Complicity in the Holocaust

In one of the darker aspects of Nazi Germany, churches and universities – generally respected institutions – grew to accept and support Nazi ideology. Robert P. Ericksen explains how an advanced, highly educated, Christian nation could commit the crimes of the Holocaust. This book describes how Germany's intellectual and spiritual leaders enthusiastically partnered with Hitler's regime, thus becoming active participants in the persecution of Jews and, ultimately, in the Holocaust. Ericksen also examines Germany's deeply flawed yet successful postwar policy of denazification in these institutions. *Complicity in the Holocaust* argues that enthusiasm for Hitler within churches and universities effectively gave Germans permission to participate in the Nazi regime.

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Churches and Universities in Nazi Germany

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Dedicated to three children now grown,
Sasha, Justin, and Annika

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Here, too, I am in touch with a group of scholars involved with topics considered in this book.

The listing of additional friends and colleagues who have contributed to my ideas and to my pleasure in the profession is too long to attempt here. Over the course of several decades, I have learned from hundreds of individuals in numerous ways. I will mention, however, some of the closest colleagues with whom I have shared work, conference sessions, and conversations. This includes a close working relationship for nearly twenty years with Susannah Heschel, now the Eli Black Professor of Jewish Studies at Dartmouth College. Her friendship and support have been a pleasure, and we have shared our interest in twentieth-century German theologians in many venues and several publications. Two other scholars have become friends as well as important participants in the critical reassessment of churches in Nazi Germany. One is Doris Bergen, now the Chancellor and Ray Wolfe Professor of Holocaust Studies at the University of Toronto, and the other is Victoria Barnett, Director of Church Relations at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Susannah, Doris, and Vicki form a core group now at the heart of our assessment of churches in Nazi Germany, along with our critique of the churches' relationship to the "Jewish question." Hans-Joachim Dahms represents another *Glücksfall* in my career. We met in the Göttingen University Archive when we recognized that each of us was focusing on documents covered in swastikas. We then met regularly in Göttingen, followed by presentations at conferences, joint publications, and meetings in places as far afield as Beijing and Xian. Achim's contribution to my knowledge of universities in Nazi Germany parallels the contributions by Susannah, Doris, and Vicki to my assessment of churches.

I am indebted to the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation for several stints of research in Germany. I had the opportunity to work on two different occasions at the Max Planck Institute for History at Göttingen, under the hospitable leadership of a wise and gentle scholar, Hartmut Lehmann. He and his wife, Silke, are now good friends as well as colleagues. Hartmut introduced me to Manfred Gailus, whose important work on churches in Nazi Germany has also informed my efforts. Alexander von Humboldt's support also allowed an opportunity to work with Gerhard Besier, both in Heidelberg and in Dresden. In 2003, I worked at the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. I was supported by a Charles Revson Fellowship and guided by the director of the center, Paul Shapiro, as well as by excellent staff members, such as Victoria Barnett, Suzanne Brown-Fleming, Robert Ehrenreich, and Wendy

Lower. I spent many hours in the Göttingen University Archive, assisted by the director, Ulrich Hunger. I also received access to denazification records at the Lower Saxony *Hauptstaatsarchiv* in Hanover and viewed various church records in the Archive of the Hanoverian *Landeskirche* and in the Central Church Archive in Berlin. Other friends in Germany include Gerhard and Sybille Hirschfeld and Jörg and Renate Ohlemacher. They have offered memorable meals and important conversations, the sort of thing that makes this profession hardly seem like work. At Pacific Lutheran University, I have been the beneficiary of endowed support, contributed by Kurt Mayer and his family, as well as Nancy Powell and her family. My Kurt Mayer Chair in Holocaust Studies has added significant travel and research support in the last few years. I am indebted to all of these individuals and institutions, as well as many more.

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Preface

In 2004, I was invited by Professor Milton Shain at Cape Town University to give the biennial Kaplan Holocaust Lectures. Those lectures represent the first time I formally combined my interest in German churches and German universities. They also represent the first time I began explicitly to consider the question of Holocaust complicity in relation to these two institutions. The following summer, Christopher Browning and I hosted a small conference in Gig Harbor, Washington, on the topic of "Future Directions in Holocaust Studies."[1] It was at this conference, funded by Zev Weiss and the Holocaust Education Foundation, that I began to ponder more seriously another question: If we try to identify complicity in the Holocaust, does that mean we are also identifying how not to be complicit? Does scholarship on the Holocaust imply a right, or even an obligation, to search for "lessons" of the Holocaust?

