923, when the Silesian commander of the Jung German Order (Jungdo), a right-wing, nationalistic, “fatherland” (patriotic) organization, asked Cardinal Bertram to support his group and recruit Catholic clergy to do the same, Bertram replied negatively. In a separate letter to a priest of his diocese, Bertram stated, “one-sided nationalism is not compatible with the principles of the Catholic religion” (p. 550). Eventually, in March 1924, the Fulda Bishops’ Conference issued a statement regarding its position toward new organizations. While the bishops did not prohibit membership in organizations such as the Jungdo and Stahlhelm, they warned Catholics against the promotion of extreme nationalism. In addition to their concern about one-sided nationalism, the interconfessional nature of these patriotic organizations also worried the German bishops. To counter such concerns, the bishops supported the efforts of Catholic organizations such as Neudeutschland which Cardinal Schulte argued would “instill a positive true love of fatherland” in Catholic youth while strengthening their Catholic faith (p. 559).

Still, the bishops did not prohibit Catholic membership in these patriotic organizations. The bishops remained neutral, not favoring any position. Nevertheless, several letters detail how patriotic organizations attempted to push Catholic bishops to take a stance on the issue. Repeatedly, for example, the documents reveal that Cardinal Bertram, in particular, refused to comply with such a request, instead issuing statements that encouraged Catholic youth and young men to join Catholic organizations, which promoted a healthy love of fatherland. By August 1925, however, the Fulda Bishops’ Conference took a stance and decided that priests could no longer be active in patriotic organizations. This forced priests such as Father Lorenz Pieper of the Paderborn archdiocese, whose written profession of allegiance to Jungdo is included in this collection, to go underground with their activities.

Overall, the documents reveal a mixed message in

regard to right-wing organizations, and even to politics in general. Little discussion concerning the Center or Bavarian People’s Party can be found in these documents, though history reveals that there was far more contact than evidenced by this collection. By contrast, most documents regularly reveal the hierarchy’s fear of becoming too involved in political issues. Still other documents, such as the August 13, 1924 letter of Karl Fritz, archbishop of Freiburg, to Cardinal Bertram, expose a contradiction to such a stance; Fritz writes, “[t]he priest shall in the exercise of his office refrain from party politics, however, in sermons he must deal with civic duties, Christian instruction, and catechism and fight against anything hostile to the Church. He has the right to be politically active in his parish” (p. 579). Primarily, though, the bishops argued that the sphere of the Church’s concern should be left to the domain of pastoral ministry. However, from the documents, it appears that most issues and events touched upon this area.

Though well documented in other collections, the episcopacy’s initial series of encounters with National Socialism are also present in Hürten’s collected documents. Most interesting is the March 24, 1929 letter of Philipp Jakob Mayer, the Mainz vicar general to Munich’s diocesan chancery. After describing the events surrounding the death and burial of the National Socialist enthusiast Erich Jost, for whose funeral the local pastor, Father Heinrich Heinstadt, instituted clear limitations for National Socialist participation, Mayer proceeded to boldly and clearly spell out where National Socialist ideology contradicted Catholic teaching.[5] In particular, Mayer challenged the Nazi party’s position toward Jews. Interestingly, Mayer also added that such an outlook and extreme nationalism could lead “to disdain and hatred of foreign peoples, especially of the Jewish people and eventually to contempt and persecution of Catholics, whose religion, the National Socialist writers claim, contains Jewish elements” (p. 998). Thus, as many historians have pointed out, the documents confirm that Catholic concern for Jews was often tied up with their own perceived minority status and fear of persecution by the National Socialists. At the same time, the documents reveal little about ingrained Catholic antisemitism and its influence on Catholic-Jewish relations in relation to state-church interactions. Still, antisemitism reared its dirty head as early as 1918, when Jacobus von Hauck, archbishop of Bamberg, wrote to Cardinal Faulhaber about the right of the state to appoint a pastor: “It would also be humiliating for the Church if a pastor would be named by a revolutionary-government with a

Jew [Kurt Eisner] at the head” (p. 13)—or when the Prussian bishops in their 1918 Pastoral Letter compared any separation of church and state to the Jews’ so-called rejection of Christ found in the Gospel of John 19:14.

As the Catholic Church dealt with the Nazi Party, it also dealt with socialism and communism. Yet, in the documents, the concern over Bolshevism reveals itself much later than one might expect. The first major address and challenge to it occurred at the August 1930 Fulda Bishops’ Conference, which subsequently issued a report on the dangers of Bolshevism. Again, in 1931, the bishops gathered at Fulda discussed similar concerns. From this point until the end of the collection, the communists and National Socialists were regular concerns for the German bishops.

Overall, the documents contained in Hürten’s two-volume collection reveal a group of pastoral leaders who were acutely concerned about the welfare of their flock and the future place of Catholicism in Germany. Although the minutes of the Fulda Bishops’ Conference offer little insight into the thinking of individual German bishops, the remaining correspondence offers us hints of the differences that existed among the spiritual leaders of German Catholics. Generally, however, the bishops appear as a united front, ever vigilant for the cause of their faith. At the same time, the documents addressing National Socialism are bold in their presentation and analysis. Unfortunately, such boldness, especially in challenging nationalism and National Socialism’s anti-Jewish rhetoric, was hardly found after March 1933. One can only imagine the outcome in German history if the German Bishops made the contents of Mainz’s Vicar General

Mayer’s 1929 letter the central issue of their 1933 Pastoral Letter and stood by their ban on membership in the Nazi Party, instead of lifting it in March 1933. But that is only hopeful fiction, and thus Hürten’s two-volume set must be read in conjunction with the other six volumes in this series of documents.

#### Notes

[1]. Bernhard Stasiewski, ed., *Akten deutscher Bischöfe über die Lage der Kirche 1933-1945*, vols. 1-3 (Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald, 1968, 1976, 1980); Ludwig Volk, ed., *Akten deutscher Bischöfe über die Lage der Kirche 1933-1945*, vols. 4-6 (Mainz: Mathias-Grünwald, 1981, 1983, 1985).

[2]. For example, see Ludwig Volk, ed., *Akten Kardinal Michael von Faulhabers 1917-1945*, vol. 1 (Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald, 1975).

[3]. On this point, see Gregory Munro, *Hitler’s Bavarian Antagonist: Georg Moenius and the Allgemeine Rundschau of Munich, 1929-1933* (Lewiston: Edwin Mullen Press, 2006), 284-290.

[4]. Heinrich Missalla, *Wie der Krieg zur Schule Gottes wurde: Hitlers Feldbischof Rarkowski: Eine notwendige Erinnerung* (Oberursel: Publik-Forum, 1997); and Gordon C. Zahn, *German Catholics and Hitler’s Wars* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1969).

[5]. For the significance of Mayer’s December 1929 letter see Heinz Hürten, “Kardinal Faulhaber und die Juden. Eine frühe Stellungnahme der katholischen Kirche zum Nationalsozialismus,” *Zeitschrift für bayerische Landesgeschichte* 68 (2005):1029-1034.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

**Citation:** Kevin P. Spicer, C.S.C. Review of Huerten, Heinz, ed., *Akten deutscher Bischoefe ueber die Lage der Kirche 1918-1933. Vol. 1: 1918-1925; Vol. 2: 1926-1933.* H-German, H-Net Reviews. September, 2010.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=30544>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.