From Heaven to Hell: Christianity in the Third Reich and Christian Imagery in Nazi Propaganda

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From Heaven to Hell:

Christianity in the Third Reich and Christian Imagery in Nazi Propaganda

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April 29, 2004
Introduction

“I will crush Christianity under my boot like a poisonous toad.”

-Adolf Hitler

Although the National Socialists’ ultimate intentions in regard to religion were concealed from the public under layers of political rhetoric, their objectives were nonetheless clear. The National Socialists sought the destruction of the Christian religion, whose teachings and values were seen as inimical to those of the State, and the establishment of a Reichskirche that would preach the doctrines of National Socialism.

The German government during the Third Reich was a totalitarian regime, but there was one matter in which the Nazi Party did not have carte blanche, religion, which made it an intrinsic threat to the authority of the State. Many Nazi officials saw Christianity as the inherent and irreconcilable enemy of National Socialism, but they knew they risked losing the support of the German people if they instantly dissolved the Christian Churches. Instead of vehemently attacking the Christian confessions the way they did in Poland, in Germany the National Socialists set up a mirage of support for and acceptance of religious institutions, all while working to undermine the Christian tradition that they considered of greatest detriment and danger to their State.

Instead of attempting to undergo an immediate transition to a state-controlled religion, Adolf Hitler and his government chose to manipulate Christianity and use it to their advantage. Hitler saw both Catholicism and Protestantism as impediments toward his quest for complete and unadulterated power over the German people, but he believed

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the Catholic Church posed a greater threat to his dominion, and it bore the brunt of the anti-religious legislation passed by the Nazi government. The Catholic religious structure, with a hierarchy of clerics who served as the congregation’s ambassadors to God, gave their clergy profound power and influence over their parishioners. This authority was exercised not only by German clerics but, more importantly, by the Pontiff in Rome. This meant that the allegiance of German Catholics would be divided between their Fuehrer and a foreigner who openly opposed National Socialism. Because the Vatican appointed the Catholic hierarchy, the Nazis could not penetrate its ranks as they could the Protestant hierarchy, where they installed pro-Nazi leadership. Instead Adolf Hitler was forced to sign a concordat with the Pope, in which he promised to allow the existence of the Catholic Church as long as it did not act as a political force. Despite this agreement, the Nazis still targeted Catholics, refusing to allow religious youth groups to meet, closing parishes, and even sending the priests they believed to be dangerous to Dachau. This all occurred while Hitler remained, outwardly, a Catholic himself. By defining himself as a Catholic, Hitler was automatically seen as supporting the institution, which gave him greater rein in terms of his policies toward it.

Adolf Hitler united the twenty-eight different German Protestant Churches into one *Reichskirche*, led by a *Reichsbishop*, which he believed he could employ as a counter-balance to the Catholic Church. Still inherently mistrustful of Christianity, he manipulated it into a form that was more consistent with the values of National Socialism, but was barely recognizable as the religion it had been. The Nazi Party strived to make German Christianity different from traditional Christianity, severing it from its
Jewish roots and passive doctrines. They replaced Jesus’ crown of thorns with a sword and made service to the nation the equivalent of religious martyrdom. Nazi Party propaganda asserted that the triumph of the Aryans was the will of God, and that the Party was a pseudo-religious savior and Hitler the German people’s messiah.

The National Socialists employed Christianity as a political tool in their propaganda, utilizing religious imagery in their posters. There are images of Hitler with a halo around his head, with an angel in his wake, and even pictures meant to invoke biblical passages. These images, which link the Nazi Party and Adolf Hitler with Christianity and Jesus Christ, reinforced the idea that by supporting the Nazis one was doing the work of God. The National Socialists also used the image of the Madonna and child in their posters, showing the ideal Aryan woman cradling an infant and bathed in light. This portrayal was often used in posters urging Germans to support Nazi charities, and showed each Aryan as having God within them. The Nazis employed serpent imagery as well, using it to symbolize enemies of the Party, notably Jews, Marxists, and capitalists. The cross is another important Christian image that can be found in both pro-Nazi and anti-Nazi propaganda. When used by the Nazis, it equated the deaths of German soldiers for their country with the death of Christ for his people. Used against the Nazis, it showed Nazi officials adding to the weight of Christ’s cross, or depicts the swastika as a cross the worker is crucified on.

The ultimate aim of the Nazi Party was the destruction of the Christian religion and its replacement with a Nazi-controlled Reichskirche that would preach the doctrines of National Socialism. As it was, the National Socialists saw the Churches as far too
influential, but until they had the unmitigated support of the German people they sought to lessen Christianity’s impact by manipulating it rather than eliminating it. They used the faith of the German people to their advantage, drawing upon Christian imagery in their propaganda and equating the National Socialists with religious redeemers.
The Nazi Party and Religion

The National Socialist Party officials were divided over the question of religion. Many were uncompromising in their National Socialist ideals, and pushed for the immediate abolition of all Christian Churches in Germany, Catholic and Evangelical. They wanted to create a state religion to replace Christianity, which would be founded upon National Socialist values. They saw the separation of Church and State as a threat to the power of their new government, as the German people’s loyalty would be divided between their Church and their Party. One such man was Martin Bormann, Head of the Party Chancellery and Hitler’s private secretary, who said in a decree to the Party Chancellery on June 7, 1941:

More and more the people must be separated from the churches and their organs the pastors... Just as the deleterious influences of astrologers, seers and other fakers are eliminated and suppressed by the State, so must the possibility of church influence also be totally removed... Not until this has happened, does the state leadership have influence on the individual citizens. Not until then are the people and Reich secure in their existence for all time.2

On the other hand, there was a faction of powerful Nazi officials who saw Christianity as a backbone of the Aryan tradition, and insisted that Churches were important to National Socialist Germany. They believed that the Aryan triumph was the will of God, and that once it had occurred, Christianity should be reinstated at the center of German social life. The doctrines of the Party, however, were irreconcilable with the teachings of traditional Christianity. There was no place in the Third Reich for traditional Catholicism or

Protestantism, but the Nazis knew they risked losing the support of the citizens if they attempted to immediately annihilate Christianity.

What occurred in Nazi Germany was a synthesis between these two extremes. The Nazis worked to maneuver the Christian religion into a form that could exist in harmony with National Socialism. This manipulation resulted in a perverse form of Christianity, referred to as “German Christianity,” that was barely distinguishable as an offshoot of either Protestantism or Catholicism. “Nazi and neopagan critics in Germany reviled Christianity for its Jewish roots, doctrinal rigidity, and enervating, womanish qualities.”

German Christianity carried with it none of the “meek” values of traditional Christianity; it eliminated submissive doctrines such as the one that taught followers to turn the other cheek, that belief that the poor would inherit the earth, and considered those that died for their country to be martyrs. Christ became a sword-bearing warrior rather than a pacifist, and the German Christians, the most extreme of German religious reform groups, referred to themselves as the “storm troopers of Christ.” Eventually the Nazis believed the German people would become accustomed to the idea of National Socialist doctrine as a religious philosophy and Christianity would die out on its own, without government intervention. At that point the Nazis would supplant it with a national Reich religion based on the principles of National Socialism, which would increase the people’s commitment to and thus the security of, their government and State. It was the perfect strategy for the Nazis, a compromise between the two extremes.

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Christianity was allowed to survive, if only in a form diluted by National Socialism, until the Nazis could eradicate and replace it.

The Nazi Party considered the Christian religion to be one of the State’s most dangerous adversaries, as its values made it the irreconcilable opponent of National Socialism. In *The Church’s Struggle with the Third Reich*, Robert D’Harcourt summarizes the Nazis’ fear of Christianity in the following way:

> Judaism, Christianity, Bolshevism are all bound together. Comrades in agitation, born tools of decay, they possess the same talent to destroy the natural structure of society. Bolshevism is the historical and logical continuation of Christianity. It realizes on a technical level what Christianity has done on a metaphysical level.\(^5\)

The Christian Churches were in an extremely precarious position during the years of Hitler’s Third Reich, associated by the National Socialists with Judaism and Bolshevism, the two principle enemies of the Nazi Party. Party philosopher Alfred Rosenberg, expressing the his anti-Christian sentiment in a diary entry, wrote, “… there cannot be any help in the people’s struggles in the long run from a moral doctrine which preaches love of the enemy, orders one to turn the left cheek when the right has been struck, etc.”\(^6\)

Because Christian values were intrinsically opposed to those of the National Socialists, Christianity was seen as a destabilizing force in the Reich. The Nazis had annexed all other areas of German life, education, health, even the arts, but they could not do the same with religion. In the South, the population was still deeply Catholic, while most of the Germans in the North were Protestants, primarily Lutheran. In both areas, religion


was too important, had too long a tradition, and was rooted too deeply in the German people to be immediately eradicated or assimilated.

In 1930, Alfred Rosenberg published *Der Mythus des 20. Jahrhunderts*, an influential work in which he laid out a comprehensive National Socialist ideology, or *Weltanschauung*. In his work, Rosenberg stated that the objective of the National Socialists should be to absorb Christianity into their pseudo-religious doctrine. He wrote:

> From education by the Church to education by Germanic value is a step of several generations. We are the transition from one education to the other. We are the conquerors of one era and the founders of a new- also religious- epoch. We bear a heavy and therefore a great destiny. To destroy images is something every revolution has been able to do. But to establish its cause upon nothing and yet not burn all bridges behind it: that is the nobility of character of the National Socialist era.  

Despite his conviction that the only religion truly harmonious with National Socialism was a state-sponsored religion, even Alfred Rosenberg, a purist in terms of National Socialist philosophy, recognized that the Nazi Party did not have complete discretion in its dealings with the German Churches. Because of this, he suggested that the National Socialists employ the religious nature already ingrained in the German people as a foundation for the establishment of a new National Socialist religion. This would lead to such a gross perversion of the Christian religion in Germany that it was barely recognizable as Christian.

In formulating their doctrine of racial superiority, Rosenberg and the Nazi Party had to contend with one of the oldest elements of Western civilization, Christianity, and with its ideal of a world Empire based on the conception of a nationless world Church.

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Rosenberg saw the Catholic Church as a greater political threat than the Protestant Church, and therefore set out to explain Evangelical German Christianity as being historically different from and greater than Papal Christianity. He distinguished German Christianity as follows:

[In the beliefs of non-German Christianity] the world was not elevated because of the life of the Savior, but because of His death and its miraculous consequences. This is the sole motif of the Pauline Scriptures. Goethe, however, feeling the life of Christ to be important and not His death, thereby attested to the soul of the German West- positive Christianity, as opposed to negative Christianity, which was founded upon a priesthood and witch-mania that went back to Etrusco-African beliefs.  

By distinguishing German Christianity from all other Christian sects, Rosenberg was able to preserve Christianity while changing it to reflect National Socialist ideology. This new Christianity, created specifically to be in accordance with Nazi doctrine, did not recognize the Old Testament, worshipped the life of the Savior, and celebrated a militant ceremonial Mass.