Anyone familiar with Holocaust education will recognize the ubiquity of this idea of lessons, whether in teaching children not to bully or teaching adults to value tolerance and oppose injustice. These are worthy goals. However, pieties in response to the Holocaust can become saccharine and simplistic. In the worst case, they can trivialize events and impede understanding. The Holocaust was horrific, probably beyond our understanding, and it likely has no "meaning" in any important sense of the word. Furthermore, anyone familiar with the norms of modern scholarship will detect another problem in the instrumental use of Holocaust

[1] Attendance at that conference of July 2005 included Omer Bartov, Yehuda Bauer, Doris Bergen, Christopher Browning, Robert Ericksen, Saul Friedländer, Peter Hayes, Dagmar Herzog, Susannah Heschel, Steven Katz, Claudia Koonz, Peter Longerich, Michael Marrus, Dan Michman, John Roth, and Zev Weiss.

education. Objectivity is an important expectation among scholars.[2] Can that be reconciled with turning history into moral judgments or the pronouncement of moral lessons? The nineteenth-century German, Leopold von Ranke, set the standard for historians when he said we must describe history "as it actually was," without letting our present concerns or points of view impinge.

I was trained in this expectation of historical objectivity. However, my first serious work on churches in Nazi Germany put me face-to-face with a difficult question: Must we really view Adolf Hitler with moral neutrality? It is hard, of course, to find historical treatments of Hitler and the Holocaust that do not indulge in some measure of moral criticism, and rightly so. In my first article on Gerhard Kittel and in my first book, *Theologians under Hitler*, I took the stance that we could assess these theologians by measuring, among other things, how explicitly and enthusiastically they supported Adolf Hitler, the Nazi Party, and the Nazi worldview.[3] I argued that our retrospective gaze since 1945 makes it clear that Hitler got it wrong. We are right to condemn the Holocaust and other crimes of the Nazi state. We are right to condemn the Nazi ideology and Nazi policies. Objectivity may be appropriate in analyzing how and why certain theologians praised Hitler and Nazism, trying to recognize the historical and intellectual determinants of their stance; but we also have a right to claim that any stance that involved enthusiastic praise for Nazi ideas and practices was a mistake, even a profound mistake.

In this book, I start with the moral judgment that murdering Jews and other innocent men, women, and children was wrong. Few would disagree, I am sure. I also argue that the Nazis signaled their basic approach to politics from the beginning, with harsh rhetoric and brutal policies in violation of well-established legal and civil rights. Each radical step

[2] I am speaking about the norms of "modern" scholarship, as rooted in the Enlightenment tradition of rationalism. "Postmodern" scholarship, by contrast, rejects the ideas of neutral objectivity and "historical truth." This can lead to a stance that allows both praise and condemnation of Hitler, or an unwillingness to distinguish between claims that the Holocaust occurred and claims that it did not. I agree with Richard J. Evans, *In Defense of History* (New York: Norton, 1999), 206–10, that this hyperrelativism represents a serious flaw in postmodern thought, alongside some useful contributions it has made. Good historians are obligated to search for truth, even in the realization that truth is exceedingly elusive. The recognition that the Holocaust happened is one of those truths not to be denied.

[3] See Robert P. Ericksen, "Theologian in the Third Reich: The Case of Gerhard Kittel," *Journal of Contemporary History*, 12 (1977), 595–622, especially 595–96; and *Theologians under Hitler: Gerhard Kittel, Paul Althaus and Emanuel Hirsch* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), especially 177–91.

from 1933 to 1939 was known to the German public – including the Aryan Paragraph of 1933, the Nuremberg Racial Laws of 1935, and the *Reichskristallnacht* pogrom of 1938. We can connect the dots and not be entirely surprised that the culmination of these policies included the murder of "lives unworthy of life"; the mobile killing units putting bullets in the brains of Jews lined up alongside mass graves; and the creation, beginning in December 1941, of half a dozen death camps whose primary purpose was the efficient murder of Jews. Seeing no need to remain morally neutral about these behaviors, I think it appropriate to ask questions about who helped make these behaviors possible.

Konrad Jarausch – writing about German lawyers, teachers, and engineers – also thinks it appropriate to ask such questions and make such judgments:

> The contribution of the professions to modern life has been profoundly ambiguous. On the one hand, the improvement of the legal system, the spread of learning, and the development of machines have increased justice, enlightenment, and comfort, thereby earning for professionals public gratitude and material rewards. On the other hand, the same experts have perpetrated callous injustice, engaged in stultifying indoctrination, and created engines of death for their own gratification and benefit.… Perhaps the most dramatic corruption of professionalism in the twentieth century was the evolution of German professions from internationally respected experts to accessories to Nazi crimes.[4]

Phrases such as "callous injustice," "stultifying indoctrination," and "corruption of professionalism" certainly represent value judgments. Although Jarausch deals with a different set of professionals, I believe similar judgments can be reached against pastors and professors.

Other observations by Jarausch are also relevant. For example, he notes that "[a]lthough the temptation to moralize about the catastrophes of recent German history is overwhelming, drawing overly facile lessons ought to be resisted." Then he adds, "Of course, it is equally misleading to approach the upheavals of the first half of the twentieth century in a machinelike 'objective' fashion. Values of the historian and the reader necessarily enter into interpretation, because humans are not robots."[5] While defending the need to include values in the discussion, he indicates certain value judgments of his own: "How could competent, individually decent university graduates fall collectively for the Austrian corporal?

