

PACIFISTS, NEUTRALS OR RESISTERS?: JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES AND THE EXPERIENCE OF NATIONAL SOCIALISM

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National Socialism, it is now clear, had its critics within Germany as well as its enthusiasts and fellow travellers. Whilst crowds cheered the Nazi parades and the Hitler Youth proclaimed, in 'Cabaret' style, that tomorrow belonged to them, workers were engaged in acts of industrial sabotage, and members of the military plotted to assassinate Hitler. In the immediate post-war years and the context of the Nuremberg Trials the scale and nature of this opposition was not a major concern of either politicians or historians, and opportunities to study it were lost. Even now it is hard to identify with any certainty the regional, gender or class base of the Germans who resisted Fascism. Records were not kept; resistance groups worked separately and underground, with the minimum number of contacts, for safety's sake.

For some German citizens active opposition to the policies of the National Socialists was a clear moral imperative long before the Nazis gained power in 1933. Amongst this number can be counted members of the Communist Party, socialists and conservatives as well as those acting as individuals, motivated by a variety of reasons and with little or no contact between them. For others, unease grew with the number of arrests of 'undesirables', racial, political or ideological. With the rallying cry of war in 1939 some of this criticism was undoubtedly silenced. German society became increasingly nazified, and opposition to the regime became more and more complex. Amongst the few identifiable groups who stood out against the Third Reich were the Kreisau Circle, the White Rose student group of Munich and the 'Edelweiss' group of working-class adolescents whose sport it was to corner and beat up members of the Hitler Youth. All were acting with different aims and motives. All hated National Socialism. But beyond that point, they had very little in common.

Once all political parties and trade unions were officially closed and their leaders arrested, and institutions such as the law, the press and education had either done homage to the Nazis or had been nazified, there was no obvious rallying-point for moral opposition to the regime. The major churches, Catholic, Evangelical and Free, and even the break-away Confessing Church offered no formal resistance

to what was generally seen to be a legally constituted government. Whilst individuals from within the churches, priestly and lay, carried on with their own acts of resistance, officially the churches had little to say. Outside the Communist Party, it is hard to find any group within Nazi Germany committed as a body to opposing National Socialism, both morally and in practice.

The Jehovah's Witnesses, it will be argued here, prove to be one exception. Whilst the Confessing Church produced its heroes like Pastor Niemoller and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Witnesses, a mere twenty thousand strong, flung themselves as a group, men, women and children, into a wholehearted struggle against the regime, losing in the process one in four of their number by death in concentration camp or prison. Together they received sentences of twenty thousand years.¹ Yet the Witnesses, whose presence in the camps is well-recorded and remembered by ex-inmates, are largely excluded from studies of the German resistance. Instead they are either dismissed as 'fanatics' or wrongly classified as conscientious objectors or pacifists.

The Nuremberg Trials perhaps set the tone in identifying the Witnesses as a group persecuted for their beliefs², and they quickly became classified as passive, 'natural victims', lying down under Nazi brutality, in trouble because of their pacifism, and as too small a group to be of any real significance. Such a view fitted well with popular attitudes to 'fringe' religious groups. The fact, also, that Witnesses had refused to enlist during the Second World War in Britain and America did not help their case. Furthermore, in the aftermath of the Second World War and the militaristic context of the Cold War, it was easier to accept as genuine resisters those who had used, or had been willing to use, military force or personal violence in their cause. Thus the 20 July 1944 plot to assassinate Hitler has received a considerable amount of popular and scholarly attention, whilst the work of those who flouted the regime in more subtle ways, for example, by hiding or protecting Jewish neighbours, has had less exposure.

The Witnesses did little to draw attention to their achievements. They declare, as they declared in Nazi Germany, their 'neutrality' in political events, and regard the experiences of their members in the Third Reich as part of their 'witness' to Jehovah carried on throughout the whole of history. Nevertheless, given the ferocity of the Witnesses' struggle against the Third Reich, and their persistent refusal, in and out of the camps, to accept the rules of the game as laid down by the

¹ M. Kater, 'Die Ernsten Bibelforscher im Dritten Reich', *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, 17 (1969), 181; K. Hutten, *Seher, Grubler, Enthusiaten* (Stuttgart, 1953), 69.

