

Theodore N. Thomas. *Women against Hitler: Christian Resistance in the Third Reich.* Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1995. xxiv + 166 pp. \$49.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-275-94619-7.



Reviewed by Doris L. Bergen

Published on H-German (November, 1995)

Theodore Thomas's *Women against Hitler: Christian Resistance in the Third Reich* pays tribute to the women of the Confessing Church. Through his attention to women and their roles, Thomas puts a human face on the "church struggle" -- the much documented contest for control of institutionalized Protestantism in National Socialist Germany. Thomas's argument has two main parts. On one level, he seeks to recover the presence of women for the record of the Protestant church under Nazism. To that end, Thomas demonstrates the ways in which women played active and indeed "crucial roles in the Confessing Church, although historians have ignored them" (p. 23). The second component of the argument is more speculative. Thomas suggests that the post-war "emergence of women as recognized, official leaders within the Protestant Church" in Germany was a direct result of women's engagement in the cause of the Confessing Church (p. xxiii). Unlike their predecessors in the Protestant Reformation, Thomas maintains, "the Confessing women succeeded in establishing the social and theological gains they won during the Church Struggle" (p. 115). He summarizes his findings and his focus in

three words: resistance, persecution, and emergence.

Thomas's first chapter, an overview of the church struggle in Nazi Germany, draws on standard accounts by John S. Conway and Klaus Scholder. The rest of the book relies heavily on information gathered through "eyewitness interviews" with twenty-eight participants in the Confessing Church. The result is both intimate and very readable. Thomas's "narrative introduction," for example, sets a poignant tone by telling stories of three Confessing Church women -- Felicitas Veder, Tabea Immer, and Emmi Hof. Use of oral testimony and personal correspondence enables Thomas to examine aspects of German church life in the 1930s and 1940s that are invisible in the written records. Chapter Two, on "Confessing laywomen in the church struggle," identifies some of the church secretaries, patronesses, and teachers who made the Confessing Church function at the local level. The third and most personal chapter deals with pastors' wives. Here Thomas's efforts generated numerous and detailed accounts. Chapter Four, on *Theologinnen* in the Confessing

Church, necessarily involves a much smaller group of women and hence a narrower source base. In this case too, oral sources are imperative.

Thomas's energy in identifying the women involved and in conducting interviews with them is commendable. But his use of those findings is somewhat problematic and even misleading in places. There appears to have been little effort made to verify the information received. Studies of human memory reveal its malleability and mutability. The best historical studies using interviews as sources test them against other voices or address issues of believability up front. Thomas does neither. As a result, some of the intriguing information he provides loses credibility. For example, Thomas repeats the claim by Irmgard Vogel's children that their mother, a pastor's wife, regularly altered church records to conceal Jewish grandparents in people's family trees (p. 62). If this true, it is a stunning example of a kind of resistance to the Nazi regime that is conspicuously absent in existing accounts of the German churches. But Thomas's single sentence on the matter gives readers no way to assess the validity of that claim. How old were Vogel's children at the time? Did their mother discuss her activities with them? How often did she commit such acts? Given the many reasons that either Vogel or her children might fabricate or embellish such a story, it is difficult to accept Thomas's acceptance of their version of events at face value.

Throughout his study, Thomas emphasizes resistance. The title makes the point twice, with its reference to "women against Hitler" and "Christian resistance in the Third Reich." But do those phrases accurately describe the situation Thomas depicts? He shows how women furthered the cause of the Confessing Church, but is such activity tantamount to opposing Hitler? Loyal German nationalists and even committed Nazis numbered among the Confessing ranks. Scholarship by Uriel Tal and Wolfgang Gerlach has demonstrated that members of the Confessing Church were by no

means immune to the antisemitism typical of many circles within German society. Although Gerlach's work appears in the bibliography, nowhere does Thomas acknowledge those findings. Instead, through his silence on the subject of complicity, he implies that the Confessing Church and its adherents, male and female, were resisters pure and clear. Sadly, that claim does not hold. Thomas scoured the cities and towns of Germany for the moving accounts of heroism that he presents. Those stories are crucial, but in order not to mislead readers, they must be presented in the context of the indifference, passivity, and even active cooperation of the majority of Germans in the Third Reich. Thomas would have done well to heed John S. Conway's warning against "hagiographical" accounts of the church struggle that demonstrate Protestant resistance, even if it means "suppressing certain facts."

Thomas's empathetic discussion of women's struggle for official standing within the church is admirable, and his contention that advances made during World War II furthered the cause of women's ordination is convincing. But he intimates that this progress toward equality occurred only within Confessing circles. In fact, women played very similar roles within the so-called German Christian movement, the pro-Nazi antagonist of the Confessing Church. Women served as German Christian vicars too, and wives of pastors in the movement filled in for their husbands during wartime. Lay women were secretaries, publicists, organizers, and patronesses of the German Christian cause. It may be tempting to assume that commitment to women's rights went hand in hand with opposition to pro-Nazi variants of Christianity. But the facts do not bear out that assumption. As Claudia Koonz has shown, women, their traditional roles, and even their efforts to circumvent or expand those roles could all be enlisted in the Nazi cause. Thomas mentions Koonz but does not test his hypotheses against her conclusions.

An intriguing aspect of Thomas's book is the attention he pays to so-called non-Aryans in the Confessing Church. Certain Confessing women, he observes, were defined as "non-Aryans" under Nazi law or took action on behalf of Jews and "non-Aryan Christians." Thomas attributes state and police measures against those women to the fact that they were Christians. But is that claim justified? Thomas's own evidence suggests probably not. For example, Thomas claims on page forty-one that "women as well as men sat in German prisons for their faith during the Church Struggle." The people he goes on to discuss were not arrested for activities connected to the Confessing Church, however. Instead, they were charged with "conspiring to falsify documents, deal in grocery coupons on the black market, and transfer identification papers to Jews in hiding." The director of the operation died for his activities. He was a "Jewish Christian physician," Thomas tells us. In general, the "martyrs" Thomas describes are overwhelmingly people defined by Nazi law as "non-Aryans" -- what Thomas calls "Jewish Christians." Friedrich Weissler, Anneliese and Hans Kauffmann, Inge Jacobsen, and Hildegard Jacoby, five of the six martyrs of the Confessing Church named (pp. 43-45), were all officially "non-Aryan." Can they simply be counted among those who gave their lives for the Confessing Church? Without evidence to the contrary, it seems more accurate to describe them as victims of the Nazi assault on Jews, Judaism, and so-called Jewish blood.

Thomas has performed a valuable service with his book *Women against Hitler*. The photographic essay alone provides a moving testimony to the women who gave so much to the Confessing Church. But readers who approach the book in isolation may come away with a somewhat skewed perception of the role of the Protestant churches in the Third Reich. "Resistance, persecution, and emergence" -- Thomas's triple byword -- is both catchy and appealing. But it fails to cap-

ture the complex and often painful reality of Christian responses to National Socialism.

Copyright (c) 1995 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@H-Net.MSU.EDU.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: Doris L. Bergen. Review of Thomas, Theodore N. *Women against Hitler: Christian Resistance in the Third Reich*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. November, 1995.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=202>



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