Living in a Time of Trouble: German Adventists Under Nazi Rule

by Jack M. Patt

The period of National Socialist rule was a difficult one for German Seventh-day Adventists, and one about which they were and are still quite reluctant to speak. Information concerning some aspects of the Advent Movement during this period is, therefore, very limited. Not much was said of Adventist difficulties in the published reports of the time, since church leaders feared that incautious statements might fall into the hands of the "Reformers," Conradi and his Seventh Day Baptist followers, and other foes of the Adventists who could have used them to add to the church's troubles.

The Nazi political order was not friendly to religion generally. The Evangelical and Catholic churches suffered government discrimination and hundreds of ministers and priests were interned. The Faith Movement of German Christians sought to harmonize Christianity with the tenets of National Socialism and make the churches a pillar of the new Reich. This effort precipitated within the Protestant churches the so-called Confessional Church, whose members became the uncompromising opponents of the German Christians. Some of the small sects, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses, were silenced by the government. The Jews also were constantly persecuted, even those who had become members of Christian denominations. Adventists, however, were allowed to continue their church organization and missionary activity.[1]

The Faith Movement of the German Christians based their program on the supposition that the rise of Hitler was an event in which God was revealing Himself. In line with their ideology, they condemned the teaching of a fallen world and emphasized faith in man. They also advocated the rejection of the Old Testament and a revision of the New Testament in such a way as to repudiate the divinity of Jesus Christ. Seventh-day Adventists were opposed to these principles of the German church, but did not voice their opposition publicly for fear of reprisals.[2]

In fact, Seventh-day Adventists considered the attempt to unify Evangelicalism and National Socialism as an ominous portent; they feared that it was the beginning of an effort to subdue all religious organizations to the Nazi order. German Adventist leaders were aware of their weakness as a small sect and admonished their members on the importance of following the counsel of Mrs. Ellen G. White's writings and the General Conference to remain out of politics. They further asked the membership to be careful of their words and actions in order to avoid giving offense to the government; such offense might

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be used as an excuse to restrict Adventist church activity.[3]

Despite the government's antagonism toward religion and restrictions of it, Seventh-day Adventists laid plans for continued missionary endeavor in all of their churches. This program, adopted in 1934, was intended to maintain the increase in church membership. It included an organized campaign in each church to give away, lend and sell Adventist periodicals, journals and books to friends and relatives and other persons at every opportunity, to issue personal invitations to give Bible readings, to mail missionary letters and publications, and to pray for specific persons who were interested in the Adventist doctrines. From time to time in the ensuing years, officers of each church made further appeals to inspire greater missionary activity.[4]

With the introduction of compulsory military training and labor service in Germany in 1935, Adventists faced the problem of adjusting themselves to government service. Under the terms of the Law of May 21, every German man between the ages of 18 and 25 was liable to military service for one year, and by the Law of June 24 both sexes of the same ages were obliged to serve in the Reich Labor Service for six months. By the terms of the Law of August 24, 1936, the term of military service was increased to two years. These requirements accounted for some apostasies, because it was difficult or virtually impossible to observe the seventh-day Sabbath in the labor service or in the army.[5]

German Seventh-day Adventists remembered the experience they had gone through between 1914 and 1918. Their unilateral decision to bear arms and work on Saturdays had been condemned by the General Conference Executive Committee as contrary to the traditional stand of the denomination. German Adventist officials later acknowledged their mistake and accepted the traditional church belief that their first obligation was to God and second to the state. They acknowledged their patriotic duty to their country only as long as they were not required to violate their religious principles. According to the Gland (Switzerland) Declaration of 1923, the official position of the German Adventists became that held by the denominational headquarters—opposition to arms-bearing and refusal to perform duty on Saturday, except in medical service. Some Seventh-day Adventists actually declined to serve in the armed forces and were imprisoned.[6]

In 1936, Baldur von Schirach moved to place all German youth in the organization, Hitler Jugend. The movement was anti-Christian, but it assured its members future employment and advancement. The temptation was great for Adventist young men to accept the security thus offered. Young women not concerned about employment and the men who planned to enter denominational employment were not affected by these incentives. Officially, the church was opposed to the Nazi attempt to engulf Adventist children but the denominational authorities and journals thought it wise to make no public issue.[7]

Adventist adults also had to face the dilemma of joining the Nazi Labor Front or facing unemployment and other hardships. Since there seemed to be no other way of solving the problem, most Adventist workingmen succumbed to the pressure and became members of the labor service to save their families; some joined the party organization.