*Der Mythus des 20. Jahrhunderts* was one of the earliest examples of the Nazis’ manipulation of Christianity. *Der Mythus* was written to push Christianity in a direction more compatible with the Weltanschauung, which would facilitate the Nazis plan to convert it into the National Socialist Reich religion. Identifying German Christianity as a religion separate from Catholicism was Rosenberg’s first step. Next he suggested that German Christianity rid itself of the Old Testament, severing it from the religion of the German Untermenschen, the Jews. Contrary to traditional scripture, Rosenberg also claimed that Jesus was not of Jewish ancestry. He wrote:

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We must content ourselves with recognizing the probability of His non-Jewish ancestry. The thoroughly un-Jewish teachings of the “kingdom of heaven within us” strengthen this realization.9

In *Der Mythus des 20. Jahrhunderts*, Rosenberg managed to pervert the traditional view of the Christian religion to one that fit with his anti-Semitic, pan-German philosophy, a philosophy that became the backbone of National Socialist ideology.

In *Mein Kampf*, a 1926 work by Adolf Hitler, would become the single most important dissertation of Nazi philosophy. The purpose of the work was to lay down a unified doctrine of National Socialism. In it Adolf Hitler espoused a position similar to Alfred Rosenberg’s. Like Rosenberg, Hitler knew that he had to find a way to intermesh National Socialism with Christianity, as the German people would not yet be willing to renounce their religion. Although Hitler saw Christianity as a treacherous element in his totalitarian State, he realized that the Christian tradition was deeply ingrained in the German people, and that directly attacking the Church could be even more dangerous to the Party than annihilating it.

The Church was a threat to Hitler’s Reich, but it was also a vehicle he could use to further his pseudo-religious cause. He wrote that it was of no importance to the future of the world whether the Catholic or Protestant sect triumphed, but rather whether the Aryan man was able to survive and prosper. Hitler did not want either Church as a permanent part of his State, and thus considered their futures of little importance. Hitler saw religion as an important propaganda tool, something he could use to strengthen his State. It was his intention to gradually usurp the Catholic and Protestant followings and

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replace them with a religion based on the doctrines of National Socialism and Aryan elitism.

Adolf Hitler exploited the German nation’s religious nature, claiming that the triumph of the Aryans and destruction of the Jews was the will of God, and calling upon the German people to serve Him by serving Germany. By declaring the Aryan people to be God’s chosen people, Hitler turned the National Socialist Party into a pseudo-religious savior and himself into a saint. The Christian Bible contains anti-Semitic passages, which Hitler employed during his quest to convert the German people from Christianity to Nazism. He used scriptural anti-Semitism to provide a rationalization for the Party’s anti-Semitic tenets and to lay the foundation for the Holocaust. Relaying the events of Jesus’ crucifixion, the Gospel of Matthew tells of the Jewish crowd’s insistence upon the execution of Christ. Pilate had tried to placate the crowd, and offered them a choice; he would pardon either Jesus or Barabas, a notorious thief. The crowd chose Barabas.

24 When Pilate saw that he could prevail nothing, but that rather a tumult was made, he took water, and washed his hands before the multitude, saying, I am innocent of the blood of this just person: see ye to it. 25 Then answered all the people, and said, His blood be on us, and on our children. 10

This passage places the responsibility for the death of the Christian savior not only upon the Jews that crucified him, but also upon their descendents. Matthew’s words lent credence to the Nazi theory that a Jew was a Jew even if he or she converted to Christianity, and it showed the Jews as a people cursed by God. It legitimized Hitler’s crusade against modern day Jews in the eyes of the Christian German people.

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10 The King James Bible. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Matthew 27.24-5.
Hitler’s final aim was to convince the German people to see National Socialist ideology as a new religious doctrine, to withdraw their loyalty from Christianity and turn it over to the State. This transition had to be gradual, and Hitler moved slowly when dealing with the Churches. He stealthily and gradually usurped their power and influence, making sure that he could not be directly accused of attacking Christianity as a religion. He eventually wanted for the National Socialists to be able to condemn Christians as Christians, to have the people see them as enemies of the State.
The Catholic Church

The Catholic Church in particular was in a position to subvert Hitler’s regime. The security of the Third Reich rested on its ability to exercise complete and total control over the lives and minds of the German people, and until the Catholic Church was destroyed that power was in jeopardy. Hans Kerrl, Reich Minister for Church Affairs, wrote in a letter dated September 6, 1939, "The Catholic Church will and must, according to the law under which it is set up, remain a thorn in the flesh of a Racial State."\(^{11}\) It was the hierarchical structure and international character of the Catholic Church more so than its teachings that made it capable of undermining the Nazi State. Its doctrines were much the same as the Protestant confessions, yet the German Protestant Churches were not considered nearly as dangerous and were far less persecuted. Traditional Catholicism teaches that only the ordained are capable of communicating directly with God, a belief that is the basis for such rites as Confession and Anointing of the Sick. Without their priests, Catholics would lose their ability to formally repent and be exonerated by God. This gave the clerics great authority and power over their parishioners, as their sanction was required in order for a sinner to purge his or her sins and enter eternal life in Heaven. This was not the only reason the Catholic hierarchy frightened Hitler. Catholics were supposed to consider the Pope to be the supreme representative of God on Earth, and his word as their ultimate law. It was therefore not possible for German Catholics to show Hitler the utter and complete allegiance he demanded of all Reich citizens.

Although Hitler was determined to undermine, if not entirely destroy, the influence of Christianity in Germany, he could hardly proceed in a provocatively confrontational manner against the two main religious denominations—Protestant and Catholic. His problem with the Catholic Church, however, derived from the allegiance both the Catholic hierarchy and the laity owed to the dictates of the Pope.\textsuperscript{12}

The danger the Pontiff’s authority posed to Hitler was heightened by the fact that the Pope was a foreigner, one who opposed National Socialism in all its forms and who had thrown his support behind one of the Nazi Party’s chief opponents, the \textit{Zentrum Partei}, the Catholic Center Party, during the elections.

Hitler did not want his power mitigated in any way, and the Pope’s ability to influence the German Catholics endangered the National Socialists’ control over them. Hitler recognized that any attack on the clerics in Germany would immediately draw the defense of Catholics in other countries, which would endanger the possibility that he could successfully complete his \textit{Weltanschauung}. Adolf Hitler studied Bismarck’s failed attempt to break Ultramontanism, a crusade that resulted in the splintering of Bismarck’s Nationalist movement, in order to ensure that nothing similar would happen to his National Socialist Party. Hitler realized that if he was going to undermine the power of the German Churches he would have to do so covertly, while publicly supporting freedom of worship and continuing to practice the faith he was raised with, the Catholic faith. Hitler and the Nazi Party would eventually attempt to curb the power of the Church in a public manner, such as happened in Poland, but they did not attempt this in Germany until they had succeeded in establishing total power over the nation.

Adolf Hitler, himself a Catholic, was well aware of the peril in which the Catholic Church placed him. According to Hermann Rauschning, President of the Danzig Senate, Hitler said:

The blacks (Catholics) should not have any illusions. Their time is up. They have reached the end of their game. I am a Catholic. Fate decreed that things should be this way. Only a Catholic knows the weak points of the Church. I know how one has to attack the brothers... I will put an end to them, that I guarantee.\(^\text{13}\)

Hitler believed that Providence had made him a Catholic so that he would know how to handle the Catholic Church. He used his Catholicism as a propaganda tool, outwardly appearing to be a religious man, while behind the scenes he was plotting the destruction of the Church he claimed to patronize. Hitler’s Catholicism gave him leeway in his affairs with the Catholic Church, as no one would expect him to be prejudiced against the very institution to which he belonged.

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**Concordat Between the Holy See and the German Reich**

July 20, 1933

…since Catholics represented some one-third of the population, Hitler perforce proceeded with caution in his ultimate goal to bring the Church to heel. Thus, the formal agreement of July 1933, the Concordat with the Vatican, was an interim step on this path—enough to lull the Church into acquiescence of the regime while leaving him the option, which he used, to step up intimidation and persecution of its members as the opportunity afforded.\textsuperscript{14}

The Reich Concordat, an agreement between the Holy See and the German Reich, was negotiated and signed in 1933 by the Vice Chancellor of the German Reich, Franz von Papen, and the Cardinal Secretary of State for the Vatican, Eugenio Pacelli, who would later become Pope Pius XII. The German Catholic Churches had traditionally enjoyed a level of autonomy greater than Catholic Churches in other countries due to ancient concordats between the Holy See and the German regional states. Pacelli believed that in signing this new pact he was increasing papal power and guaranteeing the authority of the Vatican over the German Catholics, one of the wealthiest and, despite its minority status in Germany, largest Catholic populations in the world. He was adamant that the authority of the Pope should remain unchallenged, and saw the Concordat as a means to that end.\textsuperscript{15}

While the Concordat did ensure the papacy some rights over their German parishioners, the Catholic Church was allowed to operate only as long as it did not interfere with the National Socialist agenda. In Article 1 of the Concordat, the German Reich acknowledged the right of the Vatican to pass ordinances that would be considered binding over Church members, under the provision that no German laws were violated by


these decrees. It also guaranteed freedom of worship and public practice to Catholics. Article 4 promised to allow Catholic publications to be issued without hindrance, but a stipulation was then added in the Appendix that stated, “The publication of the Apostolic Brief will take place after consultation with the Reich Government.” By using wording such as “consultation with” rather than “approval by,” the Reich gave the Vatican a false sense of security and the illusion that they would retain their ecclesiastical authority within German borders. This power, however, was exactly what the Nazis were set on destroying, and with the signing of the Concordat they managed to diminish Church authority with the sanction of the Vatican, a brilliant diplomatic feat for Adolf Hitler.

What the Catholic Church gained by signing a pact with the National Socialists was nothing compared to what it lost. The Vatican surrendered their right to protest the actions of the National Socialists, which would later be seen as a silent endorsement of Nazi policies and morality. The Concordat allowed the Nazis jurisdiction over the affairs of the Catholic Church, an area they had previously been unable to penetrate. The 14th Article, which deals with the appointment of Catholic officials and clerics, said this:

1. Catholic clerics who hold an ecclesiastical office in Germany or who exercise pastoral or educational functions must:
   (a) Be German citizens.
   (b) Have matriculated from a German secondary school.
   (c) Have studied philosophy and theology for at least three years at a German State University, a German ecclesiastical college, or a papal college in Rome.

2. The Bull nominating Archbishops, Coadjutors “cum jure successionis”, or appointing a “Praelatus nullius”, will not be issued until the name of the appointee has been submitted to the representative of the National Government in the territory concerned, and until it has been

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ascertained that no objections of a general political nature exist.\textsuperscript{17}

This Article gave the National Socialists a great deal of influence over the Roman Catholic Church’s appointments in the Reich. First, by requiring Catholic clerics to be German citizens, it removed the possibility of a foreign priest having direct control over a German Catholic congregation. The Pope could still exercise influence over them, but their immediate clerical superiors would all be German, and would have been educated in the National Socialist tradition and brought up with National Socialist values. This would mean that the form of Catholicism practiced in Germany would be more closely related to German Christianity than to traditional Catholicism. These German Catholic priests would encourage their parishioners to be loyal to the State and the Party, and now that Catholicism could be manipulated to be more in line with Reich values, would convince German Catholics that it was possible to be a Nazi and also a devout Catholic.

