

5-2016

# Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Christian. Pacifist. Assassin?

Emily Larsen  
*Whitworth University*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.whitworth.edu/th314h>

 Part of the [Christian Denominations and Sects Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), [History of Christianity Commons](#), and the [History of Religions of Western Origin Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Larsen, Emily, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Christian. Pacifist. Assassin?" Whitworth University (2016). *History of Christianity II: TH 314H*. Paper 7.  
<http://digitalcommons.whitworth.edu/th314h/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Honors Program at Whitworth University. It has been accepted for inclusion in History of Christianity II: TH 314H by an authorized administrator of Whitworth University.

## DIETRICH BONHOEFFER: CHRISTIAN. PACIFIST. ASSASSIN?

Emily Larsen

TH-314W: History of Christianity II

Dietrich Bonhoeffer is revered for his Christocentric theology, his strong convictions to follow God's commands, his resounding call for non-violence and pacifism, and his unwavering stance against Nazism. Even more, in the last few decades since his death, Bonhoeffer's life has been immortalized and Hollywood-ized into an exciting, adventurous tale of a young man who gives up his morals and principles to become a heroic spy in a top secret resistance movement seeking to assassinate Hitler. Yet, many scholars reject this view of Bonhoeffer's life and involvement in the assassination attempts, and instead argue that his involvement was in fact a faithful step and continuation in his pacifistic, Christ-driven ways. Throughout his life, Bonhoeffer committed himself to a life emulating Jesus Christ and clung to his stance on non-violence, both of which remained his trajectories until his last day on earth. His history and unwavering stance on pacifism has led many scholars to question why he considered himself a "guilty martyr" and to what extent was he directly involved with the assassination attempts. Although Bonhoeffer's allegedly active participation in the assassination attempts on Hitler's life is a valid argument, there is greater cause to believe that his role within the resistance movement continued to align with his devotion to Christ and pacifism.

From the very beginning of Hitler's regime in Germany, the entire Bonhoeffer family saw Nazism for the atrocity that it was, and Dietrich worked tirelessly to bring an end to Hitler's regime by promoting resistance within the church and non-violent protest. By 1936, the young Dietrich Bonhoeffer had come to publicly embrace pacifism, persuasively preaching it to his congregation, and was inevitably marked as an enemy of the state. Mark Nasion writes that these qualities, pacifism and being an enemy of the state, "point to two dimensions of Bonhoeffer that, if true, make him virtually unique among pastors and theologians in Germany in the 1930's and '40's.<sup>i</sup> Bonhoeffer also worked within the German church, challenging believers to resist Hitler and to avoid succumbing to his fear tactics. The Brown Synod, a general meeting of the churches of Germany resulting in a call for the dismissal or early retirement of all pastors and clergymen of non-Aryan ancestry,

stipulated that clergy could only come from those who stood in unconditional support of the Nationalist Socialist State and the German Protestant Church.<sup>ii</sup> To this, Bonhoeffer responded by making a passionate plea that all clergymen resign from their posts. When the church did not take his plea seriously, Bonhoeffer and nineteen other pastors founded the Pastors' Emergency League. The League stipulated that members would commit themselves to Scripture and Confessions and would oppose any violations to such authoritative doctrines. It also specified that members would give financial aid to those affected by Nazi laws or violence, and that they would reject the Aryan paragraph.<sup>iii</sup> Within a year, over six thousand pastors joined the Emergency League. Thus began Bonhoeffer's long, brutal fight against Nazism, a fight he would lead with little support.

For the next two years from the fall of 1933 to 1935, Bonhoeffer was given the opportunity to pastor a church in London, England. Despite the disapproval of Karl Barth, who believed Bonhoeffer to be avoiding his duty to Germany, Bonhoeffer regarded his time in London not as an escape, but as a time of preparation and reflection before his real fight against Nazism began. He spent those two years entrenched in biblical study, specifically in regards to pacifism, while also remaining current with the ongoing status of Nazi Germany. About a year into his time in London, Bonhoeffer received a personal invitation from Gandhi, whom he had long admired, to come live and study with him in India. At the same time, he was asked by the Pastors' Emergency League to pastor an underground seminary back in Germany. Being faithful to his call, in the spring of 1935, Finkenwalde Seminary was opened and by the time of its closing by the Gestapo in 1937, Bonhoeffer had trained more than 150 students.<sup>iv</sup> At Finkenwalde, Bonhoeffer instilled in his students a deep understanding of scripture, enforced strict spiritual disciplines and routines, and encouraged them to consider conscientious objection and non-violent resistance against Hitler. Bonhoeffer said to many of his students, "It is an evil time when the world lets injustice happen silently, when the oppression of the poor and the wretched cries out to heaven . . . when the persecuted church calls to God for help in the hour of dire distress and exhorts people to do justice, and yet no mouth on earth is opening to bring justice."<sup>v</sup> Bonhoeffer's leadership at Finkenwalde and his commitment to training pastors who would proclaim the Gospel throughout Germany was another step in his pacifistic and Christ-like fight against Hitler.

