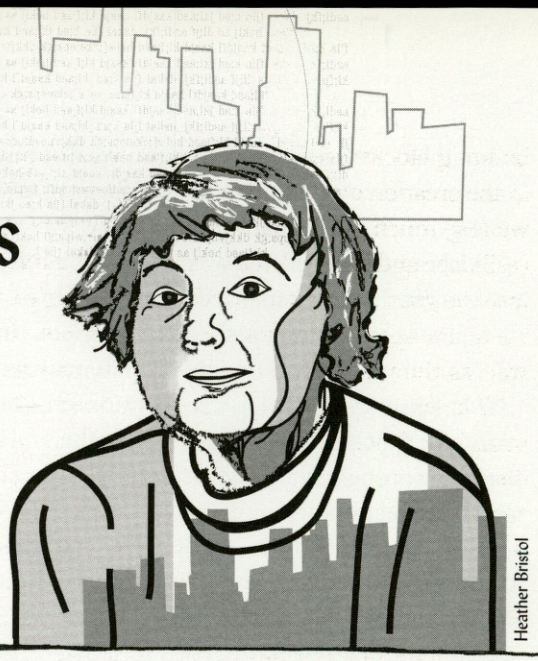
Creaking in the Beams

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Christianity, and the Third Reich

An Interview with Renate Bethge
By Gary Blount



Heather Bristol

Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer was one of the most provocative and revered theologians of the twentieth century. The trajectory of his career was steep: he received a doctorate at the age of twenty-one and a university lectureship at twenty-five. By the age of twenty-nine, he had served as a pastor for German congregations in Barcelona and London and had been dean of a seminary, albeit one that conferred "invalid" credentials. In 1933, at the age of twenty-six, he gained brief fame in a national radio broadcast that warned the German people of National Socialism, particularly Adolf Hitler. As if to acknowledge the rising importance of young Bonhoeffer, the Nazis pulled the plug on his speech moments before it ended.

Bonhoeffer was the first German theologian to denounce persecution of the Jews, and in time he settled into a collision course with the National Socialists, the more-or-less legally constituted government of Germany. At the same time, he also came into conflict with Germany's state Lutheran church, which for four centuries had embraced Martin Luther's teaching of Two Kingdoms. Two mainstays of this belief were that the church should not interfere with the state, and that it was entitled to government support in ecclesiastical matters.

In June 1940, when Germany invaded France and quickly forced its surrender, Bonhoeffer was an avowed pacifist, a condition many considered a disorder restricted mainly to the English-speaking world, and he worked as a civilian employee of the Abwehr, or German military intelligence.[1] By then, he had also found his way into the heart of a disparate body of distinguished Germans determined to neutralize Hitler. A substantial number of these thoroughly decent Germans was determined to assassinate the Führer if necessary.

The son of the chair of the department of psychiatry at the University of Berlin, Bonhoeffer possessed a superb pedigree. He was raised in one of Berlin's best neighborhoods and had in attendance seven servants while growing up. As a youth, he excelled at music and developed an interest in travel. During a post-doctoral, draft-deferring appointment at Union Seminary in New York City, Bonhoeffer found himself repelled by the harshness of racism in the United States, yet related well to the preaching and music of the black Christian culture.

Bonhoeffer fell in love twice, the second time becoming engaged to a member of the German aristocracy, Maria von Wedermeyer, a girl twenty years his junior. His arrest in 1943

at age thirty-seven ended the courtship abruptly and his death soon afterward ensured that he would never marry or have children.

Although Bonhoeffer was intense and complex, his life is nonetheless transparent. His writings are rich in metaphor and paradox and reveal a simple, irrepressible affection for the underdog. He insistently demanded that at some level, perhaps institutionally, certainly individually, Christians engage with the world. His theology is above all illustrative. His legacy is preeminently a recapitulation of God's solidarity with suffering humanity.

The fact that we know considerable amounts about Bonhoeffer, his formative years, his faith, and his actions is due in no small measure to his niece, Renate Schleicher. The daughter of Bonhoeffer's oldest sister, Ursula, Renate married Eberhard Bethge, Bonhoeffer's best friend and the man destined to become his biographer. Well known for decades in academic and pastoral circles around the world, Bethge died at his home in Wachtberg, Germany in 2000. His widow recently visited churches and college campuses in the United States. At one of these churches, I met her and asked if she would be willing to be interviewed for *Spectrum*. She readily agreed.