The second provision of the Article effectively gave the National Socialist Government the ability to veto Church appointees, although that authority was not expressly stated. All appointees had to pass the scrutiny of the Government, meaning that only those whose political views were in accordance with the National Socialists could hold a clerical position. The National Socialists, still wary that the clerics’ allegiance to the Pope would weaken their faithfulness to the Fuehrer, also required Catholic bishops to prove their allegiance to the State by taking this oath of loyalty:

Before God and on the Holy Gospels I swear and promise to honor the legally constituted Government and to cause the clergy of my diocese to

honor it. In the performance of my spiritual office and in my solicitude for the welfare and the interests of the German Reich, I will endeavor to avoid all detrimen tal acts which might endanger it.\(^{18}\)

This oath was the cause of great dissent among Catholic clerics. Some who disagreed with the government decided to take the oath rather than turn their parishes over to National Socialist puppets, out of a sense of obligation to their parishioners. Although they might have opposed the Nazi government, they felt it was their duty to continue their work as spiritual leaders, and believed that religion needed to stay alive in order for it to act against the Nazis. Some clerics, however, refused to tarnish their integrity by lying under oath, and forfeited their positions as acts of protest. They believed their refusal to acquiesce to the demands of the State would inspire their parishioners to stand against the intrusion of the Nazi Party into affairs of the Church.

Hitler had managed to secure the position of National Socialists in the hierarchy of one of his greatest political foes. With the signing of the Concordat, he was assured that the pulpit would not be used as a platform for anti-Nazi political rhetoric. In the Concordat of 1933, the Holy See agreed that, “On Sundays and Holy days, special prayers, conforming to the Liturgy, will be offered during the principal Mass for the welfare of the German Reich and its people in all Episcopal, parish and conventual churches and chapels of the German Reich.”\(^{19}\) This clause allowed the German Government to use even the Catholic Mass as an instrument of their propaganda, as


prayers offered by Catholic priests for the Reich would propagate the fallacy that the Catholic Churches now stood in full support of Adolf Hitler.

The National Socialist government feared that Catholic clerics would use their influence over their parishioners to sway the people’s political opinions and votes, a risk they could not tolerate. In a speech to the Reichstag on January 30, 1939, Adolf Hitler said, “But on one point it is well that there should be no uncertainty: the German priest as servant of God we shall protect, the priest as political enemy of the German State we shall destroy.”

The Concordat of 1933 allowed Hitler to do exactly that. The National Socialists were able to veto the appointments of clerics who they considered political enemies of the State. The Concordat assuaged Hitler’s fear of the Roman Catholic clergy as a serious political threat. In terms of the Nazis’ agenda to strip the Church of its power, Article 32, the clause in which the Vatican agreed to the de-politicization of the Catholic Church in Germany, was one of the most important provisos of the accord.

**Article 32**

In view of the special situation existing in Germany, and in view of the guarantee provided through this Concordat of legislation directed to safeguard the rights and privileges of the Roman Catholic Church in the Reich and its component States, the Holy See will prescribe regulations for the exclusion of clergy and members of religious Orders from membership of political parties, and from engaging in work on their behalf.

Now that the Vatican officially sanctioned the exclusion of Catholic clergy from politics, the German State was free to formally bar clergy from the Party without fear of a public backlash. In 1939 Martin Bormann created a new Party bylaw prohibiting clergymen,

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Theology students, and anyone closely linked to the church from membership in the National Socialist Party. The regulation also stated that any Party member who chose to join the clergy or study Theology would be expelled.\textsuperscript{22} The Nazis knew that many priests were opposed to the Party, so by preemptively barring them from membership, priests could not use their refusal to join the National Socialists as a way to make a public statement. Bormann’s decree showed that by 1939 the Nazis felt that their power was secure enough that they could act in a way openly hostile to religion without losing the support of the German citizens.

The National Socialists had successfully silenced the Catholic Church, and had done so through political channels. In a speech his private army, the \textit{Sturm Abteilung} (SA), after the signing of the Concordat, Hitler said, “…all political action in the parties will be forbidden to priests for all time, happy because we know what is wanted by millions who long to see in the priest only the comforter of their souls and not the representative of their political convictions.”\textsuperscript{23} Hitler was even able to convince the Vatican to agree to withdraw its support from the \textit{Zentrum Partei}, the formerly powerful Catholic Party that had been one of the Nazi Party’s main adversaries.

…the negotiations were conducted exclusively by Pacelli on behalf of the Pope over the heads of the faithful, the clergy, and the German bishops. [...] The \textit{Reichskonkordat} effectively removed the German Catholic Church – which had successfully rolled back Bismarck’s \textit{Kulturkampf}, and which had opposed the rise of Nazism, generally barring party members


from receiving holy communion into 1933 – from any continued role of opposition to Hitler.\textsuperscript{24}

The Roman Catholic Church no longer posed an immediate threat to Hitler’s regime, and he was now free to tighten his hold over it, slowly repealing the rights he had granted it in the agreement. Eugenio Pacelli, the same man that signed the Concordat, would watch the Nazis repeatedly violate its terms during his reign as Pius XII. He would never regain authority over German Catholics while the National Socialists were in power.

\textbf{Protestant Churches in National Socialist Germany}

The evil that’s gnawing our vitals is our priests, of both creeds. I can’t at present give them the answer they’ve been asking for, but it will cost them nothing to wait. It’s all written down in my big book. The time will come when I’ll settle my accounts with them, and I’ll go straight to the point.\textsuperscript{25}

- Adolf Hitler

Catholicism posed a more direct threat to Hitler’s rule than Protestantism did, so the Nazis threw their support behind the Protestant churches, and sought to unite the

different sects into one Reich Church (Reichskirche) that could be infused with National Socialist ideology. Hitler still saw the Christian faith as detrimental to a National Socialist State, but he was forced to choose the sect he believed to be lesser of two evils. Hitler knew that he could adequately control the Protestant Church, unlike the Catholic Church. According to his chief architect and confidant, Albert Speer, Hitler believed that: “Through me the Protestant Church could become the established church, as in England.”

Hitler, although he endeavored to diminish the power of religion in Germany, wanted to spread the propagandist idea that the National Socialists were defenders of the faith. He united the Protestant Churches into one Reichskirche, which was under the control of a Reichbishop, Ludwig Mueller, a man who was essentially Hitler’s Nazi puppet. This gave the Nazis the power to manipulate the Reichskirche and to control the messages the Church sent to its followers. Eventually they intended this State Church to preach a National Socialist doctrine just as Rosenberg and Bormann had originally proposed.

On August 26, 1934, after Hitler had risen to power, he spoke at the Ehrenbreitstein fortress in Koblenz, and said:

> There has been no interference, nor will there be any, with the teachings or religious freedom of the confessions. To the contrary, the state protects religion, though always under the conditions that it will not be used as a disguise for political purposes… I know that there are thousand of priests who are not merely reconciled with the present state, but who gladly cooperate with it… Where can our interests be more convergent than in our struggle against cultural bolshevism, against the Godless movement, against criminality, and for a social conception of community, for the

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conquest of class war and class hatred, or civil war and unrest, strife and discord. These are not anti-Christian, but rather Christian principles! 

Hitler knew that for his ruse to work he had to set an example by appearing to live both as a staunch Nazi leader and a devout Christian. He included religious imagery in his speeches, used it in Nazi propaganda posters, and eventually turned even Christian Masses into a Nazi demonstrations, complete with uniforms, processions, and swastika banners. He told his followers that religion would be an integral part of the Nazi state, and vowed to protect the rights of the Churches, both Catholic and Protestant, as long as they remained apolitical.

Hitler's affirmation of Christianity in his public speeches marked a policy of studied duplicity which characterized his government's attitude toward religion from the start... behind the scenes [he was] craftily planning the utter annihilation of the Christian faith. 

In order to create the illusion that the Nazis supported religion, Hitler used religious imagery in his speeches and frequently praised the Nazi Party for doing the work of God. “Christian anti-Semitism did not motivate the top decision makers, but it helped make their commands comprehensible to the rank and file who carried out measures against Jews as well as those who passively condoned them.”

From the beginning, anti-Semitism had been irrevocably intertwined with the Christian faith, and Hitler claimed that by destroying the Jews the Nazis were carrying out the will of the Almighty. The gospel of John, notorious for its anti-Semitic writings, talks of the Jews

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persecution of Jesus in Chapter 5, after he had miraculously cured a man who had long been suffering from a disabling disease.

16 And therefore did the Jews persecute Jesus, and sought to slay him, because he had done these things on the Sabbath day. 17 But Jesus answered them, My Father worketh hitherto, and I work. 18 Therefore the Jews sought the more to kill him, because he not only had broken the Sabbath, but said also that God was his Father, making himself equal with God. 30

According to the gospel of John, Jesus then had to move his teaching to Galilee, because the Jews in Jewry sought to kill him. The gospel describes the Jews continual persecution of Jesus and his disciples and also the Jews role in Christ’s arrest and crucifixion. John’s writings blame the Jews, rather than the Romans, for the death of Christ. The Nazis used this to justify their crusade against the modern day Jews.

The Crusades and the Inquisition were both ruthless and systematic Christian efforts to stamp out heresy, and even Martin Luther proposed that all Jewish homes and synagogues be burned, calling the Jew the second worst enemy of Christ, surpassed only by Satan himself. 31 On November 9, 1938, a night that would become known as Kristallnacht, Luther’s proposition seemed a premonition. 96 Jews were killed, over 1,000 Jewish synagogues were burned, and 7,500 Jewish storefronts and warehouses were destroyed in anti-Jewish riots prompted by the assassination of Ernst vom Rath, Third Secretary to the German Ambassador to France, by Hershel Grynszpan, a Jewish boy living in Paris whose family had been forcibly deported from Germany to Poland. 32

Joseph Goebbels, Hitler’s Chief of Propaganda, portrayed the attack as part of an international Jewish conspiracy, inciting the anger of the German citizens.

One of the most amazing instances of human self-deception— which, unfortunately, are all too frequent— is that there are hundreds of thousands of unsuspecting Christians who after reading his book, *Mein Kampf*, are somehow able to consider Adolf Hitler as a well-wisher or even, due allowance being made for error in matters of detail, as a firm adherent, of the Christian faith.33

At the same time Hitler was promoting Christianity as National Socialism’s religious arm and decreeing it the natural enemy of Bolshevism in his public speeches, he voiced his disapproval of it in private. Hitler was quoted in Martin Bormann’s records as saying on the night of July 11th-12th, 1941, “The heaviest blow that ever struck humanity was the coming of Christianity. Bolshevism is Christianity’s illegitimate child. Both are inventions of the Jew.”34 Despite Hitler’s personal view of Christianity, he knew it was important to his followers that they were able to be good Christians as well as good Nazis. As long as this was true, German citizens would not have to choose between their State and their religion, and this made the creation of a State-sponsored church crucial.