[4] Konrad Jarausch, *The Unfree Professions: German Lawyers, Teachers, and Engineers, 1900–1950* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), vii.
[5] Ibid., ix.

What material and ethical price did these experts pay for their collaboration in the inhumanity of the Third Reich?"[6]

This book will describe many pastors and professors who "fell for the Austrian corporal" and thereby collaborated "in the inhumanity of the Third Reich." They gave a ringing endorsement to the "rebirth" of Germany under Adolf Hitler, even with all his anti-Jewish hostility readily apparent. Furthermore, this enthusiastic praise was not the message of just a few pastors and professors, but it was a predominate message within churches and universities as a whole. Finally, neither of these two respected institutions ever recanted their early endorsement of Nazism or harbored significant instances of resistance within their ranks. When a few examples of resistance did occur, those resisters were more likely to be condemned and isolated than congratulated or emulated within their institutions. That is what I am calling the complicity of churches and universities. Because the institutional approval of church and university for the Nazi state was expressed so openly and never recanted, I believe that approval is the primary impression Germans at the time would have perceived. When ordinary Germans, including church members and university graduates, were asked to do horrific things by the Nazi state, they presumably had a right to think they were given permission by their pastors and by their professors. Hitler had been praised as God's gift to Germany. Nazi rule had been praised as the wonderful culmination of German history.

If this level of approval for Hitler and Nazism seems hard to imagine today, that is partly because Germans threw up their hands in denial after 1945. Also, ironically, the nearly universal post-1945 condemnation of the Nazi regime makes it harder for us to imagine the alternative, that is, pre-1945 approval. Neo-Nazis who admire and defend Hitler are usually dismissed as an angry fringe group whose ideas are unworthy of discussion. It is thus hard for us to get inside the heads of Germans within the Nazi period, those who thought Hitler was a hero rather than a villain.

I am quite certain the "good Germans" we criticize today, those Germans who considered themselves respectable scholars and church leaders, would not have imagined our willingness to condemn their ideas and their values. When we read their actual words, however, and see their unabashed praise of Hitler, it is easy to condemn them for being dangerously wrong. I am happy to make that judgment. Nonetheless, my primary goal is to follow Ranke's advice and describe the world of German

[6] Ibid., 4.

pastors and professors "as it actually was." That means we must filter out the widespread condemnation since 1945 of Nazi ideas and Nazi practices. The level of that condemnation makes it hard for us to imagine that "good Germans" could support such bad things. It tempts us to give them the benefit of the doubt, to assume that they really felt much as we do about harsh and brutal Nazi behavior but simply could not say so. That certainly applies to some Germans of the period. I am convinced, however, that the majority spoke honestly when they praised Hitler to the heavens or otherwise indicated a level of enthusiasm beyond what might have been necessary for safety's sake.

This brings me back to the question about lessons of the Holocaust. If it is appropriate to identify the mistakes of these "good Germans" in the Nazi period, should we also try to identify similar mistakes today, similar blind spots? Will future generations look back in astonishment at our moral obtuseness, our inability to recognize contradictions in our alleged values? Jarausch warns us against "drawing overly facile lessons" in response to "the catastrophes of recent German history." I agree and will leave the search for lessons primarily to readers of this book. However, the idea that we might learn from history is certainly an appropriate component in our study of the Holocaust.

As I prepared my Kaplan Holocaust Lectures in 2004, one issue did stand out for me. The pastors and professors who gave their enthusiastic support to Hitler all were marked by a particularly intense nationalism. Furthermore, this nationalism justified in their minds any number of compromised values. If it would strengthen Germany at a time of crisis, the burning of books, the firing of professors, the attack on German Jews, and making war against German neighbors could all be rationalized as necessary and appropriate. These supporters of Hitler looked at the world through very German eyes, and they were proud to do so. Thus, they justified virtually any behavior deemed necessary to renew German strength and prosperity, even behaviors that seriously violated previous norms. For each critical word that might reach them from abroad, they had a justification or a rationalization. They would point to perceived injustices against Germany, along with the claim that Germany had every right to flex its muscles and protect its rightful place in the world. It is hard to imagine that "my nation, right or wrong" could ever be an appropriate maxim. In light of the German experience, I am inclined to see it more as a cause for alarm.

When I delivered the lectures that led to this book, I was speaking to an audience of students, academics, and an educated public. I still have that

audience in mind. Readers will note that "good German women" play a small role in this book. They were neither uninvolved nor unimportant. However, my focus is on representatives of the churches and universities who made up the public face of those institutions. During that era these were primarily men. Finally, readers will notice that many of my examples come from Göttingen University. It is a prominent and respected university, founded in 1737, the *alma mater* of Otto von Bismarck, with a reputation in the 1920s as perhaps the best place in the world to study math and physics and a very solid reputation in many other disciplines. I have returned to the libraries and archives at Göttingen for three decades. As is the case with all examples in this book taken from my own research, I believe them to be representative of the German experience. I also am convinced that the arguments I present in this book are consistent with a growing body of evidence from scholars on both sides of the Atlantic.

RPE
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