

Nationaler Revolution and militärischer Aggression. Transformationen in Kirche und Gesellschaft unter der konsolidierten NS-Gewaltherrschaft 1934-39

Veranstalter: Gerhard Besier

Datum, Ort: 06.06.1998-06.06.1998, München

Bericht von: John S. Conway; Greg Monro, Catholic University, Brisbane, Australia

A Colloquium held in Munich last month, organised by Professor Gerhard Besier, was designed to widen the scope of investigations on the theme of „Nationaler Revolution and militärischer Aggression. Transformationen in Kirche und Gesellschaft unter der konsolidierten NS-Gewaltherrschaft 1934-39“.

We began with a provocative paper by Hans Mommsen, outlining the significance to the Nazi leaders, especially Hitler, of the ideological/religious struggle. This was followed by a sound examination by Gerhard Ringshausen of the various resistance movements, and the differing interpretations of their activities and motives in the writings of both their contemporaries and of subsequent generations of historians. If the early analyses were dominated by the accounts of the National Conservative resistance members, especially the German officer corps, (Fabian Schlabrendorff, *Offiziere gegen Hitler*, 1946), and by the eschatological interpretation of Nazism (J. Neuhäusler, *Kreuz und Hakenkreuz*, 1946), these were followed in the 1950s by the more differentiated picture drawn by Gerhard Ritter in his biography of Carl Goerdeler, who was certainly motivated by the need to defend an ethical system derived from the Christian faith, but also by his loathing of tyranny. In the 1970s and 1980s, with the ascendancy of the social sciences, there was a far greater stress on a sociological analysis of the resistance movement. But this in turn attracted considerable criticism from such historians as Klemens v. Klemperer and Peter Hoffmann, who insist on the importance of the religious and moral motivations of those individuals who took up arms against the Nazi regime.

Klaus Mallmann (Universität Essen) delivered an interesting paper on the Gestapo and the Churches. The evidence contained in the regularly compiled *Berichte über die weltan-*

schauliche Lage im Reich, shows that already from 1934, the Gestapo regarded the churches as one of the most serious opponents of the Nazi state. Their powers were thus used to undertake an escalating persecution of all the churches, restrained only by various tactical considerations, as during the war-time period. But as Robert Gellately has shown, they skilfully made use of the information relayed by informants or through denunciations, and successfully infiltrated a substantial number of church assemblies, including the Fulda Bishops' Conference, as well as exploiting numerous *Vertrauensmänner*, quite often retired priests.

Julius Schoeps' paper on „Nationalsozialismus als politische Religion“ traced the arguments in his book with this title (Philo Verlag), and caused a lively discussion. He argued that Nazism could only really be properly understood if one acknowledged its religious dimensions, derived from the *volkisch* roots of Nazism combined with the exaltation of the nation. Hans Mommsen was critical of the application of the word „religion“ to describe Nazism and suggested that the movement was better understood as an ideological cult. But what constitutes „religion“? One key aspect not addressed here were the various schools of German theology which certainly played a significant role in the churches' understanding and response to Nazism. The conference gained from the broader perspective provided by analyses of church responses outside Germany.

Karl Schwarz (U of Vienna) described the tensions between the highly articulate Protestant minority in Austria and the Roman Catholic majority. While Austrian Catholics generally supported the *Ständestaat* ideology of the Austrian Republic, Austrian Protestants were frequently enthusiastic proponents of the Nazi regime after 1933. Clearly both groups supported the Anschluss in 1938. However, the idea of a *Grossdeutschland* under Nazi leadership appeared to elicit more enthusiasm from the Protestants. Referring to Hans Mommsen's thesis of a radicalization of the Nazi movement from 1938, Schwarz noted that Austria was an important laboratory, where the deconfessionalization of public life was carried out with even greater rigour

when compared to the anti-clerical measures enacted before 1938 in Germany. And this pattern was to be continued in occupied Poland in 1939.

Andrew Chandler (George Bell Institute, Birmingham, UK) read a fine paper on „The Attitude of the British Churches towards the political and church situation in Germany“, making clear that the British churches became ever more critical of the Nazi regime from 1933 onwards. They quickly identified the dangers of totalitarianism and atheism, and totally rejected the ethos of violence and racism. On the other hand, the British church leaders were reluctant to interfere in another church's affairs, and were also subject to the mood of appeasement widespread at the time. During the Sudeten crisis of September 1938, most churches held special services with prayers for divine guidance. Neville Chamberlain's apparent success in securing an agreement with Hitler seemed to justify such hopes. However, the pogrom of November 1938 and the German occupation of Bohemia and Moravia in March 1939 led to a complete disillusionment with the Nazi state.

A similar response was to be seen in the North American churches, as reported by John Conway. Here too the churches were strongly inclined to a pacifist stance which went hand in hand with American isolationism. In the initial years of the Nazi dictatorship the Lutheran church press in America was sympathetic towards the Nazi regime, and there was even a tendency to accept the apologies of the Nazi propagandists who presented the Nazi regime as a bastion of Christian = anti-Communist morality. But from 1934, opposition to the Nazi regime grew considerably, especially notably over the imprisonment of Martin Niemöller in 1937. Prominent journals such as the *Christian Century* rightly noted that the Nazi attacks on Christians and Jews were companion evils. The church was therefore called to a simultaneous (and unprecedented) support of the persecuted Jews, as well as of their own members. However the call for a militant stand against Nazism was weakened by a tendency to believe that Nazi actions were not due to Hitler but to the radical wing of the party. Many North Americans also supported the appease-

ment policies of the British and French governments until the pogrom of November 1938. Thereafter their moral outrage at such events outweighed the lingering desire to uphold a pacifist stance, and hence these churches were ready to take up arms again in 1939-41 in defence of both democracy and God.

In his introductory remarks, Gerhard Besier had stressed the need to take more seriously the theological aspects of the Church Struggle. However, it was disappointing that more of these did not emerge during the proceedings. I would have liked to see more attention given to the Roman Catholic Church's part in the Church Struggle. As the devil's advocate, Doris Bergen raised the question as to why the Church Struggle is studied with such care when the Church seemed to be relatively powerless to affect the course of events. This occasioned considerable discussion about the role of the historian in making moral judgements. It was argued that, since the Church had played such a formative role in European history, the reasons for its eclipse and decline in power were especially worthy of study. Moreover, as a central component of the European intellectual tradition, the fate of the Christian faith must remain a central concern of historians.

Tagungsbericht *Nationaler Revolution and militärischer Aggression. Transformationen in Kirche und Gesellschaft unter der konsolidierten NS-Gewaltherrschaft 1934-39*. 06.06.1998-06.06.1998, München, in: H-Soz-u-Kult 08.06.1998.