... the Nazis’ unconcealed, murderous schemes and antagonism toward Christianity might make the attempt to fuse Christian tradition with National Socialism the most improbable combination of all, producing a refiguration barely recognizable as Christian.35

As improbable as this consortium may have been, the merging of National Socialist ideals with Christianity was an essential component in Hitler’s plan for the

elimination of the Christian religion in Germany. The first step in his plan was the coalition of the German Protestant sects. Not only would this coalition be a stepping-stone for the implementation of a National Socialist Church, but Hitler believed it would also serve as a counterweight to the Catholic Church. Adolf Hitler was not the first man to endorse the idea of a unified, national Protestant Church. The Protestant Association, a liberal Protestant group, was founded in 1863 to promote this objective. The unification of Protestant Churches was also a key campaign platform for the German Christian Party. The German Christians were a group of Nazi supporters who distorted Christianity into a form that, although hardly faithful to its roots, was compatible with their political beliefs.

This movement espoused the Nazi party's "positive Christianity," which is meant, among other things, that it denied sin and depravity, as well as humility, and that it stressed nationalism and the saving character of the state. The church, as part of the state, was to march along-side the people to bring it to its earthly paradise. As Karl Barth described it, "The state is eternal, equal to the Bible in expressing God's will. The Fuehrer is equal to the commands of God, rather, he is above them." With Hegel, Nietzsche, Rosenberg, and Wagner as their prophets, the "German Christians" preached their perverted gospel.36

Karl Barth, a prominent Protestant theologian of the time, opposed the distortion of Christianity that occurred during the Third Reich. He was born in Germany in 1886, and believed religion had become too accommodating to modern culture. In his writings he emphasized the discontinuity between traditional Christian morality and the values of the new German State.

Although Hitler despised Christianity and believed it to be ridiculous, weak, and obsolete, he realized that he could use the German people’s faith as a tool to increase his power. He consolidated the many German Protestant churches into one Reichskirche, which was headed by a National Socialist Reichsbishop. The Christianity preached by the Reichskirche had been manipulated to fit in with National Socialist principles. The Fuehrer was Germany’s new prophet, the new sermon one of hate rather than love. Adolf Hitler convinced the Aryan Christians that, like Christ and his disciples, they were in danger of being overtaken by an international Jewish conspiracy that meant to destroy them. The National Socialists distorted the meaning behind scriptural passages concerning the Jews persecution of Christ, working to stir up archaic Christian feelings of anti-Semitism and garner support for their crusade to annihilate world Jewry. Hitler knew it would be extremely beneficial to his Party if this new Christianity was adopted by all religious Germans, and promoted this new form of Christianity as the one true Christianity. He declared that the National Socialists were the only true Christians, and claimed that by eliminating the power of the priests the Nazi Party was actually bringing true Christianity into effect.\textsuperscript{37}

The German Christian Movement

The German Christians saw the rise of the National Socialists as a great opportunity for Christianity in Germany. They believed the Nazi Party was going to bring about a religious revival and make Christianity an integral part of Aryan life and culture. “National Socialism and Christianity, the German Christian movement preached, were not only reconcilable but mutually reinforcing.”38 They propagated an anti-Jewish Christianity and worshipped Hitler with the same religious zeal that they worshipped Christ. This movement was not simply a creation of Nazi leaders who wanted to garner support for their political systems; regular men and women who wanted to reconcile their

religious and political ideals and their belief in both Christ and Hitler shaped it. How was
this possible? The German Christians advocated a manly, nationalist, anti-Semitic,
Aryan Christianity. This was not a Christian sect built upon love, forgiveness, unity, and
understanding. Instead it was an elitist group, its membership only open to pureblooded
Aryan Germans. Even the name, German Christians, was chosen, “to force anyone else
who claimed both Germanness and Christianity to qualify that identity or risk association
with their cause. Members of the group thus used their name to enforce the contention
that they represented the only authentic fusion of German ethnicity and Christian faith.”

By mid-1933, German Christians had been elected as bishops of all but three of
Germany’s Protestant Churches, giving the movement a place in the Reich. At its
weakest, the German Christian movement had roughly 600,000 followers.

The German Christian doctrines not based on scripture, but rather on ethnicity and
nationality, a distinct politicization of their Church. Christ was hailed as a leader and a
warrior, a fighter rather than a pacifist. They believed in a philosophy of “blood and
soil,” a doctrine exceedingly similar to the very sort of naturalist religion the Nazis hoped
to install in the Reich. They believed in the sanctity of the German Volk, and that the rise
of the Aryans was destined by God. The Church of the German Christians was one for
the German soldier, and praised death for one’s country as the equivalent of martyrdom.
Like Rosenberg, the German Christians rejected Christianity’s Jewish roots. As David
Alan Black wrote in *Karl Barth and the German Church Conflict*:

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Reich Bishop Ludwig Müller had proclaimed, “We must emphasize with all decisiveness that Christianity did not grow out of Judaism but developed in opposition to Judaism. When we speak of Christianity and Judaism today, the two in their most fundamental essence stand in glaring contrast to one another. There is no bond between them, rather the sharpest opposition.”

The German Christians rejected Christ’s pacifist teachings, the Christian doctrine of love for one’s neighbor, and Christianity’s Jewish roots. To many, the German Christians were hardly recognizable as Christians. Indeed, the perverted image of Christ as a soldier was far more in tune with National Socialist principles than with any Christian ideal. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Protestant clergyman in the Third Reich, said of the National Socialists and the German Christians, "Those who claim to be building the church are, without a doubt, already at work on its destruction; unintentionally and unknowingly, they will construct a temple to idols.”

The first national conference of the German Christians was held in Berlin on April 3-5, 1933. They called for the confederation of Church and State as well as for the establishment of a Reich Church. The German Christians believed that these measures would serve to increase the power of the German nation. The declaration passed by the conference included this statement:

God has created me a German. Germanism is a gift of God. God wants me to fight for my Germany. Military service is in no sense a violation of Christian conscience, but is obedience to God… For a German the Church is the fellowship of believers who are obligated to fight for a Christian

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Germany. The goal of the ‘Faith Movement of “German Christians’” is an evangelical German Reich. 42

The German Christians had manipulated Christianity into a “new” Christianity, one that was more compatible with National Socialist ideals.

Uniting the Churches

On April 25, 1933, just three weeks after the gathering the German Christians held in Berlin, the German Evangelical Church Committee decided that the twenty-eight Protestant churches in Germany would merge into one national Evangelical Church. (In German, the term *evangelisch* (Evangelical) refers to the Lutheran, Reformed, and United Churches, and thus is more or less comparable to the English term “Protestant.”) 43 Hitler appointed his friend and former Army District Chaplain Ludwig Mueller, a moderate German Christian and a Nazi, as his liaison to the committee and his advisor on all affairs connected with the establishment of a Reich Church. Mueller had been a leader of the German Christians in East Prussia but was not as radical as many of his followers, making him an appealing ally for Hitler.

Under Hossenfelder’s leadership, the German Christians announced somewhat radical guidelines for the new church constitution; they included the statement: ‘The Evangelical church is the church of the German Christians, that is, Christians of Aryan race.’ In an effort to temper such extremism Mueller, with Hitler’s approval, took over the protectorship… of the German Christian Faith Movement on May 16. That same day new guidelines for the German Christians were issued which were far more moderate in tone.44

While Hitler may have benefited from the extremist views of the radical German Christians, he saw it as more profitable to push the group towards a more moderate stance, making the movement more acceptable to a large number of Germans. It would be easier to get the citizens to consent to the Reichskirche being led by the German Christians if the Reichsbishop was a moderate. For the security of the Reich, it was far more beneficial for Hitler to have many Germans following a moderate pro-Nazi form of Christianity than to have a small number of people devote themselves to a fanatical National Socialist one.

Once the committee members had decided to form a united Evangelical Reich Church, they had to draw up a constitution by which it would abide. After a constitution had been agreed upon, the committee was faced with the task of electing a Reich Bishop. Hitler, a staunch supporter of the German Christians, wanted a German Christian to head the unified Evangelical Church, but did not want the Party to seem as though it was becoming too closely involved in Church affairs. There was also the hope that the German Christians would sweep the Church elections the same way the Nazis had dominated the political ones. A victory by the German Christians would help legitimize Hitler’s government.

While Ludwig Mueller wanted the government to have a part in the electoral process, the rest of the committee refused to allow it. On May 23, the German Christians met to nominate their candidate for Reich Bishop; the spot went to Hitler’s advisor, Ludwig Mueller. Although Hitler hoped that his advisor on religious affairs would win the election and become the Reich Bishop, he did not want the government to be seen as having directly interfered with a religious appointment, and did not officially endorse Mueller or involve himself in the elections. Based upon the Nazi Party’s past electoral success, it was reasonable for Hitler to assume that a National Socialist and German Christian candidate could win the election without political intervention. The committee also selected a candidate, a man named Pastor Friedrich von Bodelschwingh. Von Bodelschwingh was a preacher well respected by both the Lutherans and Reformers, who had never held a religious administrative office. His lack of administrative experience was seen both as a positive and a negative trait. Many thought that it meant he was above the corruption that often plagues high Church officials, but some, like Mueller, believed it meant he was better suited to be a parish pastor than the Reichsbishop.

Regardless of Bodelschwingh’s lack of experience and Mueller’s backing by Hitler, the vote to offer the position to Mueller failed, thirteen churches to eleven, while the proposal to grant the position of Reichsbishop to Bodelschwingh passed, eleven to eight. Hitler, while disapproving of Bodelschwingh’s appointment, told the ministers he would have been no happier had they appointed Mueller Reichsbishop without consulting the government first. He said, in reference to the possibility of Mueller having been

offered the position, “…if it had happened, I would not have approved. The church should not have gone over my head. The church cannot confront our times and movement with hostility.”46

The fight was not over. Because the church commission had appointed Bodelschwingh Reich Bishop before officially ratifying the constitution, the authorities protested the appointment’s legality. Nazi Party officers sent telegrams objecting to Mueller’s having been passed over and the SA harassed the new Reich Bishop’s offices. In another effort to oust Bodelschwingh, August Jaeger was appointed State Kommissar for all Evangelical churches in Prussia, a post which should have become unnecessary after the appointment of an omnipotent Reichsbishop. This move, coupled with the actions of the SA and Nazi officials, caused Bodelschwingh to realize just how untenable his position was, and to withdraw from the office of Reichsbishop on June 24, 1933. Immediately Jaeger set about appointing German Christians to the highest administrative posts, and there was turmoil within the Church.