German Adventists could not approve of the Nazi program of racialism, nationalization of religion and anti-Semitism, all of which were contrary to the principles of Christianity, their church as well as their own consciences. They did, however, actively support sterilization of mental defectives. Some Adventists were caught in the quickened pride of German nationalism, but most opposed Hitler's 25 points in *Mein Kampf* since their attainment was based upon the use of force. Many German Adventist leaders foresaw that this program would end in disaster for Hitler and Germany, although the majority, as good Germans, supported the remilitarization program.[8]

In 1935, the Seventh-day Adventist Church came under the threat of immediate dissolution. The German government notifed the denomination's Berlin headquarters that every church in Prussia was to be closed. No explanation was given for this order, which caused great anxiety and perplexity among the Adventists.[9]

William Spicer, a vice president of the General Conference, who was in Denmark at the time, received a cablegram from headquarters in Washington, D.C., informing him that the Adventists

in Germany were in trouble. Spicer immediately went to Berlin to assess the situation and to see what could be done. He contacted government officials but could receive no satisfaction. He therefore advised the German Adventists to engage in prayer and fasting. Shortly thereafter, a government official who had been reared as an Adventist advised the church authorities, through his mother, to retain legal assistance, and they did so. Several days later the closure order was rescinded as unexpectedly as it had been announced. The Adventists, through their attorney, endeavored to determine the reason for the order, but the government officials only stated that someone, formerly an Adventist of great influence, had initiated the case and had made erroneous charges to the effect that the Adventists were disloyal to the government and had violated the laws of the land. The government officials would not elaborate on these accusations. The Adventist leaders concluded that their accuser was Louis R. Conradi, former president of the Central European Division and a pioneer of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Germany and in eastern Europe, but then a bitter enemy who was zealously trying to make trouble for his former colleagues.[10]

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With each succeeding year of the National Socialist regime, government restriction against religion became more severe. Seventh-day Adventists realized that the authorities were watching them more closely to see that government orders were obeyed; the church realized that it must follow these orders in order to save itself from closure. Adventist religious meetings were under close observation by police officers, who dropped in unexpectedly, accompanied by stenographers to take notes of what was said and done. In 1938, the Adventists were informed that the term Sabbath School was not to be used henceforth since it sounded Jewish. Therefore, the Adventists changed the name to *Bibelschule* (Bible School), and the word Sabbath on church bulletin boards was changed to *Ruhetag* (Rest Day).[11]

In 1938, colporteurs faced new regulations. House-to-house canvassing with religious books was not permitted unless the colporteurs were on a salary from a responsible concern. Since colporteurs in Germany had always worked on a commission basis, this order necessitated a fundamental and expensive change of procedure. Still, German Adventist leaders were determined to continue this part of their missionary program as long as possible.[12]

The Nazi government looked with favor upon Seventh-day Adventist welfare activity, not only accepting the social help of the Adventist churches, but also at different times recognizing their efforts through documents signed by the leader and minister of the state department with which the Adventist welfare activity was connected.[13] Since the Adventist organization worked in close cooperation with the government in the social welfare program, Adventist leaders hoped that this cooperation would help to break down prejudice against them, prevent dissolution of the church and its other missionary activities, and be a means of gaining proselytes for the church. These reasons, however, were not the primary object of Adventist participation in welfare work. The Adventists believed that the welfare work was based upon the authority of the Bible and that they had a Christian obligation to help their country and mankind.[14]

