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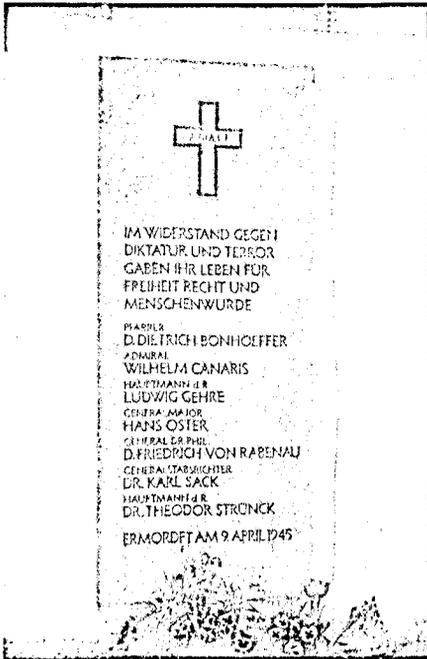


Twentieth-Century Profile: Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Gary M. Simpson

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945) was a German Lutheran pastor, theologian, and martyr who lived his adult life under the fascist Nazi regime of Adolf Hitler's Third Reich. Bonhoeffer had resisted the totalitarian tyranny of Nazism from its takeover of Germany beginning in January 1933, and on the radio he openly denounced Hitler's April 1933 Aryan Civil Service law, which had banned Jews from being German civil servants, and which eventually led to the murder of over six million European Jews. Bonhoeffer's resistance to Hitler grew throughout the 1930s, and he became an influential young leader of the Protestant "confessing church struggle" against the Nazification of German Protestantism. In July 1940 Bonhoeffer's brother-in-law, Hans von Dohnányi, convinced him to join a conspiracy group within Hitler's own military intelligence to assassinate Hitler. Bonhoeffer became a double agent. In April 1943 Bonhoeffer was arrested, imprisoned, and interrogated. Two years later Hitler personally gave the order to execute Bonhoeffer along with other conspirators, which was carried out at Flossenbürg Prison on April 9, 1945, just two weeks before the Allied forces entered Berlin.

Bonhoeffer had been raised in an aristocratic and intellectual family and studied theology at the University of Berlin, where his father was a professor of psychiatry. He was a gifted student and at the age of twenty-one he finished his first doctoral dissertation, *Sanctorum Communio*, on the proposition of "Christ existing as church-community" by probing and



Memorial stone at the Flossenbürg concentration camp marking the spot where Dietrich Bonhoeffer and other members of the resistance were executed on April 9, 1945. The plaque reads, "In resistance to dictator and terror [these people] gave their lives for freedom, justice, and human dignity."

building upon Martin Luther's Christ-centered approach to the communion of saints. Three years later Bonhoeffer finished his second dissertation, a German requirement for future professors. In 1930 he went to New York City on a scholarship for a year at Union Theological Seminary, where he studied with well-known theologians, including Reinhold Niebuhr, the most famous American Christian social ethicist of the time. During that year, he regularly worshiped and participated in numerous ways at the renowned Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem. There he gained firsthand knowledge of the systematic racist discrimination against African Americans, of their black theology and deep spirituality, and of the Harlem Renaissance.

Bonhoeffer had come to the United States with the common German-Lutheran conviction that

Christian faith and theology had little interest in concrete political life. After returning to Germany he soon became a young leader within the growing ecumenical movement of the day. He also became a strong voice within the various ecumenical peace movements across Europe, making many friends and especially establishing close ties with influential church leaders in England. These friendships and ties made him a valuable double agent who could communicate with the Allied forces about the conspiracy to assassinate Hitler and the plans to set up an alternative German government that would negotiate peace with the Allied powers, plans which of course did not come to fruition.

Addressing uncomfortable realities

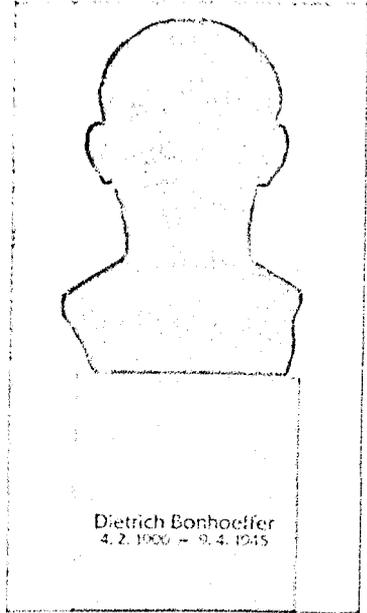
Between 1935 and 1939 Bonhoeffer became an even more integral part of the “Confessing Church” and the “Church Struggle.” The Confessing Church, which existed outside the normal German Protestant church structures, started its own preachers’ seminary, first in Zingst on the Baltic Sea and eventually on the Finkenwalde estate near the Baltic seaport of Stettin. The Confessing Church appointed Bonhoeffer as the director and teacher of the Finkenwalde seminary. Finkenwalde was the setting that inspired some of Bonhoeffer’s most famous writings: *Discipleship*, *Life Together*, and *Prayerbook of the Bible: An Introduction to the Psalms*. He took key notions from his first dissertation, *Sanctorum Communio*, and developed them for more popular audiences. Among

these key notions is that Jesus lived and acted vicariously with and for human beings and that Jesus’ incarnate, crucified, and risen way of life forms the way of life of his disciples. As Bonhoeffer puts it in *Discipleship*: In Christ “God is a God who bears. . . . Bearing constitutes being a Christian. . . . As Christ bears our burdens, so we are to bear the burden of our sisters and brothers.”

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Bonhoeffer’s core theological convictions shaped his later writings as he attempted to address new circumstances. For instance, he was trying in the thirteen manuscripts in his *Ethics*—we have only draft, not completed, chapters—to construct a “concrete Christian ethic” both for times out of joint



Bust of Dietrich Bonhoeffer from the chapel on the grounds of the Flossenbürg concentration camp, where Bonhoeffer was executed in 1945.

From the Sixteenth Century to Today

and for more ordinary times. In his oft-read *Letters and Paper from Prison* he brings his core Christian convictions into conversation with a “religionless Christianity” and with a “world come of age.” In “After Ten Years,” his 1942 Christmas letter to his family and fellow conspirators, he notes that following a “God who bears” leads to “an experience of incomparable value that we have for once learned to see the great events of world history from below, from the perspective of the outcast, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed and reviled, in short from the perspective of the suffering.”