After a conference with President Von Hindenberg in which Bodelschwingh enlightened the President to the conflict within the Church, Von Hindenberg asked Hitler to step in and attempt to settle the dispute. This was a prime opportunity for Adolf Hitler to exert his influence in the Church’s selection without making it seem as if the National Socialists were intentionally manipulating the elections to their advantage. The committee was reformed and some new members were added. The constitution was finished and confirmed by a Reich law, and a date was set for new elections in which the

seats would be voted on directly by the people. The campaign slogan for the German Christians, created by Joachim Hossenfelder, was, “The German Christians are the SA of Jesus Christ.”47 The night before the elections Hitler, at the request of Mueller, broadcasted an endorsement of the German Christians over the radio. He said:

In the interest of the recovery of the German nation, which I regard as indissolubly bound up with the National Socialist Movement, I naturally wish that the new church elections should in their result support our new policy for people and state. For, since the state is ready to guarantee the inner freedom of the religious life, it has the right to hope that in the confessions those forces will be given a hearing which are for their part determined in their resolve to do all in their power for the freedom of the nation… These forces I see primarily marshalled in that part of the Evangelical communion (Kirchenvolk), which in the German Christian Movement has consciously taken its stand on the ground of the National Socialist state - not in a submission but in a living affirmation.48

The campaign worked, and approximately two-thirds of the seats went to members of the German Christians. The elections were a clear indicator of the way the German citizens were approaching the issue of State and religion. They wanted a Church whose teachings were complimentary to the political dogma they followed, one that would praise them for their fanatical devotion to the State while allowing them to remain good Christians. This time, Ludwig Mueller was easily elected to the post of Reich Bishop. A fervent National Socialist was now head of all Evangelical Churches in Germany. Without having to appear overly intrusive in matters of the Church, the Nazis got what they required.

Besides the appointment of a new Reich Bishop, the committee’s meeting resulted in a new conception of the German Evangelical Church, called the Deutsche Evangelische Kirche (DKE), which was essentially an umbrella organization. It was set

up so that it facilitated administrative unity among smaller Churches, called Land Churches, which kept their separate confessions and methods of worship. It was not as united as the National Socialists had hoped for, but it was a step towards what the Nazis eventually hoped to achieve, one State Church that they could manipulate to preach the doctrines of National Socialism.

There were several reasons why uniting the Protestant Churches in Germany into one Reich Church seemed beneficial to the National Socialist government. One of these which was frequently noted was the possibility that this united Evangelical Church could serve as a counterweight to the powerful Catholic Church. Adolf Hitler originally conformed to this idea, but later saw it as unwise, noting:

In the Eastern territories, our policy should be to encourage the survival of as many religious sects and communities as possible… Once only in my life have I been stupid enough to try to unite some twenty different sects under one head; and God, to whom be thanks, endowed my twenty Protestant Bishops with such stupidity, that I was saved from my own folly. If I had succeeded, I should now have two Popes on my back! And two blackmailers!49

The National Socialists believed that by uniting the Churches, and having only two sects, the Catholic and the Evangelical, to handle, they were making their position easier. Had they left the different sects independent of one another, they would have had to appease many different Churches and many different Church leaders. This way there was only one administration to manage, and one that was predominantly German Christian and thus pro-Nazi.

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Uniting the Churches, which was done under the guise of strengthening religion in the Reich, was actually a façade for destroying it. As was written in a July 10, 1945 document prepared by the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) Research and Analysis Branch to Major William Coogan:

National Socialism by its very nature was hostile to Christianity and the Christian churches. The purpose of the National Socialist movement was to convert the German people into a homogenous racial group united in all its energies for prosecution of aggressive warfare.  

The Nazis saw uniting the Protestant Churches into one Reichkirche as an advantage because the citizens of the Third Reich would become accustomed to the idea of a State religion. This would prove important in the National Socialists’ plan to introduce a Reich Church based on the principles of National Socialism. The creation of the Reichskirche by the National Socialists was an attempt to bring about this goal, not to create a stronger Christian Church.

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The Persecution of the Church in Occupied Poland

On August 31, 1939, the Nazis dressed a German prisoner in a Polish uniform and took him to Gleiwitz, a German town bordering Poland. There they shot him, faking a Polish attack on the Gleiwitz radio station. The next morning, September 1, 1939, German troops invaded Poland, carrying out the invasion under the false pretense of self-defense.\(^5\) As Hitler’s troops Blitzkrieged Poland, the Fuehrer addressed the Reichstag, enumerating his reasons for the attack. Amongst them was the recovery of the Polish Corridor, a strip of German land ceded to Poland in the Treaty of Versailles. Hitler claimed that after the annexation of the Corridor by Poland, over one million people of German blood had been forced to leave their homeland, and that those who remained were ill-treated by the Poles. Hitler’s armies, however, did not stop after reclaiming the territories Germany had lost in 1918, and within a week Germany had the city of Krakow under its control.

On September 9 Colonel Eduard Wagner discussed the future of Poland with Hitler’s Army Chief of Staff, General Halder. “It is the Fuehrer’s and Goering’s intention,” Wagner wrote in his diary, “to destroy and exterminate the Polish nation. More than that cannot even be hinted at in writing.”\(^5\)

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Hitler was carrying out his Weltanschauung with brutal efficiency in Poland. His policies against the Jews and the Church were instituted immediately in Poland, whereas in Germany he had to slowly acclimate his citizens to them. Admiral Wilhelm Canaris, Chief of the Abwehr, the German Secret Intelligence Service, visited Poland on 10 September. Informed of civilian massacres by his officers, Canaris went to voice his objection to Hitler. He told General Wilhelm Keitel, Chief of the Armed Forces High Command, “I have information… that mass executions are being planned in Poland, and that members of the Polish nobility and the Roma Catholic bishops and priest have been singled out for extermination.”

Canaris was told to keep his protest silent, as Hitler had already decided upon his course of action. Unable to forget the atrocities he witnessed in Poland, Canaris became a leader of the Wehrmacht resistance, and was executed in 1945 for helping plan assassination and coup attempts and for disclosing privileged information about Hitler’s war strategy to the British.

It did not take long for the Nazis to gain complete control of Poland, and once they had, they set out to completely annihilate Christianity in the conquered nation. The cruelty and brutality with which the elimination of priests and parishes was carried out proved the Nazis’ bitter hatred of religion and their complete lack of respect for men of the cloth. Churches, abbeys, convents, and monasteries were closed; their funds and lands were confiscated. Priests and clergymen were forced to perform humiliating tasks, were beaten and shot by the soldiers, and many were rounded up and sent to Concentration Camps. Although measures were taken against both the Protestant and

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Catholic Churches, it was the Catholic Church that endured the worst of the Nazis’ persecution. Because Poland was a conquered nation, the Nazis could persecute the Churches without the façade of legality they needed in Germany. Their purges of the Church in occupied territories were quick and complete, unlike in the Fatherland where they were forced to take the careful steps against it. In Germany they feared losing the support of the German citizens, but in Poland they could rule with an iron fist, as they did not need the consent or the support of the Polish people for their policies. According to John Conway:

> The Nazis’ antagonism towards the Churches arose from their intolerance of any compromise with a system of belief that spanned the centuries and embraced all men under a doctrine of equality before God… The Nazi radicals were motivated not only by a desire for total control, but for an ideological fanaticism that believed it possible to create an ersatz religion of blood and soil.\(^{55}\)

In Poland the Nazis finally had their chance to eradicate Christianity, and they did not hesitate to begin a systematic and comprehensive elimination of the Christian faith, starting with its priests and Masses.

> “In the territory conquered from Poland, Nazi anti-clericals fashioned a *tabula rasa* that, unhampered by the legal and social restrictions felt back home, presented a canvas on which to paint the ideal Nazi society.”\(^{56}\) In the Warthegau, the Nazis could test the policies that they would have liked to institute in a perfect National Socialist State, and which they would have instituted in Germany had they been unhampered by public opinion. While they could not risk attacking Christianity in Germany, the defeated Poles

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had to endure the commands of the Reich, and Poland became a testing ground for a progressive National Socialist religious plan. The two men most influential in shaping Nazi religious policies in Poland were Martin Bormann, who advocated the destruction of Christianity and its replacement with a National Socialist religion, and Arthur Greiser, the Reich Governor of the Warthegau. In December of 1940, Greiser drafted thirteen points that would dictate the role of religion and religious institutions in the Gau. In The German Churches Under Hitler, Ernst Christian Helmreich writes that the legislation passed to limit the actions of the Churches in the Warthegau was often considered to be the legislation Hitler would have brought about in Germany had the National Socialists won the war and remained in power. Helmreich summarized and analyzed those laws as follows:

1. Henceforth there were to be no churches as state institutions, only religious associations as private organizations, which meant churches were no longer to be corporations under public law, with all the privileges that status entailed.
2. The religious associations were not to be administered by publicly recognized authorities, but simply by association representatives.
3. As a result of the above provisions, there would in the future be no church laws, orders, or edicts, which meant that the churches could not be financed by church taxes, a restriction which was strictly enforced here as it was in Austria and some other annexed territories.
4. There were to be no connections with groups outside the Gau, notably no legal, financial, or service ties with the Old Reich churches. Some ties could be maintained with German Protestantism, but in essence the Church of the Warthegau was to be independent. The same provision was to apply to the Catholic Church, and ties with the Vatican were to be cut.
5. Only adults could be church members, and they would have to make a written application. Persons were no longer born into the church; the concept of a Land, folk, or territorial church was ended. Persons from the Old Reich who came to the Warthegau would also have to make written application for membership. This provision in particular raised objections, for it struck at the very conception of the Christian church as a
congregation of baptized Christians. Were not children also members of
the church?
6. All lesser church groups, such as youth, women’s, and men’s associations,
were dissolved; nothing was to stand in the way of bringing about unity
among the German people.
7. Germans and Poles could no longer attend the same services. This
provision simply carried the principle of nationality over into the
churches. The Poles had their own designated churches…
8. Henceforth no confirmation instruction was to be given in the schools, a
ban which was later extended to all religious instruction. Religious
instruction was limited to young people between ten and eighteen, and was
to be given only by pastors of state-recognized religious bodies in church
buildings…
9. Gifts by association members were to provide all financial support; there
would be no other subsidies. Contributions of over 500 marks would be
subject to a gift tax. Church collections in services were forbidden, and all
alms boxes were sealed…
10. The associations were not to own any property but the church building
itself. Cemeteries were to be state-owned, and should not be restricted to
a single confession since that disturbed communal unity. Germans and
Poles, nevertheless, had to be buried in separate sections…
11. Churches were not to undertake social welfare work; this was the sole
province of the National Socialist party.
12. All religious foundations and monasteries were to be confiscated since
they were not in accordance with German standards of morality or
population policy.
13. The religious associations could appoint only people from the Warthegau
to serve them. These were not to be full-time pastors, but should have
another profession as well…

The restrictions the National Socialists placed on Polish parishes were not only
aimed at the immediate destruction of the Church as an institution, but also at keeping
religion from being passed on to the younger generation. In the same way the Nazis
concentrated on the murder of Jewish children to destroy the Jewish race, the Nazis knew
that Christianity would die out if its traditions and beliefs were not imparted to Christian
children. Religious education was not allowed to begin until a child was old enough to

57 Helmreich, Ernst Christian. The German Churches under Hitler: Background, Struggle, and Epilogue.
question Christian beliefs, many of which contradict science and are based on faith alone. These younger generations would have been indoctrinated with National Socialist teachings when their minds were most malleable, and would likely to reject any Christian ideas contrary to the Nazi doctrines they had grown up with. Far fewer children would accept Christianity than had the children of older generations, and its following would eventually disappear. All religious lessons in Poland were required to be taught by pastors of state-recognized bodies. National Socialist pastors took control of the children’s religious educations, and the Christianity they imparted to the youths was the bigoted and militant German form of Christianity. The provisions also struck at the fundamental Christian sacrament of baptism, since children were no longer allowed to be members of the Church. Helmreich’s legislation meant to keep Christianity from being passed down to the next generation of Christian children. The Nazis controlled the education of children while they were still at their most impressionable, and only once children were more mature were they allowed religious instruction, increasing the chance that they would reject Christianity.