² *Trial of the Major War Criminals before the International Military Tribunal* (London, 1947), 12 June 1946; 16, 176 and *passim*.

Nazis, their experiences under National Socialism warrant examination within the context of resistance. The Witnesses, although a small group, were highly visible in their response to National Socialism. They took active steps to challenge all sorts of Nazi policies and in the camps proved themselves to be anything but 'natural victims'.

At first sight the classification of Witnesses as pacifist appears to have some validity, even though it does not fully explain the ferocity of Nazi persecution nor the Witness response to it. Even here, however, general assumptions about the Witnesses are wrong. Although it was undoubtedly after the introduction of compulsory military service in 1935 that the movement began to face its hardest test, arrests had been made as early as 1933 as members refused to obey the ban on their activities, to vote or to take part in public festivals. It was convenient for the authorities to label the Witnesses as pacifist, since their refusal to enlist was an identifiable act of disloyalty to the new state, placing them clearly in the camp of fifth columnists with close associations, according to Gestapo reports, with international Zionism, communism and freemasonry.³

How far the Nazis understood the real nature of the Witness position is debatable, and it could be argued that the subtleties of belief of this group were of little concern to the Gestapo. However, regular and detailed Gestapo reports did outline Witness beliefs and speculate on the potential damage they could inflict. They were always treated as subversives with more at stake than an ideological pacifism. Others who were conscientious objectors were given some leeway by the regime; some undertook war-related work, an option which the Witnesses were never offered but which they would have refused to take. Others, such as strict Seventh Day Adventists, were allowed some concessions in relation to their religious practices.

Witnesses do not regard themselves as pacifists or conscientious objectors, simply as citizens of Jehovah's kingdom and recruits to His army. Their inability, they would argue, rather than their unwillingness, to fight for Germany arose simply from the fact that no citizen or soldier can serve two masters, especially if these are likely to be on opposing sides. The world, currently under the sway of Satan, is in opposition to the world of Jehovah to which Witnesses belong. At Armageddon the two forces of good and evil will engage in battle, and evil will be defeated. The end of the 'present order' is near, and all earthly political systems currently and demonstrably in the hands of Satan are soon to be destroyed. Thus, whilst Witnesses are law-abiding citizens in so far as the law of Jehovah allows, they can offer no allegiance to an 'earthly' state.

Interestingly, it was during the First World War that the Witness movement had clarified its stance on its 'neutrality'. Some German

³ Bavarian State Archives (BSA), IV 6071/16.3, 11 June 1934.

Witnesses had enlisted and fought for Germany, but the writings of Rutherford and their dissemination through Witness journals had made the issue an important one for members in the 1920s. The difficulties for Witnesses were violently intensified by the totalitarian nature of the Third Reich as they faced this first test of their neutrality. Whilst the nature of the Third Reich and its operation still remains an issue of debate, one thing is clear, that in Nazi Germany there could be no neutrals. Thus the Witnesses declared their stance unequivocally at a major convention held in Berlin in June 1933 and, from this point on, battle lines were drawn. Undeterred by the ban on their activities, Witnesses continued to place their literature and to hold meetings, offering God's millennium in contrast to the thousand-year Reich. The political situation provided, if anything, further evidence that the 'present order' was close to its end, and the Witnesses did not hesitate to say this. Increasingly Witnesses were publicly identified as traitors, and arrests were made. Very quickly Witnesses lost civil rights, jobs and, in some cases, their children who were taken away to be brought up in Nazi homes.