Renate, as a Christmas present to his brother-in-law, Hans von Dohnanyi, fellow plotter Hans Oster, and closest friend Eberhard Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer at the end of 1942 wrote an essay entitled "After Ten Years."[2] The essay is his summary of the German opposition to Hitler. It speaks of "no ground under our feet"; the opposition effort thus far has been a failure. Among the reasons is the inaction of morally sensitive, humane, and educated Germans. What Bonhoeffer sees needed is "exclusive allegiance to God." He asks, "Are we still of any use? . . . Are there responsible people?" Were you aware of this letter to your fiancé, Eberhard Bethge? Did it discourage or frighten you?

Gary Blount and Renate Bethge.

RB First, as you know, although Uncle Dietrich had already had some brushes with the Gestapo, he hadn't yet been arrested. The opposition was fragmented and ambivalent. Not only was I aware of this letter, several other family members gathered around as it was read aloud to us. We did not see this as a discouraging letter. We were familiar with Uncle Dietrich's views and they largely reflected the family's thinking. You must realize that we saw this as not simply a matter of being in one camp or the other. We realized that there were many good, responsible Germans who identified with the successes of Germany and wanted to win the war.

You mention that as a teenager you were privy to news about the German resistance to Hitler. I believe that many discussions of various plots to eliminate Hitler were held in your home. It seems that the more I read about these plots, the more I discover that more of your family members were involved.

Let's start with Dietrich's uncle, Paul von Hase, who was commander of the garrison in Berlin. Next, there was your Uncle Dietrich's brother-in-law, Hans von Dohnanyi, chief of special projects for the Abwehr. Then there was your Uncle Klaus, legal advisor to Lufthansa. Finally, both your fiancé, a pastor, and your father, a high official in the air ministry, were involved in one or more of the conspiracies. Your grandparents, the eminent psychiatrist Karl Bonhoeffer and his wife, were also involved at some level.

As your uncle, Karl-Friedrich, said at the end of the war, "Our parents were aware of what they were doing, approved of it and gave their assistance. I believe there were very few families in Germany of which there was such complete agreement on political matters."[3]

RB [Renate reflects.] You know, I often wondered if my family would have been as close without the Nazi threat and the evil of the regime. My parents walked a very fine line with my sister and me. Very early they recognized the dangers of National Socialism and tried to protect us from indoctrination.

On the other hand, they allowed us to participate in a limited way in youth activities such as Hitler Youth excursions, camping, and hiking. And I must confess, as a young girl I liked the brown uniforms. Dorothee and I would merrily sing the songs about bomb, bomb,

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bomb England; most of the songs had very catchy tunes. [Renate and her sister, Dorothee, who has joined us, spontaneously break into singing one of their favorite National Youth songs.]

In school, we were expected to start each lesson with a hearty "Heil Hitler." You must understand that the teachers were required to make this routine. To us, saying "Heil Hitler" was as normal as saying "Good morning." Our neighbors sometimes walked around saluting one another with "Heil Hitler," and Dorothee and I found this funny and strange. You must remember that by the mid-thirties Germany was an exciting place! We had the Olympics. People had jobs. I think we were just innocent children.

One day at school reality struck. I was fifteen I think, maybe sixteen, and in earnest I approached one of my friends who was in the party; we both had been elected to the student council. I felt I needed to tell this nice girl about the terrible concentration camps. She immediately told me that she would have to report me because the Germans must win the war.

I went home terrified, feeling stupid for having trusted another student. The next day the girl said that if she could convince me that the Nazis were good, she would not have to report me. She never said anything after that.

Do you recall when your school curriculum changed? Did you get a big dose of Social Darwinism to support Hitler's race theories and politics?

RB Race theories were introduced and biology was changed when the Nazis took over the schools.

Did you have Jewish friends? As you know, your Aunt Sabine, who was Dietrich's twin sister, wrote in the family Portrait *that the parents of some Jewish classmates did not allow them to come to the homes of Gentile friends.*

RB Oh yes, we all had Jewish friends. Many Christians were married to Jews. And of course, there were some Jewish Christians. I think my aunt was referring to the concern of some Jewish parents about dietary issues in their friends' homes.

As a teenager, what was your knowledge about the plots against Hitler?