The Protestant Churches in Poland were allowed some contact with the Nazified Protestant Churches in Germany, but the Pope posed too great a danger to the Reich for the Nazis to allow the Polish Catholic Churches any contact with the Vatican. They hoped to destroy the Pope as the head of the Catholic Churches within the Reich, and to eliminate the international religious spirit and hierarchy that made the Catholic Church a danger to the Party. Without it, the Catholic Church was simply another Christian sect that Hitler would handle when the time came.
The greatest harm to our people are our pastors of both churches... The moment will come when I carry out a reckoning with them without wasting much time. I will not stumble over legal red tape in such times. Here, only considerations of expediency will be decisive. I am convinced that things will look quite different in ten years, because we will not get around the basic solution. — Adolf Hitler

The Nazis used Poland as an experiment in religious policy, swiftly annihilating Christian religious instruction and Church membership for youths. The Vatican, while it denounced the National Socialists, made no outright move to stop the destruction of its Polish parishes. Although it appealed the strangulation Christianity, the dispersing of nuns, and the detainment of priests in Concentration Camps to Joachim von Ribbentrop, the Reich Minister for Foreign Affairs, it did not have the temporal power to compel Germany to change its policies.

The Nazis made no effort to conceal their hatred of the Catholic Church in Poland, but there was another reason for their methodical deportation and murder of the clergy. On January 14, 1949, Bishop Carl Maria Splett, who had been appointed to a Polish diocese after its bishop had run from the Nazis, wrote the Pope, saying:

At my inquiry the Gestapo told me that Cardinal Hlond had called for resistance among the Polish population over the Vatican radio station… They say that Cardinal Hlond called the Polish people to rally round its priests and teachers. Thereupon, numerous priests and teachers were arrested and executed, or were tortured to death in the most terrible manner, or were even shipped to the far east.59

Because of Hlond’s suggestion that priests lead the Polish resistance, clerics came to be seen by the Nazis as political, as well as ideological, enemies the State. All Catholic schools in Poland were closed, and the Catholic presses and bookstores in the Warthegau

and in most of the major dioceses were shut down. Catholic charitable and social organizations were precluded from meeting. Hlond’s radio broadcast was a mistake, but his reports to Pope Pius XII between 1939 and 1940 helped document the severity of the situation in Poland. Of the sixteen priests killed in the Archdiocese of Gniezno, ten were shot, two were bludgeoned with rifle-butts, one died of exhaustion due to forced labor, two perished while incarcerated in Nazi prisons, and one was killed by a Nazi bomb.⁶⁰ Hlond wrote in his report, “The oppression being exerted against the houses and apostolate of Religious houses has as its purpose and end their total extinction.”⁶¹

Hlond’s reports also contained information about instances of Nazi brutality, including the humiliation they forced Canon Casimir Stepczynski to bear. In September of 1939, the same month as the German invasion, German soldiers confined 5,000 Poles to a stable in Bydgoszcz. They were packed so tightly there was no room to sit down. The people used one corner of the stable to relieve themselves, and the Canon, with the help of one Jewish man, was forced to carry away the excrement with his bare hands. Adam Musial, the curate, was rigorously beaten with a rifle-butt after he proposed he replace the Canon.⁶² Between Bydgoszcz and Gniezno there were 261 churches. Of those almost half lost their priests, and those that still had them were only allowed to hold Mass between nine and eleven A.M. on Sunday mornings. Those Masses had to be conducted in German. The Nazis also banned Church collections and confiscated Church funds, forcing the priests to live off the charity of their parishioners.

The women of the Catholic Church fared no better than the men. Convents and
abbeys were closed, along with their hospitals, orphanages, schools, and shelters. The
nuns were forced to servile labor, and many were interred in a separate prison camp next
to Dachau. As soon as the Nazis had conquered Poland, they began to vigorously
suppress all forms of Christianity and organized religion therein.

It goes without saying that the Nazi aim is to dechristianize as rapidly as
possible these countries which are attached to the Catholic faith, and the
results are as follows: 95 per cent of the priests have been imprisoned,
expelled, or humiliated before the eyes of the faithful. The Curia no
longer exists; the Cathedral has been made into a garage... Hundreds of
churches have been closed. The whole patrimony of the Church has been
confiscated, and the most eminent Catholics executed.63

Having been brought to Dachau, the principle camp for incarcerated clergymen,
Polish priests were singled out and treated more cruelly than other Christian clerics. The
Encyklopedia Katolicka reports 4,618 total Christian clerics imprisoned over the course
of Nazi regime. Of the 2,796 who were held at Dachau, 95 percent were Roman
Catholics, and 1,807, or 65 percent, were Polish. Very often these Poles were chosen as
subjects for Nazi studies on hypothermia and other medical experiments, and were forced
to endure humiliations and brutal beatings at the hands of the Nazi guards. 947
clergymen would lose their lives at Dachau, a startling 866 being of Polish nationality.64

The Nazi policies in Poland were designed to eliminate Christianity as an
institution, and thereby destroy it as a potential political threat. Had the National
Socialists had carte blanche in the matter of German religion, they would have enacted
similar restrictions to curtail Christianity. Instead they were forced to eradicate

63 "Wartime Rescue of the Jews by the Polish Catholic Clergy." Nov. 2003. The Polish Educational
64 "Wartime Rescue of the Jews by the Polish Catholic Clergy." Nov. 2003. The Polish Educational
Christianity slowly in Germany, and to do it under the guise of “wartime necessity.” Within German borders they had to indict specific priests for acts of enmity toward the State, but in Poland they could round up all Christian clerics and terminate them without explanation or fear of public reprisal. Hitler believed it was impossible for Christianity, especially Catholicism, and National Socialism to coexist within the Reich. In Germany he had to wean the citizens off Christianity; in Poland he simply destroyed the Churches. The Polish parishes were crushed, and with it the institution that had the greatest ability to undermine the National Socialist Reich. Surreptitiously, Hitler worked to achieve this objective in Germany as well.

The Persecution of German Churches
The National Socialists did not contain their persecution of the Christian Churches to Poland. Priests and clergy in Germany were kept under strict governmental scrutiny. A branch of the Sipo/SD, the Nazis’ political police force and intelligence service, was created to deal exclusively with the Churches. It investigated priests and parishes for treasonous activity and kept their activities under constant surveillance. “In the case of Catholics, for example, some have estimated that approximately one third of their priests endured some kind of reprisal during these years.”65 Even the Reichskirche was not safe from governmental restrictions. Its Christian practices were limited, and it was pushed closer and closer towards becoming a National Socialist Church. The Nazi government passed “Laws for the Safeguarding of the German Evangelical Church” that prohibited the Church more than protected it. “By 1937, the result of all these measures was complete administrative control by the Nazi conspirators over the Evangelical churches.”66

Religious instruction in Germany was given diminished status; interdenominational schools took the place of confessional ones, and more and more class time was dedicated to instruction in National Socialist ideology and the sciences.67 Martin Bormann insisted that the Minister of Education restrict Theological studies in Universities, and ordered that the Churches not be informed of this decision. Theological programs were to be replaced with National Socialist Eugenics programs. In December


1933, Reichs bishop Ludwig Mueller facilitated the amalgamation of the Evangelical Youth Association with the Hitler Youth. The National Socialists also instituted an obligatory youth training service for boys between fourteen and eighteen, which was held on Sunday mornings, and which the boys had to attend in place of Mass. The Nazis were trying to eliminate Christianity in Germany by preventing it from being passed on to the youth, just as they had done in Poland.

The Reich Press Chamber essentially suspended Church presses on June 1, 1940, claiming the people and materials could be better used to support the war effort. The German Faith Movement was not subject to the above restriction, only the Christian press. The action showed blatant discrimination against the Church establishment. In July of 1940, civilian pastors were restricted from communicating with the servicemen from their parishes who had gone to war. They were allowed to send Bibles, but could not highlight passages or send selections. The National Socialists insisted that the servicemen’s religious guidance come from service chaplains, of which many units, including the SS and the Luftwaffe, were devoid. The Nazis did not want their soldiers’ National Socialist ideals corrupted by Christian philosophy, and undertook to isolate them from their Churches.

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Church properties were seized and clergy members were arrested and imprisoned on trite charges, often being held without due process. Regierungsrat Roth told a conference of church specialists at the Reich Main Security Office in 1941:

It has been demonstrated that it is impracticable to deal with political offenses (malicious) under normal legal procedure. Owing to the lack of political perception which still prevails among the legal authorities, suspension of this procedure must be reckoned with. The so-called “Agitator Priests” must therefore be dealt with in future by Stapo members, and, if the occasion arises, be removed to a Concentration Camp, if agreed upon by the RSHA [Reich Main Security Office].

If a priest was deemed to pose any threat to the Nazi State he was dealt with quickly and decisively. Although less serious offenses were supposed to be punished with warnings or fines, the government frequently skipped straight to short-term arrest, protective custody, and forbidding the offender to preach.

German Church property was often confiscated in the name of “wartime necessity.” Convents, monasteries, and other ecclesiastical institutions had their property appropriated, with the government paying them only a nominal rental fee meant more to prevent public reprisals than to genuinely compensate the Church for the loss of its assets. By September 1941, Roth boasted that the National Socialists had dissolved about 100 monasteries in the Reich. In a letter to Heinrich Himmler, from the RSHA Chief of Staff, it was noted:

After further preparations in which the Party Chancellery participated prominently, the Reich Minister of the Interior found a

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way which makes it possible to seize ecclesiastical premises practically without compensation and yet avoids the impression of being a measure directed against the Church.73

Because of the religious nature of many of their supporters, the Nazi Party was careful that their policies could not be criticized as attacks upon religious institutions. Their moves against the Churches had to seem as if they were taken out of necessity rather than out of spite. Often monasteries and convents were accused of secular activities outside of their religious duties. Unecclesiastical pursuits violated Nazi policy that Churches contain their activities to matters of faith, and served as justification for their closure.

The National Socialists’ attack against German Churches was far more subversive that it was in Poland, but its final aim was the same, the destruction of Christian institutions and the termination of Christian education. The strangulation of the Churches in the German State was protracted and deliberately innocuous. Measures against the Church in Germany were enacted piecemeal, as opposed to in Poland where the immediacy of the restrictions made the National Socialists’ onslaught against Christianity obvious. The Nazis sought to contain Christianity and the Churches, but in Germany they were forced to do so in a clandestine way so as not to alienate their supporters.