Is it legitimate to classify Jehovah's Witnesses as resisters? One scholarly definition of German resistance argues it as the 'clearly politically self-conscious behaviour of the adherents of [a] persecuted organization . . . who seek to weaken or overthrow the Nazi dictatorship'.⁴ Others would argue that German resisters can only be defined in terms of their willingness to overthrow the Nazis by force.⁵ Witness behaviour demonstrates many of the characteristics attributed to resisters. They opposed National Socialism; they refused to obey those of its dictates which they found offensive; they engaged in acts of civil disobedience, distributed underground literature, aided Jews, spread anti-Nazi propaganda and generally disrupted the running of the Nazi state. Their behaviour was motivated by the desire to see the coming of Jehovah's victory, rather than the building of a socialist state. But many of their objections to National Socialism they shared with other resisters.

The new totalitarian regime raised issues of a wide and unavoidable nature. Unable to ignore the Witnesses, the Nazis engaged the small group in instant warfare. There were attempts to persuade mainstream Christians, albeit with little subtlety, that their interests as Germans and Christians were best served by the new Reich; but for the small 'fanatics' there was no choice. Thus the Witnesses, willing and even anxious to stay out of it all, found themselves labelled as subversives and projected into a hand-to-hand struggle with the authorities. As the Third Reich progressed, so the Witnesses began to

⁴ T. Mason, 'The Workers' Opposition in Nazi Germany', *History Workshop*, 11 (Spring 1981), 120-37.

⁵ G. Romoser, 'The Politics of Uncertainty: The German Resistance Movement', *Social Research*, xxx (1964), 74.

identify National Socialism more and more with Satan's last-ditch stand and to act in a positive way, both in the camps where they found themselves in ever increasing numbers, and in German society at large, as witnesses to the evils of Nazism. In the process, they made public issues of justice and religious freedom, took up police and court time and quite openly, through their international network, spread the word about what was really happening inside Nazi Germany not just to Witnesses but also to Jews, to young people, and to ordinary citizens. If industrial sabotage and politically motivated civil disobedience managed to disrupt the Nazi state, then the activities of the Witnesses can be seen to have achieved a similar end. The difference may lie in intention; the Witnesses, at least at first, merely intended to protect their faith, not to disrupt the smooth running of the state. But as the battle progressed, the situation changed.

That neutrality was converted to hostility and resistance was largely due to the way in which the authorities handled the group. The initial response of the Witnesses to the new government was a polite attempt to negotiate⁶ but, after this failed, relations broke down and the Nazis pursued a deliberate policy of eradicating the movement from Germany. This was expensive in police time and was to prove public in its failure. Premises were seized in police raids, and members were arrested.⁷ To their surprise⁸ the Gestapo found what should have been a swift and easy campaign turning into a major operation as brute force appeared to fire, rather than to dampen, the determination of the Witnesses. As members were thrown into prison, so others took their place in the missionary field.⁹

Not deliberately, but as a result of their refusal to acknowledge the Nazi state as supreme over Jehovah's kingdom, the Witnesses proved increasingly troublesome to the Nazis. By their continued conversions, even in the concentration camps, where by 1935 they constituted a large enough group to have their own insignia, the purple triangle,¹⁰ they proved unstoppable.

It is not the intention here to catalogue the ways in which the Jehovah's Witnesses stood firm against persecution, nor to discuss the intentions or policies of their persecutors in any detail,¹¹ but simply to argue that the Witness response to persecution was, in all its forms, compatible with the aims and methods of more generally recognized

⁶ BSA, letter from Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, Magdeburg, M 19056, 30 June 1933.

⁷ Bavarian Political Police, B. 27239/34 1 i B, 14 July 1934.

⁸ H. Witetschek et al., *Die Kirchliche Lage in Bayern nach den Regierungspräsidentenberichten, 1933–1945* (Mainz, 1966–73), iv. 151; Secret State Police, B. 41451/36 11 iB b, 24 December 1936; BSA, B. 36250/36 11 i B, 28 January 1936.

⁹ Report of Prussian Minister of Justice on Jehovah's Witnesses, 27 January 1935.

¹⁰ E. Kogon, *The Theory and Practice of Hell: The German Concentration Camps* (New York, 1973), 44–5.