This welfare program included readiness to do everything necessary for the welfare of the country (not contrary to first obedience to God), such as providing assistance to the needy in the form of food, shelter and clothing, caring for the sick, caring for the weak and the aged, caring for orphans, promoting abstinence from the use of tobacco and alcohol, furtherance of morality in every form, help of the religiously oppressed, and the protection of widows and minorities. Adventists emphasized that these were services in which all Christians should participate for the benefit of the entire nation.[15]

The German government recognized the need of organizing the entire population to assist in a welfare campaign. The German Welfare and Winter Relief was started in the winter of 1933-1934 and was a campaign in which all welfare organizations were ordered to assist. Each year the Adventist churches took part in the national winter welfare and relief work. Thousands of Adventists helped meet the great social need by selling welfare stamps and joining various women's welfare groups. At the end of each successful campaign, the government sent letters of appreciation to the Seventh-day Adventist headquarters in Germany.[16]

During the year 1933, the German Adventists helped over 55,000 persons; spent $18,610 for welfare; distributed over 50,000 articles of clothing, 3,900 pairs of shoes and $9,440 worth of food. In 1934, $13,214 was spent for welfare, 42,000 articles of clothing were distributed, 4,500 pairs of shoes were given away, $9,369 was spent for food and over 40,000 persons were helped. During the ensuing years, the church made similar contributions to welfare.[17]

Throughout the war years in Germany, Adventists continued their activity in social health and welfare of various kinds, including temperance work. Many Adventist churches organized groups of women who cooperated with the *Frauenbund für alkoholfreie Kultur* (Women's Union for Alcohol-Free Society). This organization published *Das Weisse Band* (The White Band), a pamphlet to propagandize its work. A similar close relationship existed with the *Deutscher Bund zur Bekämpfung der Tabakgefahren* (German Union for the Fight Against the Dangers of Tobacco). The Advent Welfare Work *(Advent-Wohlfahrtswerk)* organized a division in 1939 with 7,367 active participants devoted to fighting the use of tobacco and alcohol.[18] Through this department, the Advent Welfare activity became a part of the *Reichstelle gegen die Alkohol und Tabakgefahren* (State Office Against the Alcohol and Tobacco Traffic). At the end of 1939, this society embraced 38,282 members. The Adventist monthly journal *Gute Gesundheit* (Good Health), with a circulation of over 22,000 copies, vigorously campaigned against the use of alcohol and tobacco.[19]

Adventists continued to help in the sale and purchase of stamps for the Winter-War Relief Work. During the winter of 1939-1940, Seventh-day Adventists sold over $89,500 worth of stamps, an increase of almost $40,000 over their sales of the previous winter. Solicitors sold these stamps in guest homes, hotels, railroad stations and in house-to-house canvassing.[20]

Adventist welfare activity became an integral part of the Reich welfare program. The Advent Welfare Organization gave clothing and other items to the needy in the war areas of eastern Germany, to soldiers at the front, to the wounded in the hospitals, and it assisted in packing and sending parcels. Many Adventist women helped in the German Red Cross activities and in other welfare organizations. They likewise helped soldiers' wives and children in need, and assisted with their housework and other duties. For this work, the Seventh-day Adventists received expressions of thanks from the German Red Cross, and found favor as well with the Reich Welfare Office.[21]

Adventists also contributed free social work in their hospitals and sanitariums. In 1939, the Friedensau Sanitarium and Hospital and Marienhöhe Convalescent Home took care of 50 undernourished boys and girls from Austria and Sudetenland for six weeks. The Waldfriede Sanitarium provided 27 beds for needy patients and rendered service for a total of 625 days. The Bad Aibling Sanitarium took care of 30 patients, representing a total of 630 days. The Friedensau Sanitarium donated services to 30 patients; and the Marienhöhe Convalescent Home, to 20 patients. The Adventist children's vacation home at Johannesberg near Konigshöhe in the Sudetenland cared for 21 young people without cost. The Sonnenhof near Dresden and the Friedensau Home for the Aged also rendered free service.[22]

The Friedensau Sisterhood, consisting of Adventist nurses graduated from Friedensau, volunteered their services for needy patients. They worked in various private clinics, in army hospitals and in private nursing.

The work of the Adventist nurses, the Advent Welfare Organization, and the sanitariums at Friedensau, Waldfriede and Bad Aibling represented the main Adventist missionary activity in the Central European Division during the last year of the war. When the German armies were reeling from defeat, it was virtually impossible to conduct missionary activity in other areas. By

the end of the war, Adventists were themselves in great need of food, clothing and financial assistance. Fortunately for them, aid was forthcoming from their brethren in the United States.[23]

The prewar Nazi years were filled with trial and difficulty for Adventist children and parents. Since the Adventist church did not operate elementary and secondary schools, attendance at public schools six days a week was obligatory. It was usually impossible for Adventist parents to obtain permission to have their children excused from attendance on Sabbath.

It was different in Adventist seminaries, where the administration was conducted by church leaders. However, there were other difficulties. The Central European Division leaders decided in the autumn of 1934 to close the Neandertal Missionary Seminary and to discontinue the ministerial course at Friedensau and Marienhöhe. This action was taken out of fear that no more Adventist young people could be placed in denominational missionary work. For two years, there was no training whatsoever of Adventist ministers in Germany.

Even so, 106 students enrolled at the Friedensau Missionary Seminary during the school year 1933-1934. In 1934-1935, the enrollment dropped to 70 and in 1935-1936 decreased still further to 47. Even the introduction of a course in colporteur-evangelism in 1934, which was designed to increase the enrollment, did not stop the decline. There was, however, an increase in 1936 lasting until the outbreak of the war in 1939. In the school year 1936-1937, there were 76 students; in 1938-1939 there were 106, and the same number during 1939-1940 school year.[24]

In the autumn of 1936, Friedensau began to train ministers again. Of those who had left in 1934 only a few returned to complete their ministerial education. Threatened since 1933 by the probability of having to close the school, Marienhöhe Missionary Seminary was finally forced to discontinue its operation in the spring of 1939. Consequently, as before 1921, Friedensau became the only Seventh-day Adventist educational institution in Germany.[25]

The outbreak of the war in 1939 inevitably affected Adventist educational activity in Germany. Most students enrolled in the educational institutions were in the younger classes. During the first year of the war, only 12 enrolled in the ministerial and teaching courses at the Friedensau Missionary Seminary and the number dropped to six in the following year. In the autumn of 1941, these courses had to be discontinued. The total enrollment, however, was large enough to keep the school in operation. From 1941 to 1942, this total increased from 85 to 103. It is possible that the bombings of the cities induced some parents to send their children to the sure refuge of the forest tranquility at Friedensau. In 1943, the government closed the school and the Wehrmacht converted the buildings of the school into a hospital. For the second time in its history, the Friedensau school had to close its doors because of war. Until 1945, the buildings served the Germans as a place of convalescence, and after the war they were used as a hospital for the Soviet occupation forces. Not until March 1947 was the school able to resume its operation.[26]

Information about the Seventh-day Adventists and their church activity during the war years from 1939 to 1945 is quite limited. The scarcity of source materials is largely due to the destruction of the Adventist archives at Hamburg and Berlin by Allied bombings. Furthermore, the leaders of the church in Germany were reluctant to divulge much information about those years because of the embarrassment it might bring to them; some church members had been swept along with the tide of nationalism, had joined the Nazi party, borne arms, worked on the seventh-day Sabbath and supported the Nazi war effort wholeheartedly.

The majority of church members, however, clung to the official stand of the denomination, not wishing to repeat the experience of Adventists during World War I. Many German Adventist leaders foresaw that the war would end in disaster for Germany, although the majority supported the war effort and hoped for victory. Those who believed that the war would end in Germany's defeat were convinced of the injustice and unchristian principles of the Nazi regime.