Christian Imagery in Nazi Propaganda

The Nazis’ misuse of Christianity extended to their propaganda, which was riddled with Christian imagery. Nazi leaders and soldiers were portrayed as religious figures typically were, bathed in light and emitting ethereal, golden glows. The women looked soft and content, and were typically posed like the Virgin Mary, cradling their infants. These depictions of ideal Germans were contrasted with the images of those the National Socialists considered Untermenschen. Jews, Communists, and Capitalists were portrayed as serpents, a classic Christian symbol of evil. The portrayal of National Socialists like saints and martyrs caused the German people to associate the Nazi cause with the work of God. Spiritual-minded propaganda images gave the Nazi campaign the aura of a religious quest, and lent it legitimacy in the minds of the Christian Germans.

Nazi propaganda artists placed the Fuehrer in religious settings, used Christian symbols in their posters, and at times referenced biblical passages in order to parallel Hitler with Christ or a Christian saint. In the poster shown in Figure 1, Adolf Hitler is shown at the head of his army. Above him, the clouds have opened and rays of light pour down upon his head. A lone dove flies directly above him. Compare this image to “Jesus’ Baptism,” by Martin Luther [Figure 2], and “The Baptism of Jesus,” by Gustave Doré [Figure 3]. The Nazi poster bears a striking resemblance to works illustrating the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan. All three of the paintings show rays of light piercing through a break in the clouds onto the subject, a dove prominently placed where the clouds part. Matthew 3:13-17 describes the baptism of Christ:
13 Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. 14 John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" 15 But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. 16 And when Jesus was baptized, he went up immediately from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and alighting on him; 17 and lo, a voice from heaven, saying, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." 74

Christians believe that when the Holy Spirit touches a person, that person is filled with the power of God or knowledge of His will. The Holy Spirit also bestows upon people great faith. The Spirit is frequently represented as light, fire, or, as in these images, as a dove. In the propaganda poster, the Nazis’ implied that Hitler had been touched by the Holy Spirit, bestowed with the power of God’s truth, and was leading his people to follow the Divine will, just as Jesus had. While both Doré and Luther’s works convey the passivity, humbleness, and spiritual nature of Christ, in the poster Hitler

is bold, militant, and determined. This image fits with the shift in German thinking from the traditional Christian doctrine to that of German Christianity, which worshiped Jesus as a soldier of God who brandished a sword rather than an olive branch. While the Nazis wanted Hitler to be associated with Christ, they did not want him to appear weak or pacifistic, qualities they abhorred and did not want glorified.

Figure 3

The right-wing magazine ‘Kladderadatsch’ published an illustration on March 22, 1936 that also meant to convey the idea that Hitler was one of God’s chosen leaders. The artist drew Hitler sowing seeds that are supposed to be the seeds of peace, and the figure of peace, an angel, looms behind him [Figure 4]. In traditional Christianity, angels were seen as harbingers of God who brought His word to the people. The angel shown here is blowing a horn as if heralding Hitler’s arrival as the new savior. When the
angel appeared to the Virgin Mary in the gospel of Luke, it was to tell her God favored her, and to give her the message of the savior’s coming. The angel in the picture here is announcing the arrival of Hitler as the bringer of peace and prosperity. In this picture Hitler has again been paralleled with the most important figure in Christianity.

Hitler was also portrayed as an intermediary between God and his people in Taust’s work, “Hitler and God.” [Figure 5] In the painting, Hitler, with a halo around his head, stands above his followers as if he were preaching to them or interpreting for them the scene before them. They are facing fires that have been formed into the shape of a swastika. The scene can be interpreted as analogous to the Biblical story in Exodus where God appears to Moses in the form of a burning bush:

2 And the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush: and he looked, and, behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed… 4 And when the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called unto him out of the midst of the bush, and said, Moses, Moses. And he said, Here am I. 75

The fires burning before the men represent the word of God, and the swastika shape shows that His message is one of obedience to the Reich. This analogy makes Hitler into the Moses figure, leading God’s chosen people to the promised land of Aryan prosperity. Taust chose to depict Hitler with a halo, a distinctly Christian symbol indicative of

sainthood. This painting conveyed the idea that Hitler and the National Socialists were leading the German people along God’s chosen path.

The Virgin Mary is seen as the archetypal Christian woman: chaste, loving, devoted to her family and God. These were all qualities Hitler wished to reinstate in German women after the raucous 1920s. Weimar Berlin had lost the morals of traditional Germany, and was filled with transvestites, cabarets, and prostitutes. According to Peter Gay, "Berlin, it is obvious, aroused powerful emotions in everyone. It delighted most, terrified some, but left no one indifferent...."76 Hitler was certainly not indifferent to the loss of morality in Germany. He wanted women to return to their place in the home and to their former virtue, and National Socialist propaganda reflected this. A poster for the NSDAP [Figure 6] shows a joyful German family gathered around their new baby. In the poster, the the wing of the Nazi eagle encircles the family, and the poster reads, “The NSDAP secures the community.” The parents are beaming and have their arms around their children. The mother was drawn the same way many artists

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typically portrayed the Virgin. She is gazing down at the infant swaddled in a white blanket, and even the white scarf wrapped around her head is reminiscent of Mary’s white veil. This woman is the epitome of the perfect Aryan mother, and she is meant to be reminiscent of the most venerated woman in Christianity. The poster is similar to “The Holy Family,” by Giulio Romano [Figure 7], which depicts the first meeting of the Christ child and John the Baptist. In Romano’s work, Mary holds the young Jesus, and looks down sweetly at the children while Joseph sits watching over them. The Nazi poster mirrors the closeness of the family and the way their arms draw the viewer’s eye in a circular path. Thus the perfect Nazi German family and the perfect Christian family were shown to be the same. The Nazis were trying to convince the German people that by supporting the National Socialist Party they were supporting the values and causes that were already sacred to them. Thus the NSDAP, the Nazi Party, which eventually wanted to rid the German state of Christianity, was portrayed as the ultimate protector of Christian values and community.
Nazi charity posters from the mid-1930s also echoed the idea that Nazi women should be similar to the Virgin Mary. The poster in Figure 8, which sought support for the Assistance Program for Mothers and Children, shows a content young mother feeding her infant. Her portrayal is remarkably similar to a portrait of the Virgin, “Madonna and Child,” by Warner Sallman [Figure 9], done in 1931, roughly the same time as the poster was printed. Even a poster for the Winter Aid Program that shows a middle-aged woman and her older son depicts the woman bathed in an ethereal light and wearing a veil [Figure 10]. These references to the Virgin in National Socialist propaganda were not unintentional. By portraying Nazi ideals in a Christian fashion, the National Socialists succeeded in intermeshing their values with those of Christianity in the minds of the German people.
As a Christian symbol, the serpent is a physical manifestation of Satan, and is used to represent evil, physical desire, and temptation. In the book of Genesis, Chapter 3, it is the serpent who beguiles Eve into eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, causing Adam’s and Eve’s expulsion from the Garden of Eden [Figure 11]. The serpent, whether as a representative of Satan or the fallen angel himself, is responsible for Adam’s and Eve’s fall from grace. The association of the serpent with Satan is continual throughout the Bible, and appears overtly in Revelations 12.9, which says, “And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world; he was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with
Nazi propaganda artists capitalized on this Christian symbol of evil by depicting Jews, Communists, and Capitalists as serpents in their works.

The Anti-Semitic cartoon in Figure 12 shows a naked woman in shackles being attacked by snakes. On the serpents the artist wrote the names of accused sex offenders, one of which was Magnus Hirschfield, a Jewish sex researcher. The Nazis frequently portrayed the Jews as perverse and immoral sexual predators who preyed on unsuspecting Aryan women. In America, the same charge was leveled against blacks by Southern white racists. Showing the Jews and blacks as being ruled by their primal instincts dehumanized them, and made them appear uncivilized and animalistic, dangerous because they cannot control their desires. The sexual predator myth also fostered fear among members of the “superior” race who feared that their blood would become contaminated with black blood or the blood of Jewish Untermenschen through rape. Now not only was the integrity of Aryan German women at stake, but also the purity of the entire Aryan race.

The serpent was not only used to represent Jews, but also ideological enemies of the Nazi Party. In Figure 13, a National Socialist poster from the early 1930s, a Nazi arm strangles a snake with the words “Marxism” and “High Finance” written on it. The caption above the picture reads, “Death to Lies.” The greatest philosophical threats to Socialism were Communism and Capitalism, which are rendered here in the form of the

serpent. The connotation, made to the viewer through the use of biblical imagery, was that these two ideologies were intrinsically corrupt, and that The National Socialists were saving Germany from them. It was during this period that the threat of Communism developing in Germany was especially great; many countries were turning to it in an attempt to pull themselves out of the depression. The Nazis found competing with the large Communist Party that had formed in Germany, and in order to defeat it they portrayed the Communists as villains, even blaming them for the Reichstag fire in 1933. Capitalists as well as Communists disapproved of Fascism, believing it to be dictatorial and against democratic principles. There were three major economic and social ideologies during the 1930s: Communism, Fascism, and Democracy, which went hand in hand with Capitalism. The National Socialists saw Capitalism and Communism as threats to the security of their State, and attempted to destroy their followings in Germany. They used Christian imagery in their propaganda to convey the idea that these ideologies were inherently evil, and that they would destroy Germany unless stifled by the Nazi Party.

German Christianity taught its followers that to die for one’s country was to die a martyr’s death. This doctrine is reflected in the poster in Figure 14. The most prominent Christian symbol, the cross, is used to equate the deaths of National Socialists for
Germany with the crucifixion of Christ for humanity. “The text translates as: ‘Over 300 National Socialists died for you- murdered by Marxist subhumanity!!! For work and food vote Adolf Hitler List 2.’ The reference is to Nazis killed during the political battles on the streets and in political meetings.”

The poster contended that these men suffered and died to save the German people just as Christ did for his people. Here religion was replaced with political ideology, Christ with Nazi soldiers, and the Jews with the Communists.

Propaganda artists hostile to the National Socialists also used Christian symbols, especially the cross, to convey their perceptions of the Reich. A 1932 poster that advocated the SDP [Figure 15], the German Communist Party, shows a worker roped to a swastika in a way emblematic of Christ’s crucifixion. The caption reads, “The Worker in the Reich of the Swastika.” The implication was that the National Socialist Party would crucify the German worker. John Heartfield, an artist openly critical of both the Weimar Republic and the Nazi Reich, used the Christian cross in

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several of his commentaries on the Nazi government. In Figure 16, Heartfield drew Ludwig Mueller, the National Socialist Reichbishop, adding weight to Christ’s cross by drilling planks to it which morph it into a swastika. The message written on it states, “For the establishment of the State Church the Cross was still not heavy enough.” The allegation here was that the Nazification of the Christian Churches in Germany made the work of the Churches more difficult then it had previously been. Considered in terms of the Protestant Church, Heartfield’s message was that the Nazification of the Evangelical churches had changed Jesus’ message into a perverted version of the original one, and that it would now be even more difficult for followers to spread the true meaning of Christianity. Looking at the poster from the Catholic point of view, Heartfield was criticizing the restrictions the Nazis put upon the Catholic Church that hindered its ability to grow and thrive within the Reich. Heartfield also created the poster in Figure 17. It shows four bloody hatchets roped together to form a swastika, and the words read, “The old motto in the ‘new’ Reich: blood and iron.” Heartfield clearly disapproved of the militancy and persecution that characterized the
Third Reich. The bloody swastika is reminiscent of Christ’s torture and death upon the cross, and equated the Nazis with Christ’s murderers. Another Heartfield poster from AIZ, January 1934, depicts Ludwig Mueller reviewing his priests the same way a general reviews his troops [Figure 18]. The priests are carrying crosses that have been made to look like swastikas. The poster was created in response to the Nazification of the Protestant Church. In Heartfield’s opinion priests had changed from messengers of God to instruments of the Nazi Party. Propaganda artists who opposed the National Socialists used Christian imagery in their works to rekindle the people’s traditional Christian values of tolerance, love, and acceptance. They portrayed the Nazi Party as a political faction that would crucify the people and suppress Christian religion and its morals.