Two final events drove Bonhoeffer to join Abwehr, the counterintelligence agency of the armed forces of Nazi Germany, which was also the primary center of the resistance movement against the Nazis.<sup>vi</sup> The first event came on April 20, 1938, when the Confessing Church and all of its active pastors gave full allegiance to Hitler. Bonhoeffer recalled being horrified that, “the cross on the Wartburg had been replaced during Holy Week by an immense floodlit swastika.”<sup>vii</sup> The second event that motivated Bonhoeffer to join Abwehr was the night of Kristallnacht, the infamous night when many Jewish homes, business, and synagogues, were trashed and burned to the ground. Not only had it always been Bonhoeffer’s religious and moral conviction to fight with and on behalf of the Jews, this war was also very personal for him. Several of Dietrich’s family members and friends, including his brother-in-law, were Jewish and eventually had to flee for safety. In fact, every member of the Bonhoeffer family was involved in the resistance against Nazism and therefore personally affected by Hitler’s regime. Bonhoeffer’s brother, Klaus, and two of his brothers-in-law were executed by the Nazis, his sister, Christel, was imprisoned but fortunately survived, and two of his other sisters married men who had survived the concentration camps. Even after having the chance to live peacefully in the United States, Bonhoeffer came to the conclusion that he could not run or abandon Germany, the Church, those fighting Hitler, or the countless millions of innocent people being slaughtered. Reflecting on his opportunity to escape Hitler and Nazism in Germany, Bonhoeffer writes, “I must live through this difficult period of our national history with the Christian people of Germany. I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people . . .”<sup>viii</sup> Contemplating his choice between staying in Germany and trying to preserve the Church, or leaving and watching Nazism take over, Bonhoeffer writes, “I know which of these two alternatives I must choose; but I cannot make that choice in security.”<sup>ix</sup> Bonhoeffer made the choice to return to Germany, seemingly abandoning his previous non-violent and pacifistic ways, and became, what has been widely perceived as, a key player in several assassination attempts on Hitler’s life.

Near the end of 1940 up until his arrest on April 5, 1943, Bonhoeffer worked for Abwehr after receiving a position from Hans von Dohnanyi, his brother-in-law, and Hans Oster, a department head within the agency. On paper, Bonhoeffer’s job was defined as

gathering intelligence to assist Germany in its military victory by using his extensive connections all over Europe. Nation writes, “No one of whom I am aware really imagines that was what Bonhoeffer was doing.” He continues, “The ostensible purpose was to acquire information. The real reason was almost identical with this official one, except for the word *acquire*, for the actual purpose was to *pass on* information . . . [He] was supposed to establish links with countries abroad.”<sup>x</sup> Most scholars are unanimous in believing that Bonhoeffer was using his post in Abwehr to meet with Allied forces: giving them information about Hitler’s military plans, telling of the unimaginable horrors taking place within the concentration camps, and looking for ways for the Allies to infiltrate and help remove Hitler from power. It is at this point that scholars begin to differentiate: some believe in the heroic, changed Bonhoeffer who knowingly joined the resistance movement to actively help in the assassination attempts of Hitler, while others believe Bonhoeffer’s motives were more peaceful and consistent to his character. Nation writes, “. . . Bonhoeffer’s life as an agent of Abwehr was truly a cover: a way to avoid military induction while continuing his theological reflection and ministry.”<sup>xi</sup> Stanley Hauerwas agrees, “Bonhoeffer gratefully accepted von Dohnanyi’s offer to become a member of Abwehr because it gave him the means to avoid conscription and the dreaded necessity to take an oath of loyalty to Hitler.”<sup>xii</sup> Taking the position at Abwehr allowed Bonhoeffer the prime opportunity to continue his theological studies, avoid the bloodshed of war, and yet, still fight the evil of Nazism in his non-violent ways.

Many theologians and historians now believe that Bonhoeffer’s acceptance of his position within Abwehr was not contradictory to his pacifistic views or inconsistent with his theology, but was actually the only way he could live within Nazi Germany and fight for the survival of the church that was congruent with his convictions and beliefs. Nation adds, “. . . he joined Abwehr very specifically because he continued to believe what he had said in his 1932 lecture ‘Christ in Peace,’ that ‘for Christians any military service, except in the ambulance of corps, and any preparation for war, is forbidden.’”<sup>xiii</sup> He also claims that Bonhoeffer’s decision to return to Germany from the United States did not stem from his excitement or desire to participate in Hitler’s assassination attempts, but because he believed staying in the U.S. to be cowardly, and as a German, he had a duty to resist and fight with his fellow men.<sup>xiv</sup> In an informal conversation, when asked what he would do if

war broke out, Bonhoeffer said, "I pray that God will give me the strength not to take up arms."<sup>xv</sup> Nation emphasizes that while Bonhoeffer's joining of Abwehr may not have been as absolute as his non-violent resolution earlier on, he was still able to keep his hands clean from killing on the front lines and taking an oath of unconditional loyalty to Hitler. Nation reiterates that for a man his age, living in Germany in the time that he did, it is extraordinary that he was able to avoid taking up arms.<sup>xvi</sup> Nation, quoting Sabine Dramm, another Bonhoeffer scholar, writes, "The 'internal role' that he played in his resistance circle can most readily be described as intellectual pastoral care . . . He was a pastor, a father confessor, a spiritual adviser . . . Bonhoeffer strengthened other people in what they did at points where the church was silent, and therefore, in spite of some differences, among those involved in the resistance he strengthened believers especially."<sup>xvii</sup> Throughout his entire involvement with Abwehr, Bonhoeffer followed his convictions: he didn't resort or allow himself to be pushed into violence, he continued meeting with his friends and mentors all over Europe, and he was able to pastor those in dire need of his help.

Interestingly, Bonhoeffer was not arrested for his involvement in the assassination attempts, but for helping fourteen Jews escape Germany using government money. He was later indicted, but only because, once arrested, it was discovered that Bonhoeffer had evaded military call-up and was thus "subverting military power," as well as helping others avoid military service.<sup>xviii</sup> Nation writes, "Thus Bonhoeffer was imprisoned because the court discovered that his work for the Abwehr was indeed a fabrication. His 'job' was a fiction created to keep him from killing on the front line."<sup>xix</sup> Other members of Abwehr were caught and tried for their involvement in the assassination attempts, and it was because Bonhoeffer had been so closely linked with many of them, that he too was condemned and sentenced the same punishments and eventual death. Bonhoeffer died a man accused of trying to assassinate Hitler, as an enemy of the state, but from his writings and the accounts of those surrounding Bonhoeffer, it seems the only crime he was actually guilty of committing was avoiding military service.

While this minority view that Bonhoeffer wasn't actually involved with the assassination attempts of Hitler is convincing and more consistent with his unwavering theological and moral convictions, when one reads his reflections of his time in Abwehr,

both in *Ethics and Letters and Papers from Prison*, it is nearly impossible not to witness the guilt and regret that emanate from his writings.. There is a profound sense that, whether or not he was directly involved in the assassination attempts, Bonhoeffer nevertheless felt responsible and guilty, at the very least feeling the pain and guilt of his friends and colleagues who actually were directly involved in the assassination plots. Writing of God's judgment and grace, Bonhoeffer asserts,, "Reconciliation with the world cost God so dearly. Only by executing God's judgment on God can peace grow between God and the world, between human and human . . . Only as judged by God can human beings live before God; only the crucified human being is at peace with God."<sup>xx</sup> He further reflects on suffering and the severe guilt that the church will suffer for having stayed silent for so long against the helpless and persecuted, proclaiming, "By falling silent the church became guilty for the loss of responsible action in society, courageous intervention, and the readiness to suffer for what is acknowledged as right. It is guilty of the government's falling away from Christ."<sup>xxi</sup> Explaining that Christians must not only accept their own personal judgment, but also be willing to take on the sins and judgment of the world, he writes, "The church is today the community of people who, grasped by the power of Christ's grace, acknowledge, confess, and take upon themselves not only their personal sins, but also the Western world's falling away from Jesus Christ as guilt towards Jesus Christ."<sup>xxii</sup> In his writing, he tries to justify or make sense of evil actions, rationalizing that, "It is worse to be evil than to do evil . . . One sin is not like another. They have different weights. There are heavier and lighter sins. Falling away [Abfall] is far more serious than falling down [Fall]. The most brilliant virtues of the apostates are as dark as night compared with the dark weaknesses of the faithful."<sup>xxiii</sup> He tries to make sense of such deep, universal suffering, writing, "Matt. 8:17 makes it quite clear that Christ helps us not by virtue of his omnipotence but rather by virtue of his weakness and suffering . . . The Bible directs people toward the powerlessness and the suffering of God; only the suffering God can help."<sup>xxiv</sup> These are the numerous reflections of a man deeply conflicted by the events having taken place, not only within the war, but also in what he was witnessing in Abwehr. If Bonhoeffer's involvement was as innocent as trying to avoid the front lines, then his writings and reflections unveil a man taking upon himself the guilt of all those around him, including Hitler, the silent German Church, and his friends directly responsible for the assassination attempts. Bonhoeffer

writes, ““Jesus is certainly no advocate for the successful in history, but neither does he lead the revolt of the failures against the successful. His concern is neither success nor failure but willing acceptance of the judgment of God.”<sup>xxv</sup> Bonhoeffer believed it to be his duty and divine calling to take onto himself the guilt and judgment of Nazi Germany, just as Christ has done for all of humanity. Bonhoeffer’s incredibly intricate and profound understanding of guilt and of the opportunity to bear the sins of one’s brothers and sisters was the final step in his fight against Hitler. In being able to lament and endure the sins of others, Bonhoeffer believed he had defeated and overcome the evil that had ensued.

While Bonhoeffer is revered for his theology, pacifism, and seemingly contradictory involvement in the assassination attempts of Hitler, there is significant evidence to suggest that Bonhoeffer’s motives and reasoning for his involvement with the resistance movement are very different than it has widely been portrayed. It may never be known to what extent Dietrich Bonhoeffer was physically involved in trying to kill Hitler, but his writings, nevertheless, convey a man theologically, emotionally, and morally entrenched in the plots and wrestling to understand their ramifications. Bonhoeffer was a man utterly devoted to the Lord and thus was convicted of the need to embrace pacifism. Nation writes, “And since there is no evidence that he did that [gave up his theological and pacifistic convictions ], might we then see that it is possible that, as Bonhoeffer said in April 1944, ‘my life—as strange as it may sound—has gone in a straight line, uninterrupted, at least in regard to how I’ve lived it?’”<sup>xxvi</sup> Bonhoeffer fulfilled his calling: he lived his life in a way that left him with very few regrets and confidence that he would see Jesus in heaven. He was unwavering in his convictions and faith, and in his steadfastness, he freely accepted the role God had planned for him. He may have died a “guilty martyr,” but not merely because of the sins he had committed; he had also borne the sins of those around him. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was able to die a death aligned with his entire life: a death in the image of Christ, bearing the sins of those who knew not what they had done.

---

<sup>i</sup>Mark Theiessen Nation, Anthony G. Siegrist, and Daniel P. Umbel, *Bonhoeffer the Assassin?* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academics, 2013), 17.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid., 48-49.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>v</sup> Ibid., 63.



- 
- vi Nelson, *The Companion of Dietrich Bonhoeffer: The Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 39.
- vii Nation, Siegrist, and Umbel, *Bonhoeffer the Assassin?*, 67.
- viii F. Burton Nelson, ed. de Gruchy, John W., *The Companion of Dietrich Bonhoeffer: The Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Cambridge, UK: The Cambridge University Press, 1999), 39.
- ix *Ibid.*, 39.
- x Nation, Siegrist, and Umbel, *Bonhoeffer the Assassin?*, 75.
- xi *Ibid.*, 76.
- xii Stanley Hauerwas, *Performing the Faith: Bonhoeffer and the Practice of Nonviolence* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House Company, 2004), 35.
- xiii Nation, Siegrist, and Umbel, *Bonhoeffer the Assassin?*, 78.
- xiv *Ibid.*, 78-79.
- xv *Ibid.*, 80.
- xvi *Ibid.*, 81.
- xvii *Ibid.*, 82.
- xviii *Ibid.*, 86-87.
- xix *Ibid.*, 87.
- xx Dietrich Bonhoeffer, ed. Clifford J. Green, *Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 88.
- xxi *Ibid.*, 141.
- xxii *Ibid.*, 135.
- xxiii *Ibid.*, 77.
- xxiv Dietrich Bonhoeffer, ed. Eberhard Bethge, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 479.
- xxv Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 90.
- xxvi Nation, Siegrist, and Umbel, *Bonhoeffer the Assassin?*, 95.