



**Georg Denzler.** *Widerstand ist nicht das richtige Wort: Katholische Priester und Theologen im Dritten Reich.* Zürich: Pendo Verlag, 2003. 304 S. EUR 22.00, broschiert, ISBN 978-3-85842-479-2.



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A Question of Resistance: The Catholic Church in the Third Reich

For more than forty years, a debate among historians has raged over the degree of ecclesiastical Catholic resistance to National Socialism. Scholars like Klaus Gotto, Hans Guenter Hockerts, and Konrad Repgen propose models that portray the church as an institution that resisted the Third Reich in a clear and consistent manner. Others, such as Gerhard Paul and Klaus-Michael Mallmann, refuse to embrace the former models and, instead, argue that the church engaged in a "form of loyal reluctance" (p. 9) in an attempt to exist within the Third Reich. George Denzler, Professor of Church History at the University of Bamberg, no stranger to the history of the Catholic Church in the Third Reich, goes even further than his colleagues by stating that historians should not even consider the word *Widerstand* to define the behavior of the Catholic church under Hitler.[1] Similarly, he rejects Martin Broszat's term *Resistenz* as too broad an expression to encase the dynamics of resistance. Although individual Catholics did resist the Hitler regime, Denzler ar-

gues that the German Catholic church, as an institution, failed to follow in the footsteps of Christ in its unwillingness to risk persecution by the state in order to speak out for justice and dignity for all people. He admits that even though the church did engage in conduct that the state would threateningly label as "deviant," which, at times, partially restricted the "totalitarian claim to power of National Socialism" (p. 9), it never sought to criticize the National Socialist government directly, especially in regard to issues that church authorities deemed outside of their sphere of concern. To support this argument, Denzler quotes extensively from both primary sources and from interviews that he conducted (originally for programs for Bavarian radio) with churchmen who had lived through this period. While offering analysis, he also allows the often damning quotes to speak for themselves to illustrate the extent of accommodation that the institutional Catholic church and its leaders were willing to make in order to survive within the Nazi state.

A major strength of Denzler's work is his use of examples to present and illustrate his case. For

example, in his overview of the church's interaction with National Socialism prior to and throughout Hitler's years of power, Denzler makes us aware of the church's diverse response to National Socialism as evidenced in the reaction of individual Catholics such as Fr. Stephen Rugel of Augsburg, who, even prior to 1933, spoke out against Hitler's antisemitism, predicting correctly where it might lead. Similarly, Denzler reveals the difficulty average priests had to endure once the German bishops reversed their verdict against National Socialism in a public statement on March 28, 1933. For example, Fr. Ludwig Wolker, General President of the Catholic Young Men's Association, wrote his bishop to inform him how difficult priests in the trenches found it to "switch gears" (p. 22). Despite individuals such as these, Denzler argues that most priests adhered to their bishops charge not to cause trouble with the new state. Most of the blame for such compliance, Denzler places on the shoulders of the bishops who taught and encouraged loyalty and submission to the authority of the state. However, Denzler does point out that there were exceptions to this rule, such as Konrad von Preysing, Bishop of Eichstaett (1932-1935) and then Bishop of Berlin (1935-1950), who, together with members of the Committee for Members of Religious Orders, urged his fellow bishops to abandon the *Eingabepolitik* of Adolf Cardinal Bertram, Archbishop of Breslau and head of the German Bishops Fulda Conference, and adopt a course of confrontation toward the Nazi government and party. Unfortunately, as Denzler correctly points out, his efforts fell on deaf ears. The bishops were too concerned with the fate of their own institution to jeopardize it by a clear campaign against the Nazi government.