RB Actually, there were many discussions, not only among my family members at my grandfather's house next door, but also with important officials. I think even General Oster came once.[4] As teenagers, we were not included in the adult conversations, but we were aware of the danger and importance of these matters.

When guests arrived at our home, the evening would begin with music and end in political discussions. Our parents would direct us to circle around the house to make sure no one was listening at the windows before tuning into the BBC. Uncle Klaus came up with the code, "There's a creaking in the beams." This meant that the resistance movement and our family members were moving forward. There was a strong sense of unity for something dangerous but very important.

Speaking of General Oster, didn't Fabian von Schlabrendorff say that he was "a man after God's own heart"? Hasn't Oster been called the managing director of the resistance? Weren't there many other devout Christians in the leadership of the resistance?

RB Yes, yes, certainly. And as you probably know, there were three main paths into the German resistance to Hitler: military, religious, and political—extreme left to right.

But the church in Germany has been roundly criticized for capitulating to Hitler's rantings and demands. Even though Hitler sent out mixed signals about his attitude toward the church, referring at times to "positive Christianity," he made some disparaging remarks early on that should have served, it seems, as a dire warning. For instance: "You can do anything you want with them. They will submit, . . . they are insignificant little people, submissive as dogs."[5] Was he right?

RB No, I don't think so. You know that the man who was about to become my husband, Eberhard Bethge,

was not that determined to take up the political struggle initially. I think he was gradually persuaded during his time as Uncle Dietrich's assistant at Finkenwalde Seminary in the mid-thirties. Nonetheless, Eberhard was among the first to recognize the danger of the Nazification of the church.

You speak of the famous Finkenwalde Seminary days from 1935 to 1937. Having broken with the state church, Dietrich and Eberhard were involved in a magnificent experiment, the spirit of which was captured in Life Together. *Eberhard later characterized your uncle's type of extemporaneous praying as something "we had never heard before."*

Do you think Eberhard came to regard this seminary routine as a model for training and worship? We have learned of the a cappella singing and the focus on prayers for the Confessing Church, for forgiveness, for failings in the ministry, for the sick, miserable and lonesome, and even for their enemies. Would you say this experience was transformative for Eberhard?

It was not necessary to commit deeds to be found guilty.
Nazi justice held you responsible for your beliefs.

RB Yes to both [questions]. Unfortunately, many of the men at these seminaries did not survive the struggle. I know that many of them felt relieved to get rid of the political pressure and were more comfortable in the army proving they were loyal Germans. And, Gary, I believe that you have discovered how these small, unapproved seminaries could threaten the mighty Nazis.

By the late 1930s and throughout the war there was a wide spectrum of German opposition to Hitler. The mildest form was systematic criticism of him; the most extreme form included plans to kill not only him, but also his top henchmen. In the middle were strategies to contain him. Where did Dietrich's activities fall on this spectrum?

RB Although I think for him this was mainly a political matter, he was on record for the need to exterminate Hitler. However, my Uncle Dietrich's emphasis was on ending the crimes against the Jews and the Nazis' political enemies and on establishing a link to the Allies and ending the war as soon as possible.

Renate and Dorothee, did your Uncle Dietrich actually handle any of the explosives?

RB [Laughter from both.] Oh no! But Uncle Hans [Dohnanyi] did.

As the group focused in the late 1930s on neutralizing or containing Hitler before he could start a war, I believe your grandfather was prepared as a highly placed government psychiatrist to declare Hitler insane and to have him institutionalized as long as possible.

RB That's correct. Our grandfather said there was enough evidence to commit him

Then there was that obscure handful of Christian students and one or two professors at the University of Munich, mainly medical students, who distributed anti-Hitler leaflets in the middle of the war. Their movement was known as The White Rose.[6]

RB Absolutely astonishing! We couldn't believe how brave those students were. And they were all beheaded. It was awful!

That occurred in 1943, after one of the infamous trials of the People's Court.

RB Yes, they were all condemned by the court of Roland Freisler, the dreaded judge who sentenced my father and thousands of others to death.

I think one of the most striking ironies of the resistance story occurred on Saturday, February 3, 1945, when Fabian von Schlabrendorff went on trial in Freisler's court. Schlabrendorff, who was your Uncle Dietrich's fiancée's cousin, had actually carried two bombs to Hitler's plane but somehow they had failed to detonate and kill Hitler in midflight. Your Uncle Hans had prepared the bombs.