Totalitarian art depicted Hitler as religious art did saints, showing the Nazi’s desire to develop National Socialism into a secular religion that would take the place of Christianity in Germany. Images of Adolf Hitler were presented in different forms in Germany, meant to appeal to different sectors of the population. The Nazis needed the
support of the large number of German Christians living in the Reich, and the images directed at these Germans depicted Hitler in a religious fashion. German Christians venerated the portraits of the Fuehrer with the same adulation they had previously reserved for religious icons. The Council of the German Evangelical Church sent a memorandum to Hitler in 1936 complaining, “We must inform the Fuehrer of our embarrassment that the forms in which he is worshipped are often identical to the forms of worship of God alone. Only a few years ago the Fuehrer did not accept that portrayal of him should appear on church altars… Today he is portrayed as a national high-priest and even as an intermediary between God and the people.”79 This response from the German Christians was exactly what the National Socialists were hoping to achieve through the use of propaganda targeted to Christians. Hitler was no longer merely a secular leader; he was also God’s chosen messenger. The Jews were depicted as serpents, fundamentally evil and cursed by God, the irreconcilable enemies of true Christians. These images worked upon the hearts and minds of the Christian faithful in Germany, and sparked a dedication to the National Socialist Party driven by a force akin to a religious fervor. If the German people could be made to view the Nazi Party as a religious and political element, it would likely break down their allegiance to their old Christian faith and eventually allow the National Socialists to usurp Christianity’s position the people’s spiritual leader and destroy the Churches.

Conclusion

Although many ideological Nazi purists considered Christian values to be detrimental to the National Socialist State, Christianity nonetheless became an important tool in their propaganda campaign. The National Socialists manipulated Christianity in order to use the German people’s religious nature to their advantage. Christian images figured prominently in National Socialist posters and Nazi speeches were peppered with religious language and biblical references. To the German citizens, the Nazi Party became more than a simple political party, it became the religious champion of the Aryan people. Its racial cleansing was portrayed as a holy crusade, and Hitler took Christ’s place as the Christian savior. The people were encouraged to extend their devotion from God alone to God and Country.

The Nazis employed religious imagery in their propaganda posters and paintings so that people would subliminally associate National Socialism with religion. They connected Hitler to great Christian prophets, Moses and often Christ. People were supposed to see Hitler as a savior and messenger, someone they felt compelled to devote their lives to. Hitler’s Final Solution came to be seen not as perverse ethnic cleansing, but rather a religious crusade inspired by God. The National Socialists also used Christian imagery to imply that their values were essentially Christian; they depicted German mothers posed like the Madonna, and Aryan families bathed in holy light. The cross evokes strong emotions in Christians, representing martyrdom, sacrifice, and supreme love. The Nazis used cross imagery to show their dead as men who had died not for secular reasons, but to protect the sanctity and future of the Aryan people. The serpent, a biblical metaphor for Satan, was used as to symbolize the Reich’s enemies,
Jews, Communists, and Capitalists. By usurping traditional Christian images for use in their propaganda, the National Socialists played upon the German people’s religious convictions, and garnered mass support for their cause.

Christianity was a political tool for the Nazis, one that they would use while convenient and eliminate when it was no longer useful. Hitler believed the eventual eradication of Christianity was essential to the security of his Reich. He had succeeded in manipulating German Christianity into a form that was more compatible with National Socialist principles, but the tenants of conventional Christianity were inimical to those of the Reich, and he could not risk having the old Christian principles of love and tolerance resurface. In conquered Poland, the Nazis immediately instituted religious reforms meant to strangle Christianity. A document prepared by the Office of Strategic Services Research and Analysis Branch for Major William Coogan on July 10, 1945, contains this report on the persecution of the Christian Churches by the Nazi Party:

Throughout the period of National Socialist rule, religious liberties in Germany and in the occupied areas were seriously impaired. The various Christian Churches were systematically cut off from effective communication with the people. They were confined as far as possible to the performance of narrowly religious functions, and even within this narrow sphere were subjected to as many hindrances as the Nazis dared to impose. Those results were accomplished partly by legal and partly by illegal and terroristic means.  

The Nazis feared the authority Christian Churches had over their parishioners. The Party demanded utter and complete loyalty from its members, and a Christian was bound to obey the laws of his or her Church. The Catholic Church in particular

represented a threat to the Nazi Party, as Catholics were taught to accept papal infallibility, a belief that God protects the Pope from error when he speaks on matters of faith or morality. This doctrine made the Pope an extremely dangerous man, since if he chose to condemn the actions of the Nazi Party, German Catholics would feel compelled to follow suit. Hitler realized he could not trust the Catholic Church, as it felt no allegiance to a particular nation. He worried that, “If one day the State’s policy ceased to suit Rome or the clergy, the priests would turn against the State, as they are doing now. History provides us examples that should make us careful.”

Hitler used his own Catholicism to defend himself from claims that he meant to destroy the Catholic Church. He publicly attended Catholic Masses and observed Catholic traditions, but covertly he tightened the National Socialists’ control over the German Catholic Church.

In an April 19, 1936 broadcast, Joseph Goebbels, Hitler’s Minister of Propaganda, told the German people, “We have a feeling that Germany has been transformed into a great house of God, including all classes, professions and creeds, where the Fuehrer as our mediator stood before the throne of the Almighty.” As chief of Nazi propaganda, it was Goebbel’s task to present Nazi ideology to the people in a way that they would find favorable. Having been raised by devout Catholic parents, Goebbels was well aware of the religiosity of the German people, and was determined to use it to help secure their support for the National Socialist government. Goebbels often referred to Hitler as

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“either Christ or St. John.” Religious Nazi officials purported that Hitler had a special knowledge of God’s plan, and that his work was divinely inspired. The German people were led to believe they were following the path of a saint.

Julius Streicher, an editor and contributor to the weekly newspaper Der Stuermer, an anti-Semitic, pro-Nazi publication, used religion to bolster German feelings of anti-Semitism. A photograph of a Jew in his paper was labeled “Satan,” and many of the cartoons he printed alluded to the Jews as conspirators of the devil. Streicher’s justification for the Holocaust, given to the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg in 1945, had its roots in the gospel of John. He rationalized the acts of the Nazis by referencing this biblical passage, in which Jesus addresses the Jews:

42 Jesus said unto them, If God were your Father, ye would love me: for I proceeded forth and came from God: neither came I of myself, but he sent me.  
43 Why do ye not understand my speech? even because ye cannot hear my word.  
44 Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is a liar, and the father of it.

Streicher told the court, “If the danger of the reproduction of that curse of God in the Jewish blood is finally to come to an end, then there is only one way-- the extermination of that people whose father is the devil.” This was precisely the mind-set the Nazis hoped to instill in their followers. They wanted the German people to believe in the truth of the Nazi Party as fervently as they believed in the doctrines of the Church.

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Hermann Goering, the Commander in Chief of the Luftwaffe and Hitler’s designated successor, said, “God gave the savior to the German people. We have faith, deep and unshakeable faith, that he [Hitler] was sent to us by God to save Germany.” Religious rhetoric such as this convinced the German people that Hitler was fulfilling a divine mission and leading the Aryan people to their destiny.

Adolf Hitler reinforced this belief in his oratory, promising to protect the sanctity of religion, the rights of Churches, and affirming his unshakable faith in God. In an address to the Reichstag on March 23, 1933, Hitler declared:

> While the government is determined to carry through the political and moral purging of our public life, it is creating and insuring prerequisites for a truly religious life. The government sees in both Christian confessions the factors most important for the maintenance of our Folkdom. It will respect agreements concluded between them and the states. However, it expects that its work will meet with a similar appreciation. The government will treat all other denominations with equal objective justice. However, it can never condone that belonging to a certain denomination or to a certain race might be regarded as a license to commit or tolerate crimes. The Government will devote its care to the sincere living together of the Church and the State.

Hitler attended Catholic Masses and claimed to be working to strengthen the Protestant Churches by uniting them into one robust *Reichskirche*. In public he appeared to be an ardent supporter of Christianity, but in private he revealed, “Fascism may make its peace with the Church in God’s name. I will do that too. Why not! This will not keep me from exterminating Christianity from Germany root and branch. One is either a Christian or a

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German. One cannot be both.** Hitler could not espouse this view publicly for fear of losing his popularity. Instead he set about to surreptitiously undermine the Churches and refocus the Germans’ faith from Christianity to National Socialism. In the Reichskirche, religious banners were swapped with Nazi flags, Sunday suits with uniforms, and religious processions with military marches. The Vatican had signed a Concordat with the National Socialist government, and during Catholic Masses, prayers were read for the security and future of the Reich. To the public, it appeared that the Nazis had the blessing of both confessions.

The National Socialists planned more than to simple manipulate and restrain the Churches. When they felt the citizens were ready, they meant to rid the Reich of Christianity, and replace it with a National Socialist religion. They wanted the German people to become so accustomed to the authority of the Reich that they would eventually be able to condemn Christians as Christians, to make people see the practice of the Christian religion as a treasonable activity. In Poland the Nazis immediately began anti-Christian policies. Christians were persecuted and suppressed, and Christian clerics suffered the same fate as the Jews. They were targeted for abuse by the Nazi soldiers, transported to Concentration Camps, tormented, and murdered. Polish priests were considered enemies of the Reich. Christians Churches, especially Catholic ones, were forced to follow strict regulations concerning worship times, membership, and religious education. The laws were oppressive to the point of stifling. The Nazis, who had proclaimed themselves defenders of the faith and soldiers of God, treated Christians in

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Poland with the same contempt they had previously reserved for Jews and Communists. The Nazis’ policies in Poland demonstrated their ultimate desire to eradicate Christianity in the Reich. Although Hitler claimed to respect Christianity and practice it himself, in reality he was preparing to purge Germany of it, and with it all philosophies that rivaled National Socialist doctrine. In order to preserve the security of the Third Reich, Hitler had to abolish any institutions that could potentially mitigate his power over the German people. The Christian Church was one of these, and although Hitler had used Christianity to gain the support and devotion of the German people, his Final Solution for the Churches was the same as his Final Solution for the Jews: elimination.
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LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS


