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# Reading Bonhoeffer's "After Ten Years" in Our Times

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*One must be cautious about drawing simplistic historical analogies. Nowhere is this truer than in the case of comparisons to Nazi Germany, its leaders, and the Holocaust. The period between 1933 and 1945 was characterized by a complex constellation of factors, many of them unique to Europe during the first half of the twentieth century. Nationalism, antisemitism, ethnocentrism, and populism have played a role in different historical periods and national contexts. Moreover, the language of grievance and resentment is usually homegrown, drawing upon the embedded prejudices and fears of a particular society as well as its hopes, which often are articulated in themes revived from the particular history of the host nation.*

*At such moments the responses of citizens and their institutions are crucial. Political culture is not just the product of how citizens engage in and create their society. It is also an expression of what we are willing to tolerate, what compromises we make and the reasons why we make them—and those are the factors that can undermine and even destroy a political culture.*

*The veneer of ethics and moral behavior in the public square can be surprisingly thin. Human beings are easily swayed and enraptured; peer pressure and crowd behavior are powerful forces. We are used to living by a particular set of rules, values, and expectations of behavior, individually and socially, and it is often easier for institutions like the civil service, universities, businesses, and religious bodies to conform than to resist. When the rules change it can be difficult to find our bearings, let alone chart a new course that can address and if necessary challenge what is happening around us.*

*These are the themes that Dietrich Bonhoeffer addressed in "After Ten Years." His context was Nazi Germany, but his observations about what happens to human decency and courage when a political culture disintegrates continue to resonate around the world today.*

## The Historical Context for "After Ten Years"

"After Ten Years" is a powerful reflection about what happened to Germany, its people, and their political culture in the decade after the Nazis came to power. It was written in December 1942 by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German Protestant theologian and pastor who fought against the nazification of his church and was executed in April 1945 for his ties to the conspiracy to overthrow the Nazi regime.

Bonhoeffer came from the Prussian upper middle class, a conservative and largely nationalist milieu from which the National Socialists drew significant support. In contrast, the Bonhoeffer family opposed National Socialism from the beginning, repulsed, as one of them later said, by its "petty nationalism" and sensing intuitively "that this tree would bear no good fruit."[1] Bonhoeffer and his seven siblings were raised in an atmosphere of enlightened humanism, with an emphasis on independent thinking, clear ethical standards, and a broader sense of their obligations as citizens. The Bonhoeffers were church members but not regular churchgoers, and his parents were surprised when Dietrich Bonhoeffer decided to study theology.

These family influences on Bonhoeffer are especially evident in "After Ten Years," and they are reflected in his early critiques of the Nazi regime, its curtailment of civil liberties, and the persecution of the Jewish minority and political opponents. Only weeks after Adolf Hitler became chancellor, for example, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote to

1. Emmi Bonhoeffer (the widow of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's brother Klaus), in a May 6, 1986, interview. In Victoria Barnett, *For the Soul of the People: Protestant Protest against Hitler* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 25.

the U.S. theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, under whom he had studied in New York, about the "barbarization" of German culture, noting that "we will need to create a Civil Liberties Union in the coming period."[2]

Few in the German Protestant Church shared his views, and in late 1933 Bonhoeffer went to London, torn by the failings of his church, the growing pressures of the Nazi state, and the search for what his own path in the new Germany should be. He stayed in London for two years, serving two German-speaking churches and returning to Nazi Germany in 1935 to teach seminarians in the Confessing Church, a Protestant movement that had emerged to combat the more extreme pro-Nazi factions within the Protestant churches. He left briefly once again as war loomed in 1939, coming to the United States for what would have been a safe exile and a distinguished career. He arrived with his brother Karl Friedrich, a renowned physicist who had been invited to give a series of lectures. Both men returned to Germany in July 1939 at the family's request. Dietrich Bonhoeffer told Reinhold Niebuhr that he was returning from a deep sense of obligation to shape the future of his country and his church. "Christians in Germany," he wrote, "will face the terrible alternative of either willing the defeat of their nation in order that Christian civilization may survive, or willing the victory of their nation and thereby destroying our civilization. I know which of these alternatives I must choose, but I cannot make that choice in security. . . ."[3]

In the early years of the war his brother-in-law Hans von Dohnanyi, who held a high position in the Justice Ministry, helped Bonhoeffer avoid military service by getting him a post in the Office of Military Intelligence. Under the command of Admiral Wilhelm Canaris, that office became the center of the conspiracy to overthrow the Nazi regime. Dohnanyi himself was regarded by many as the intellectual head of the conspiracy, and through him Bonhoeffer was already part of a network of Germans with knowledge of and some involvement in that conspiracy. In 1943 he and Dohnanyi were arrested and imprisoned. In April 1945 they were executed by the Nazi regime, as were two other Bonhoeffer family members engaged in the resistance, Bonhoeffer's brother Klaus and another brother-in-law, Rüdiger Schleicher.

"After Ten Years" was written for Dohnanyi, Bonhoeffer's close

2. Letter of February 6, 1933. In Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works English Edition, Volume 12: *Berlin: 1932–1933* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 94.
3. Letter of June 1939 to Reinhold Niebuhr. In Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Theological Education Underground: 1937–1939*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol. 15 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 210.

friend and colleague Eberhard Bethge, and Major General Hans Oster, a German military officer in intelligence work who had been involved in conversations about a possible overthrow of the Nazi regime since 1938 (Oster had secretly informed the Allies about the imminent invasions of Belgium and Holland). Bonhoeffer sent it to them at Christmas 1942; the essay was a retrospective analysis of what had happened to them, and more broadly, what had happened to his church, his country, and his compatriots in the decade that had passed since the Nazis came to power. He focused on the failures of Germans and their institutions to withstand and resist National Socialism, exploring the underlying reasons for these failures. One part of the essay was taken from a passage Bonhoeffer had written in his *Ethics* manuscripts one year before, and there are themes and even phrases that appear in letters to Dohnanyi and Bethge throughout this period. "After Ten Years" was written, then, as a synthesis of an ongoing and troubled conversation between these men as they wrestled with their consciences and the diminishing options open to those who sought the end of National Socialism.

December 1942 was an especially bleak moment. The resistance circle to which Bonhoeffer was connected was one of several networks informed about the plans to overthrow the regime. These networks included high-level diplomats, civil servants, professors, political officials, and career military officers, all of whom were critical of the regime and who had begun to think very concretely about what a post-Nazi Germany might look like. Some of these circles outlined the possible future of German social, political, and educational institutions; others coordinated communication between different localized resistance groups. Bonhoeffer's assignment was to convey information and peace feelers from the higher levels of the resistance to his church contacts abroad. He was also visiting resistance groups throughout Germany—in early 1943, for example, a meeting was set up between him and the White Rose students in Munich.[4] That meeting never took place because of the arrests and executions of several members of that group in February 1943.

The actual plans to overthrow the regime depended on the few high-ranking military officials who had direct access to Adolf Hitler. Their success would depend on a number of other factors, such as measures

4. The "White Rose" was a resistance group founded by several students at the University of Munich. The group distributed leaflets decrying the mass murders of Jews in the East and calling for public resistance. It was denounced in January 1943 and its leaders, Christoph Probst and Hans and Sophie Scholl, were executed in February. Other members of the group were arrested and executed later that year.

that could prevent a counter-coup by loyalist Nazis and assure popular support. The officers who were involved vacillated constantly—sometimes according to how the war was going, sometimes driven by their own ambitions and opportunism. By the end of 1942 there had been several failed or aborted attempts to assassinate Hitler. The hopes of the Dohnanyi circle rose after the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, but plans for a coup stalled in late 1942 as the battle of Stalingrad turned into a protracted and ultimately catastrophic defeat for the German forces.

By 1942 the genocide of the Jewish population was well underway. German *Einsatzgruppen* and the Order Police had been engaged in mass killings of Jews since the beginning of the war. At the Wannsee Conference in January 1942 senior Nazi officials finalized plans for coordinating the murder of Jews throughout Europe, and over the course of 1942 mass killing operations began at Treblinka, Sobibor, and Belzec. By December 1942, over four million European Jews had already been murdered. Hans von Dohnanyi, who had begun tracking Nazi crimes even before the war, was receiving reports and documentation of the atrocities from various sources.

The conspirators could not know what is clear to us in retrospect: that the tide of the war was turning against Nazi Germany. In December 1942 there were no indications that military leaders were willing to attempt a coup, even as the scope of war crimes and atrocities reached new levels. Several months later, another conspirator, Ulrich von Hassell, would write: "The longer the war lasts, the lower my opinion of the generals . . . they have no civil courage. They lack the self-assurance and the universal views that come from real culture. Almost to a man they bow before Hitler. . . . All upon whom we placed hopes fail us, and they fail us in the most miserable way. For these men admit [Nazi crimes] but they lack courage to act."[5]

Yet Bonhoeffer's haunting statement, "have there ever been people in history who in their time, like us, had so little ground under their feet," did not simply refer to what the conspirators faced in terms of wartime events, Nazi crimes, and the reluctance of leading military officials to turn against the regime. Bonhoeffer's letter was not so much an assessment of where they stood in 1942 but of how they had gotten there. "Ten years," he began, "is a long time in the life of a human being." He went on to offer a series of "conclusions about

5. Ulrich von Hassell, *The Von Hassell Diaries 1938-1944* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1947), 196.

human experience" that he had drawn from those years. To understand these conclusions and his ethical reflections about them, we must understand the complexity of Bonhoeffer's own record during those years.

## Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Path through History

Adolf Hitler became chancellor on January 30, 1933, and what followed in the subsequent six weeks is a stunning case study in how quickly a political culture can collapse. Germany initially remained a constitutional democracy. Hitler's conservative nationalist coalition partners expected that they would govern and that the popular new chancellor would be a figurehead who could rally his followers to support the new government after the turbulent Weimar years. There was little open opposition to the Nazi measures against opponents on the left, such as communists, left-wing journalists, and trade unions. Nazi paramilitary groups were given free rein to beat up Jews, gays, and other social "undesirables." There was widespread silence or rationalization about all these developments throughout German institutions, including the churches. With the March 23 Enabling Act, Hitler abrogated the German constitution, and democracy was replaced by a Nazi state under direct control of the Führer.

In those early weeks there were Germans who grasped the moral and political significance of what had just happened to their country. Young Dietrich Bonhoeffer—he was twenty-seven years old—wrote two essays that are striking for their political astuteness. The first essay, "The Führer and the Individual in the Younger Generation,"[6] was written in February 1933 and explored why his contemporaries were so enthusiastic about Hitler. Bonhoeffer understood Nazism's appeal to Germans, especially those of his generation. He himself had lost a brother in the First World War. As a student during the 1920s he briefly joined a right-wing paramilitary organization, and during that period he gave several talks that displayed a certain degree of nationalism and typical German resentment about the Versailles Treaty. Nonetheless, inoculated through his family, his upbringing and experiences abroad, his commitment to the international ecumenical movement, and his faith, Bonhoeffer recognized the dangers inherent in Nazi ideology and rhetoric, and the essay included the warning that even a charismatic "leader" could easily become a "misleader."[7]

6. Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works English Edition, Volume 12: *Berlin 1932–1933*, 266–82.