On that particular day, allied bombers struck the courthouse, and the only one in it seriously wounded was the iniquitous Freisler, who was struck in the head by a falling

beam. He was pronounced dead by your Uncle Rolf, an army doctor in the courthouse that day to appeal for mercy for your father, who had been sentenced to death the previous day.

RB This is all true, and for leverage in the appeal Uncle Rolf refused to sign Freisler's death certificate.

This same Judge Freisler had declared to the conspirator Moltke, at his trial a few weeks earlier, "Christianity and National Socialism have one thing in common, Count von Molke, and only one, we both demand the whole person."[7]

Renate, let's step back a moment. During this terrible time, the late 1930s to the late 1940s, you lived part of your childhood, all of your adolescence, and then entered young adulthood. You were not only a witness to history, but also, one might say, a significant actor.

RB I can tell you I was often frightened but hopeful. We were a family that went to church. In Germany, the tradition is that you go to your district or neighborhood church. But our minister was half Nazi. I recall my father having several conversations with the minister about this. Finally, my father said that we would have to have church at home. He said it is not a proper Sunday without church.

As a family, we would gather around the piano and sing our favorite hymns, such as "Gib Dich Zufrieden und Stille Sei." Sometimes Uncle Dietrich would drop by and give a little sermon.

After the arrest of several family members, I got a little involved in transporting and decoding messages among the imprisoned family. My father, who was not a particularly good conspirator, was known as a person who could not lie; he did distort the truth more than he liked.

I became involved in trying to free my father and my Uncle Dietrich. In my father's case, we tried to bribe his lawyer with liquor, and in my Uncle Dietrich's case we approached a friendly guard with a plan to supply a maintenance uniform in which my uncle could walk out of prison. At the last minute he [Uncle Dietrich] cancelled this plan because his brother Klaus had just been picked up by the Gestapo and Uncle Dietrich felt the whole family was in grave danger.

There are two German words and concepts that help explain the terror: *sippenhaft* and *gesinnungsstrafrecht*. In the first case, the Nazis extended a convicted person's responsibility to include his family; they sometimes went so far as to remove the children from the family and place them in orphanages, giving them new names. In the second case, it was not necessary to commit deeds to be found guilty; Nazi justice held you responsible for your beliefs.

In a letter sent to you from prison, which commemorated your first child's baptism, Dietrich wrote, "Our church, which has been fighting in these years only for its self-preservation, as though it were an end in itself, is incapable of taking the word of reconciliation and redemption to the world."[8]

Some in my church, the Adventist Church, are making an attempt to come to grips with the German Adventists' subordination of key church principles to National Socialism. These principles include a separation of church and state and a bias toward pacifism. Renate, do you have any advice for the Adventist Church?

RB We all have made certain compromises, even our men who have been killed. Do you want to stay alive? Do you want your families to stay alive—where do you draw the line? Partly, it's a question of timing. As my Uncle Klaus said early in the war, "You don't step on the tail of a snake, you cut off its head."

Would you say a word about your Uncle Dietrich's temperament and mood? At the end, do you think he became suicidal or felt terribly guilty?

RB As a child, I remember Uncle Dietrich as fun and positive. He had firm opinions and was decisive. Before the July 20, 1944, coup against Hitler he seemed cheerful even though he was in prison. There was a scrap of paper found later suggesting that he was feeling hopeless but I think that mainly related to his concern about torture and revealing too much

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

information that would place others in harm. I don't think he was ever ashamed or felt guilty.

And contrary to some reports, his name was not dropped from the intercessory prayer list by the church, but he himself asked for it to be taken off to protect members of the Confessing Church. Uncle Dietrich was very clear: if you sin, God will forgive you. God is looking out for the responsible person. He felt convicted to act as he was acting and if wrong, God would forgive him. He was resting on his belief in God.

In one of his final messages to you and your husband your Uncle Dietrich wrote, "In Jesus, God has said Yes and Amen to it all and that Yes and Amen is the firm ground on which we stand."[9]

You were a twenty-year-old Christian, a wife and new mother. Your father and your uncles were in prison and in great peril. Your husband would be caught up in the Gestapo sweep after July 20. How firm did the ground feel under your feet?

RB The ground was, you might say, trembling. We had our faith and clung to hope that the war would soon end.

The Rest of the Story

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was arrested in 1943 for currency violations related to transporting Jews out of Germany. He was eventually tried by a kangaroo court and officially declared an enemy of the state. After the July 20, 1944, coup attempt Bonhoeffer realized that Hitler's rage was now focused upon him and imprisoned coconspirators and told his family that "their life has been placed wholly in better and stronger hands."

Bonhoeffer was hanged at Flossenburg, April 9, 1945, two days before his SS guards fled in the face of the rapid Allied advance. He spoke his last known words to a fellow prisoner named Paine Best, a British secret service agent: "This is the end—for me, the beginning of life."

Dr. Karl Bonhoeffer was forced out of retirement at the end of the war to support his extended family, whose members the German people considered traitors. Karl is known for his work on treating alcoholism and classifying mental disorders. In postwar Germany, he was eventually acclaimed for his tireless efforts in support of Jewish colleagues before the war and for his vocal and persistent opposition to factions within the German medical establishment that promoted euthanasia. He died in Germany in 1948.

Eberhard Bethge spent several months in a Nazi prison before being liberated by the Soviet army. He was sent to the United States for a period of "reeducation" after the war. He and Renate Bethge also lived in England before returning to Germany, where he worked as a chaplain in both East and West Germany and organized continuing education for German pastors. He is best known as Dietrich Bonhoeffer's biographer.

Ursula Bonhoeffer Schleicher enjoyed singing as her brother Dietrich played the piano when they grew up in Berlin. She hid Jews during the war. She brought her husband's violin to him in prison. According to Sabine Bonhoeffer-Leibholz, Ursula often asked herself whether she had done right by dissuading her brother, Klaus, from committing suicide just prior to his arrest by the Gestapo.

Hans von Dohnanyi accumulated evidence of Nazi crimes starting in 1933 while working in the German Ministry of Justice. He became one of the highest ranking officials in German military intelligence and, after being arrested, arranged for his wife, Christine Bonhoeffer, to smuggle a diphtheria culture into prison, which he took to buy time and keep from implicating others. He was carried into court semiconscious, convicted, and then hanged on April 9, 1945.

Rüdiger Schleicher had been wounded in World War I. His office at the Institute for the Law of the Sky was one of the meeting places for those who opposed Hitler. The SS shot him, Klaus Bonhoeffer, and several other prisoners in the backs of their necks on April 23, 1945.

The Confessing Church was formed in 1934, when approximately one-fourth of German Protestant pastors declared their independence from the state church.

The Allies continued to turn a deaf ear to proposals by the German resistance to end the war early. Eventually, the Allies even ridiculed the resistance. Incredibly, the BBC, shortly after the failed coup on July 20, 1944, broadcast the names of high-ranking Germans thought to be involved. At least one scholar has referred to the resistence's tragic "illusion of solidarity" with the Allies.

Notes and References

1. John W. de Grunchy, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 2. The Abwher became locked in rivalry with other German intelligence agencies, especially the Gestapo. The Abwher's chief, Admiral Wilhelm Canaris, was executed with Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Like Hitler and most Germans, Canaris was staunchly anti-communist. He was considered religious and highly moral and to the end maintained that he did not condone assassination.

2. De Grunchy, *Cambridge Companion*, 206.

3. Sabine Liebholz-Bonhoeffer, *The Bonhoeffers: Portrait of a*

Family (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1971).

4. General Has Oster was deputy chief of military intelligence. According to Michael Burleigh, *The Third Reich* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000), 687, Oster betrayed to the Dutch, Belgians, Danes, and Norwegians German plans to invade their countries. He was also apparently the author of the plan to capture Hitler and have him certified insane.

5. Joan Winmill Brown, ed., *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, The Martyred Christian* (New York: Macmillan, 1995), 9.

6. About these students, Peter Selby has written, "The living out of Christianity in the modern world is the task of those who see themselves as people who are essentially godchildren, beneficiaries of the sacrifice and perception of Bonhoeffer and those like him, spared the abyss they endured and seeking to be prepared for the ones that lie ahead." De Gruchy, *Cambridge Companion*, 243.

7. Quoted in Joachim Fest, *Plotting Hitler's Death* (New York: Henry Holt, 1994), 316. Helmuth Count von Moltke headed the resistance faction known as the Kreisau Circle, a group of socialists and Christians, most of whom opposed violence.

8. De Grunchy, *Cambridge Companion*, 242.

9. Ibid., 259.

For Further Reading

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