According to Denzler, most German bishops gradually accommodated themselves to National Socialism after their March 28 pronouncement. For example, in 1933, after the promulgation of the state's forced sterilization law, Denzler relates that despite their protests, the bishops made provisions for hospital personnel who had to per-

form this procedure. Similarly, he reveals how the bishops acceded to the increasingly harsh anti-semitic policies of the Hitler regime. Starting with the April 1, 1933 boycott of Jewish owned businesses, Denzler accounts the case of Michael Cardinal von Faulhaber, Archbishop of Munich and Freising, who, like most bishops, feared reprisal from the state and loss of public support from Catholics if they advocated for Jews. Denzler points out that Faulhaber did instruct German Catholics not to engage in any actions that were unchristian toward Jews. Nevertheless, Faulhaber was not willing to go further and, instead, believed that the Jews could take care of themselves. Denzler points out that this was symptomatic and representative of bishops like Faulhaber who exhibited traditional anti-Judaism. More importantly, Denzler observes that during this period, it was very difficult for the average Catholic to distinguish between anti-Judaism and antisemitism. Both affected Jews negatively. Only the 1937 papal encyclical *Mit brennender Sorge* came close to speaking on behalf of the Jews in its one clear sentence against the racial fanaticism of National Socialism. Yet, Denzler notes that it "intentionally avoided the word Jew" to clarify its criticism of the state's treatment of Jews (p. 39). Those bishops who did publicly confront the state through their preaching and actions, such as Preysing and Clemens August von Galen, Bishop of Muenster, who spoke against the state's T-4 euthanasia program, were left to stand alone. The papacy and their fellow bishops seemed robbed of the capacity to remain upright with them.

One group that Denzler views as too sympathetic to National Socialism were Catholic theologians. Directing his attention to Karl Adam, Joseph Lortz, Michael Schmaus, and Anton Stonner, Denzler shows how willing many of them were to go out of their way to support National Socialism. Unfortunately, in his discussion, he totally ignores the English language secondary sources that have examined this question extensively.[2] He does this throughout his work. Nevertheless, Denzler

does make his case clear with the sources that he incorporates into his discussion by showing that these theologians saw in National Socialism a force to use against the threat of Bolshevism, liberalism, rationalism, and relativism. Interestingly, Denzler shows that after the war, with an exception of a few professors, such as Adolf Herte of Paderborn and Hans Barion of Braunsberg, the denazification process cleared the way for these theology professors to find employment in their field. Rightly, Denzler quotes Fr. Hans Pfeil, a priest of the former diocese of Meißen and Professor of Philosophy at the Universities of Muenster and Wuerzburg, who stated that "you had to live through the years 1933-1945 in a university. Many professors changed or sold their loyalty, many remained silent, and only a few resisted; and now there are no longer any who had been National Socialists" (p. 82).

In his discussion of the Philosophical-Theological College of Bamberg, Denzler reveals how unaffected many Catholics were by the Third Reich. A telling quote by Fr. Karl Theodor Kehrbach sheds light on the situation: "Rector Fr. Dr. Johann Schmitt one day said to me in the seminary, the young men here in the house seemed to live on a happy island where they were protected from direct Nazi-hostility [...]. The rector warned us not to commit the 'martyrdom of the mouth' by making rash and belligerent statements against the Nazis from the pulpit. The church does not love any such 'martyrdom'....One thing is certain: The very concept of 'human rights' was unknown to us. We knew that the church does, of course, have to defend its own rights on account of its divine mission" (p. 104). Certainly, such thinking did not inspire courageous resistance. Still, Denzler shows that some student theologians and priests were willing to engage in subversive acts by distributing the homilies of Bishop Galen and the Youth Front or even participate in ecumenism by taking up a collection for the Protestant Bishop Kurt Meiser, "whose entire family in Munich the Nazis had kicked out of their home" (p. 94). These ac-

tions, however, were the exception, Denzler concludes, and not the norm.

To illustrate his thesis further, Denzler offers eight biographical case-studies that contrast collaborators with opponents of the regime. We learn of Fr. Joseph Rossaint of the archdiocese of Cologne whose sympathy for socialism brought him in conflict with the state and with his own church superiors and of Fr. Franz Reinisch whose refusal to take the Flag Oath ultimately cost him his life. The latter received only hesitant support from his religious provincial who, like the state, encouraged Reinisch to give in and follow suit by taking the oath. Denzler contrasts the brave lives of these individuals with churchmen who collaborated with the state. He offers several examples, including Fr. Josef Roth of the Munich archdiocese, who as a priest worked for the Ministry of Church Affairs and regularly approved the imprisonment of his fellow priests who challenged the Nazi state. Roth's lethal antisemitism that his church superiors failed to quell is revealed through direct quotes. Similarly, Albert Hartl, an ex-priest from Munich, worked to promote National Socialism by joining the SS and serving in the RSHA division that harassed the churches and labored to employ over two hundred informants to keep him abreast of the churches' activities. Denzler only leaves out a more indicting piece of evidence of Hartl's depravity when he fails to note that the SS demoted him for sexually assaulting a woman. Last, but not least, Denzler profiles Auxiliary Bishop Franz Xaver Eberle of Augsburg, who maintained his friendship with Karl Wahl, Gauleiter of Augsburg and Minister-President of Swabia, throughout the Third Reich. After a 1937 meeting between Eberle, who was accompanied by Wahl, Hitler remarked to the latter: "Wahl, your auxiliary bishop is the most sympathetic priest that I have ever met" (p. 171). Denzler points out that despite his actions during the Third Reich, the denazification board acquitted Eberle of any wrongdoing. Denzler concurs with Fr. Johannes Kraus of Eichstaett, himself persecut-

ed by the Hitler regime, that the denazification process really did not address the churches properly.[3]

Denzler concludes by examining the potential for resistance within the churches and its coming to terms with the collective role it played during the Third Reich. This conclusion includes an interesting examination of Catholic individuals who offered private opinions against the Nazi regime and a discussion of the church's theological mission. Ultimately he concludes that the church failed to resist. Only individual Catholics resisted. For the bishops, "politicized" clergy who challenged the state were "a thorn in the eye" (p. 252). They offered the priests little understanding or assistance. The Pope also was ultimately of no help.

Denzler follows his concluding points with an epilogue that examines the Goldhagen debate. He states: "Goldhagen is not an historian and also did not mean to write an historical book. He offers no primary research but limits himself to secondary literature [...]. Goldhagen makes a moral judgment of the church without first demonstrating its possible failures and effective motives in a fundamental discussion of historical facts" (pp. 272-273). Denzler's words speak for themselves!

Denzler has produced an incredibly engaging and important work that encompasses a wide range of material to support his thesis. Ultimately, the question for historians is whether they agree with Denzler's understanding and applicability of resistance. For example, his expectations for the institutional church and for individual Catholics often find their discursive origins in the theology and syntax of Vatican II rather than the theology of the period. Similarly, he often paints broad strokes with the use of his examples by revealing the extremes on both ends of the spectrum in the church. Therefore, the reader is confronted by either a churchman, such as Father Rossaint, who fully rejected National Socialism or by an individual, such as the former-Munich priest turned SS-Man, Albert Hartl, who totally embraced the

Hitler movement. The reader is left wondering about the half-uttered choices made by most Catholics who fell into the middle of this wide spectrum. Denzler provides very little insight into these experiences. Despite these reservations, Denzler has produced an informative work that brings to light new evidence that will enable diverse scholars to discover within their own understanding of resistance the restricted nature of the Catholic church's response to National Socialism.

#### Notes

[1]. See Denzler's earlier work with Volker Fabricius, *Christen und Nationalsozialisten*, revised edition (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1993).

[2]. For example, see Donald Dietrich, "Catholic Theologians in Hitler's Reich: Adaptation and Critique," *Journal of Church and State* 29 (1987), pp. 19-45; Robert A. Krieg, *Karl Adam: Catholicism in German Culture* (Notre Dame: University Of Notre Dame Press, 1992); Robert A. Krieg, "Karl Adam, National Socialism, and Christian Tradition," *Theological Studies* 60 (1999), pp. 432-456; Michael B. Lukens, "Joseph Lortz and a Catholic Accommodation with National Socialism," in *Betrayal: German Churches and the Holocaust*, ed. Robert P. Ericksen and Susannah Heschel (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), pp. 149-168; and Kevin Spicer, C.S.C., "Last Years of a Resister in the Diocese of Berlin: Bernhard Lichtenberg's Conflict with Karl Adam and his Fateful Imprisonment," *Church History* 70 (2001), pp. 248-270. Also see the forthcoming work by Robert A. Krieg, *Theology and Politics: Catholic Theologians in Hitler's Germany* (New York: Continuum, 2004).

[3]. On Kraus see Ludwig Brandl, *Widerspruch und Gehorsam. Der gerade Weg des Eichstaetter Dompfarrers Johannes Kraus im Dritten Reich* (Wuerzburg: Echter, 1995).

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