For the most part, because of their religious convictions, German Adventists inducted into

the army during World War II were able to enter the Medical Corps, Quartermaster Corps, or some other noncombatant branch of the military service. The German Adventist leaders, remembering painfully the church's earlier experience, strictly followed the 1923 declaration, made at Gland, Switzerland, espousing the principle of noncombatancy and the observance of the seventh-day Sabbath.[27] In the second World War, the government unofficially recognized the noncombatant position of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Officially, no German was exempt from arms-bearing except the Catholic clergy.[28]

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Nor was there any provision in the German army for exemption from performing duty on Saturday. Every Seventh-day Adventist had to meet and decide this problem personally. Not all military officers were Nazis, and the difference between party and nonparty men was very apparent in their treatment of nonconformists. No Seventh-day Adventist could expect any consideration from a Nazi.[29]

Seventh-day Adventists endeavored to cooperate with the government as far as conscience permitted, realizing that those who refused military duty were subject, officially at least, to the death penalty. Several Adventist young men who refused to perform military duty were apprehended by the SS (Schutzstaffel) and put in concentration camps without a trial. Others were placed in insane asylums or other kinds of mental institutions. A few received the death penalty or a heavy sentence of imprisonment.[30]

Religious propaganda and missionary activity had to be restricted more and more after 1939 and finally the distribution of publications became impossible. In order to continue operation, the publishing house at Hamburg became a private business enterprise in 1938; it was thus possible to supply Adventist churches with publications until 1940. But in that year no more paper was allotted to Seventh-day Adventists for the publication of religious books and journals. The official government explanation was that the publishing house produced nothing essential for the war effort. In order to prevent confiscation by the government, the publishing house concentrated its efforts on commercial printing.[31]

The cessation of the publication of religious literature resulted in a great shortage of Bibles, Adventist books, journals and periodicals for the church members. Colporteur activity was greatly hampered. In fact, soon there was no choice but to suspend completely this traditional work of the denomination, and to advise the colporteurs to seek new means of employment.[32]

Liberties and religious privileges varied in the different *Kreise* (districts). In some areas, religious services were restricted, while in others meetings were allowed. Much depended upon the reaction of the local commanding officer of the Gestapo or the police officers. Almost everywhere, however, government agents sat in the congregations to observe what was said and done. Any criticism of the government, or of the National Socialist party, would bring speedy retribution. Consequently, Adventist church leaders and members were very careful about their public statements.[33]

At the outbreak of the war in 1939, an ordinance issued by the government prevented ministers from taking offerings at church services or collecting donations from house-to-house solicitation. By a strange quirk of the regulations, however, it was permissible for the local church pastors to levy fees on their members. In this way, it was possible to circumvent the restrictions, and thus financially support the needs of the church.[34]

The threat of dissolution hung over the German Seventh-day Adventist Church during the war years as menacingly as it had before 1939. In 1940, the government issued a pamphlet entitled *Das Reichsministerium für Kirchliche Angelegenheiten* (The Ministry of Church Affairs for the Empire) which offered some reassurances. It stated, "Other groups which limit themselves in their peculiar teachings to the field of religion may continue to exist, for

instance, the Salvation Army, the Mennonites, the Quakers, the New Apostolics, the Roman Apostolics, and the Seventh-day Adventists."[35] In view of that statement, the Seventh-day Adventists should have been able to expect tolerance; still, they did not completely trust the Nazis and continued to fear dissolution.

Actually, Adventist church activity was generally tolerated but there were a few exceptions: it was forbidden in Upper Silesia on January 24, 1941, in Danzig and West Prussia on April 4, 1941, and in Lower Silesia on May 9, 1941. On these occasions, petitions and negotiations brought no success. But members still met surreptitiously in various homes in order to conduct their church services. Again and again, the keeping of the seventh-day Sabbath caused trials, warnings and penalties for individual church members, but despite these difficulties most Adventists had the courage to remain faithful to their convictions.