¹¹ See C. King, *The Nazi State and the New Religions* (New York, 1982) for a detailed examination of the experiences of Jehovah's Witnesses and four other groups (Mormons, Adventists, Christian Scientists and the New Apostolic Church) in the Third Reich.

resistance fighters. The Witnesses operated at a variety of levels. Driven by the knowledge that they were witnessing to Jehovah in an evil world, they continued all their missionary practice unabated in a public and unashamed way. In doing this they highlighted the Nazi abuse of the law in a way which was embarrassing for a regime still anxious to argue its legitimacy and respect for the laws of Weimar. Thus, Witnesses coming into the courts in large numbers and making public statements on why they were being arrested, demonstrated the naked abuse of the law and brought protests from within the legal profession and the civil service.¹²

In similar vein, Witnesses distributed literature and posters. These not only declared their religious message, but quite clearly identified what were seen as the widespread injustices and brutality of National Socialism. This literature, smuggled into Germany, also had wide external circulation and pulled no punches. An example is the series of hard-hitting cartoons published in the Witness journal *The Golden Age* in 1937 which identifies in no uncertain terms political and moral injustices within Germany, including the treatment of the Jews.¹³ As the Witnesses after 1933 were unwilling to limit their comments about the regime to criticisms about how they as a group were being treated, so they were equally indiscreet in their choice of target-audience, always attempting to deliver their religious literature to Gestapo offices. Thus, by acting in the public arena, the Witnesses were undermining, on however small a scale, the efficient running of the state and were exposing, by these and similar means, the failure of the police to contain the movement. Far from being the persecuted and beaten cranks identified in the early Gestapo reports, they became recognized, by the authorities and by members of the public with whom they came into contact, as a force to be reckoned with.¹⁴

At another level, as an underground movement, the Witnesses were ideally constituted to act as resisters. Perhaps the most dramatic example of their behaviour in this field was in the concentration camps where even the slightest disobedience of the Nazis could bring death. Nevertheless, the Witnesses held firm, with public displays of their faith and hymn singing, even in the death cells. Thus converts were made and secretly baptized; copies of *Watchtower* were smuggled in, and, in one camp, a newsletter was produced in the camp itself.¹⁵ Witnesses operated, next to the communists, possibly the most efficient underground network in the camps, helping newly admitted Witnesses, supporting each other and offering help where possible,

¹² BSA, 42296, 15 July 1940.

¹³ *The Golden Age*, xviii, 10 March 1937, 355–76.

¹⁴ For example, interviews with Dorota Wind, 19 October 1978 and Mrs Werner Fett, 12 October 1978. Wiener Library Files of Survivors, P111 h, 1091, 159.

¹⁵ *Jehovah's Witness in the Divine Purpose* (Pennsylvania, 1959), 171; M. Buber, *Under Two Dictators* (London, 1950), 229; L. Poliakov and J. Wulf, *Das Dritte Reich und Seine Diener*, Dokumente Auswärtiges Amt, Justiz, Wehrmacht (Berlin, 1956), 314.

even to other inmates.¹⁶ Most importantly, just as outside the camps they refused to accept Nazi values and Nazi game-rules, so they presented a challenge to the camp ideology in which inmates were brutalized and de-personalized. Witnesses died as martyrs and offered a theology of martyrdom for others under sentence of death. As one inmate recalls, they were respected by most of the inmates who saw them as 'a rock in the mud'.¹⁷

The Nazis remained divided and in some confusion about how seriously they should take the Witnesses, and it is perhaps partly their misunderstanding of the movement which helps to explain its success as a disruptive force. Witnesses were consistent in their behaviour. Thus they maintained a technical 'neutrality' towards their SS masters and were amongst the very few camp inmates who could be used safely as servants or valets in SS homes. A Witness would not kill, even if shaving an SS officer with a cut-throat razor provided an ideal opportunity to do so. There were those in the Party who admired the dedication of the Witnesses. Himmler, in particular, saw the movement as providing an ideal model of devotion which the SS could usefully emulate. He even had fantasies about the settlement of the group as a buffer state in the east after the war was won, seeing them as ideal proto-Nazis, Aryan, obedient, hard-working and honest.¹⁸ Rudolph Hoess, commandant of Auschwitz, whilst treating Witness inmates in Auschwitz to special tortures and humiliations, subsequently admitted that he saw them only as harmless cranks.¹⁹

Yet the Witnesses were far from harmless, and there were Gestapo officers who knew this. The fact that the movement's members came largely from amongst the socially and economically underprivileged, and that it claimed to have no political aims, only religious ones, caused its potential as an effective centre of resistance to be underestimated. Indeed, there are some very good reasons why the Jehovah's Witnesses should prove the ideal resisters. Where others were divided on aims and methods and on what should happen when the Nazis were overthrown, the Witnesses had no doubts. It was all in the hands of God.

If a wider view is taken of what constitutes resistance in Nazi Germany, then Jehovah's Witnesses may be seen as very effective members of that grouping, resisting the authorities in practical as well as ideological ways. Whilst remaining totally loyal to their faith, they clearly did engage, in and out of the camps, in acts of sabotage and opposition. Witness families, while they were free, helped and

¹⁶ H. Langbein, *Menschen in Auschwitz* (Vienna, 1972), 279–80; *Germany*, no. 2, Cmd 6120 (London, 1939).

¹⁷ Interview with Mrs Werner Fett.

¹⁸ G. Ritter, 'Wünschträume Himmlers am Juli 1944', *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht*, 3 (1954), 162–8.

¹⁹ R. Hoess, *Commandant of Auschwitz* (London, 1959), 89ff.

protected fugitive Jews. Once in the camps, often working in positions of privilege, they used these positions to pass on information, give help or save lives. Wherever the Witnesses could subvert National Socialism, without abandoning their principles, they did so.

In 1933 the Witnesses were outsiders in the civil state. By 1945, without having compromised their faith, they had shared with other Germans in the fight against Nazism. Their very presence, visibility and persistence had highlighted the National Socialist disregard for the laws of Weimar and its intense brutality against ordinary German citizens. Perhaps more importantly, albeit on a relatively small scale, the way the Witnesses were able, in spite of police raids, torture and wide-scale arrests, to keep up their preaching and distribution of literature provided evidence that National Socialism was not invincible. The same process was magnified in the camps, where the Witnesses made a lasting impression on those who came into contact with them.

They were not only resisters, but they were good resisters, having in their organization and theology all the essential prerequisites. Their strength was in their membership of the group, and that network operated to their favour, in and out of camps, as well as providing the major reason for their refusal to abandon their faith. In many ways they bear closest comparison with the communists. Each had a well-tested and effective cell-network. Each was convinced that they were seeing in National Socialism a stage in the eschatological plan, whether the millennium was to be socialist or theocratic. Neither was willing to compromise. Each could offer not only group-support to its members but also promises of a better world to come at the end of the struggle. For each, a death was a martyrdom in the cause, and for each there was no turning-back once the battle with Fascism had been engaged.

It is clear that resistance to Nazism was diverse, scattered and highly varied in its aims and means. There was no one clear plan to overthrow Nazism, no clear and agreed aims about what would happen next, little or no contact between groups and minimum contact within groups. The Witnesses, like other German resisters, did what they could according to their principles. On occasions, in camps and outside, they joined with others in enterprises which briefly united disparate individuals. In Augsburg, from the outbreak of war until May 1940, Jehovah's Witnesses joined with communists, socialists and Catholics in a group which met regularly to listen illegally to broadcasts from London and Moscow, the penalty for which was death.²⁰

The Jehovah's Witnesses were clear about their role and about how they should behave. As 'witnesses' to Jehovah, they had to obey His law. They might expect persecution, but they were not passive victims. In Nazi Germany they were willing and able to put up a good and effective defence of their faith against those who persecuted them and, as such, earn a place in the history of the German resistance.

²⁰ A. Merson, *Communist Resistance in Nazi Germany* (London, 1985), 227.