The Seventh-day Adventist denomination in Germany was allowed to operate as a church for two major reasons. It voluntarily restricted its activities to the "religious" field and excluded any "political" comment. It gained favor with the government through its commendable welfare work. Even though ministers, church officers and church laymen were limited in some ways, a wholesale confiscation of church property, which might have resulted in the complete collapse of the Advent Movement, did not take place.[36]

Adventists, like all other Germans, suffered severe losses from Allied bombing raids. More than 2,250,000 homes or over 20 percent of all dwellings within the area of the Federal Republic of Germany were totally destroyed by the war. A further 2,500,000 homes were more or less heavily damaged and made uninhabitable.[37] In Germany alone, 9,891 Seventh-day Adventists lost their homes and everything they possessed, including their Bibles and other books, through Allied bombings. Seven hundred church members lost their lives. The Adventist church in Cologne was destroyed in the first bombing of that city on May 30, 1942. On July 28, 1943, Allied bombers severely damaged the four-story food factory and publishing house at Hamburg. After 11 months of repair work, the factory was reopened and again produced bread, biscuits, breakfast cereals and other foods. The food factory was able to survive only because its products continued to find a market in the general public as well as among the church members. The main difficulty was the acquisition of sufficient raw materials.[38]

The part of the publishing house left standing after the July attack was the building which housed the machinery; consequently, publishing could be continued. The bombings destroyed the Adventist headquarters building at Hamburg, a stunning blow since most of the records of the church in Germany were thereby lost. Allied bombings also burned out the Berlin Seventh-day Adventist headquarters building and the headquarters building at Frankfurt-am-Main, and church buildings in Krefeld, Bielefeld, Herford, Karlsruhe, Stuttgart, the two in Nürnberg and all six in Hamburg. In all, 150 chapels, meeting halls and office buildings were destroyed. The union headquarters building at Stuttgart was severely damaged. Consequently, evangelistic meetings were forced to be curtailed in the larger cities, and the primary missionary activity was making house-to-house visits in search of persons who were interested in having Bible studies.[39]

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Food became scarce in Germany during the last years of the war, and it became progressively scarcer as the bombings increased in intensity and destructive effect. Most Adventists, as well as other Germans, ate black bread without butter and drank weak ersatz coffee, without milk or cream, for breakfast. Other meals consisted almost entirely of potatoes and gravy. No fresh vegetables were available for the city population. Most of the stores in the metropolitan areas were either destroyed or had little or noth-

ing for sale and many people suffered from malnutrition.[40]

The Adventist hospitals and rest homes continued to operate during the war. In the Waldfriede Sanitarium and Hospital at Berlin there was throughout the war a daily average of 138 patients in the 160-bed hospital. The staff included five physicians, 34 graduate nurses, 21 student nurses and 47 other employees. The Bad Aibling Sanitarium, the Friedensau Sanitarium and Hospital and the Marienhöhe Convalescent Home had their quarters filled to capacity during most of the war years. Nursing training was conducted at the Friedensau Sanitarium and Hospital and also at the Waldfriede Sanitarium and Hospital. The nurses' course consisted of a half-year of pre-nursing and one and one-half years of specialized training. Eight demolition and 30 incendiary bombs fell on the Waldfriede grounds without hitting the buildings or inflicting serious injury to persons.[41]

During the Nazi period, the German Seventh-day Adventist church comprised three unions, West German, East German and South German, which were part of the Central European Division. The organization of Germany into three unions had existed since 1910. The membership increase between the inception of the National Socialist government in 1933 and the outbreak of World War II was from 36,278 to 38,323, an increase of 2,045. Church leaders felt that it was satisfactory considering the numerous difficulties which confronted the church. The increase was attributed to the concerted missionary program which was commenced in 1934.[42]

With the loss of much of the territory controlled by Germany during the war, the three German unions, including 17 local conference organizations, suffered reductions in church membership. The loss of territories to Poland and Russia resulted in an automatic transfer of 16,468 members to these nations. After the boundary changes were made, the Central European Division comprising the three German unions consisted, on January 1, 1946, of 26,891 members in 653 churches with 280 ordained ministers.[43]

The Seventh-day Adventist Church in Germany has survived the reign of National Socialism including the war period, although in a weakened condition.

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43. "General Conference Report No. 8," *Review and Herald* (Washington, D.C.), June 14, 1946, p. 181; *84th Annual Statistical Report of Seventh-day Adventists 1946* (Washington, D.C.), pp. 8-9.