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Editors

Donald Q. Cannon
Brent L. Top

**Department of Church History and Doctrine
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“When the Wicked Rule the People Mourn”: The Experiences of German Saints during World War II

Robert C. Freeman

The memories of World War II are terrible for members of the Church who lived through it and for people everywhere. The devastation inflicted upon the nations of the earth during the awful conflict made it the bloodiest war in modern human history. In all nations of Europe, people both in and out of the Church suffered greatly as did those in many other countries. In some places, such as Russia and Poland, millions died as a result of the violence. Germany also paid a tremendous price for its role as chief instigator of the hostilities in Europe. Over four million of her sons and daughters died, and many cities and towns were utterly destroyed. For German members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the tribulations of the war were difficult indeed.

At the time of the outbreak of war in Europe, the Church had a strong presence in Germany. By the end of the 1930s the Church population in Germany ranked third in total membership, behind the United States and Canada.¹ Against the growing evidence that war loomed on the horizon, Church President Heber J. Grant and several other leaders toured Germany and key European nations during the summer of 1937. At each stop President Grant assessed the progress of the Church and warned members of the need to rely less on the American missionaries.²

In September 1938 indications that the outbreak of war might be imminent prompted Church leaders in Salt Lake City to evacuate American and other missionaries from Germany.³ However, the immediate threat of hostilities soon dissipated, and the missionaries were allowed to return.⁴ This evacuation served as a dress rehearsal

of the actual evacuation ordered by the First Presidency one year later.⁵ Beginning on 25 August 1939 and continuing through the next week, approximately 150 full-time missionaries were safely withdrawn from Germany. The last missionaries arrived in Copenhagen, Denmark, on 1 September 1939, the day of the German invasion of Poland.⁶

Several weeks after the evacuation of missionaries, on 25 September 1939, President Thomas E. McKay, who presided over the Church in Europe throughout most of the war, issued a letter of encouragement to the German members:

We pray sincerely to our Heavenly Father, that He might protect and bless those that have been called to arms and that He might strengthen those who have remained at home for the additional responsibilities that rest upon your shoulders. Pray, live a pure life, keep the word of wisdom, pay your tithing, visit and participate in all the meetings, keep free from finding fault and bearing false witness, sustain those that have been called to preside and it is our promise that the Lord will guide and lead you in all things and that you, even in the midst of afflictions and difficulties will find joy and satisfaction. Be always mindful that we are engaged in the work of the Lord and that Jesus is the Christ. He is our head, we are members of His Church. His gospel, as it has been revealed to the Prophet Joseph Smith will be victorious.⁷

In January 1940 new presidents were called to preside over the missions in Germany and Switzerland.⁸ The new leadership was called to replace the American leaders who returned to the United States early in 1940. The new leaders included Herbert Klopfer and Christian Heck as acting presidents of the East and West German Missions respectively. In spite of the hardships of the war, these leaders inspired the members to remain faithful.

Among the most difficult challenges that confronted the Church in Germany were the difficulties associated with communications. As in several other European nations, Church members in Germany were essentially cut off from Salt Lake City for most of the war. Additionally, in September 1940, the monthly Church publication *Der Stern*, which had been in publication since 1869, was halted for the duration of the war.⁹ Suspension of the paper came in response to the Nazi government's wartime prohibition against the printing of independent magazines and books.

During the early period of the war, Germany's successes were many and conditions of the Church in Germany remained fairly stable. While food and other commodities became increasingly scarce, Church programs generally operated without significant interruption. In 1942, for example, the Hamburg District sponsored a joyful centennial celebration of the founding of the Church's Relief Society. Ironically, general Church and stake celebrations of the same event in the United States were canceled, while the event in Hamburg drew over five hundred Saints, making it one of the largest commemorations in the Church.¹⁰

In stark contrast to these joyful celebrations, just one month earlier, seventeen-year-old Latter-day Saint Helmuth Hübener and close friends Karl-Heinz Schnibbe and Rudi Wobbe were arrested by German authorities for distributing anti-Nazi leaflets.¹¹ While Karl-Heinz Schnibbe and Rudi Wobbe were given lengthy prison terms, Helmuth Hübener was eventually beheaded at Plötzensee Prison, near Berlin, on 27 October 1942.¹² Hübener died a martyr's death and in the years after the war was revered as a hero.

Another Latter-day Saint civilian who suffered under the Third Reich was Jewish member Salomon Schwartz, an active member of the Hamburg-Barmbeck Branch who was incarcerated in a concentration camp at Theresienstadt.¹³ The experience of Salomon Schwartz was particularly lamentable because leaders of the Hamburg-Barmbeck Branch had posted a sign over the entrance to the branch building that read "Jews Are Not Allowed." Although typical of other churches and businesses during that period, the message provided a sad commentary on the circumstances of the time.

The Feverish War at the Battlefield

While exact numbers are not available, hundreds of German Saints wore the uniform of the Third Reich during the war. For those engaged in the fighting, the experiences were often too difficult to describe. By the end of the war, nearly five hundred German Latter-day Saint soldiers died in battle and many more were injured.¹⁴ Whenever news of the death of a Latter-day Saint soldier was received by family and branch members at home, special memorial services were convened. In March 1943 Friedrich Biehl, former

president of the West German Mission, became one of the first of several key leaders who died during the war.¹⁵

Experiences of those involved in the fighting varied greatly, but some of the most harrowing stories told were by those fighting on the Russian front. One German Saint who fought along the Russian front was Walter K. Rohloff, who described the experience of arriving at his “new home”:

My new home was a hole in the ground, covered with big logs and plenty of dirt on the top. The “Bunker” as we called that place, was connected to the “Hauptkampf linie” (front line or trench). A squad of about six to eight men occupied a bunker. I was placed in a squad and introduced myself to everyone. One of the men was standing guard, the others were sitting in the bunker playing cards. When my turn came, I had to stand guard by a machine gun. From that place I could see, as much as darkness permitted, the no-man’s land. About forty yards in front of me, we had a barbed wire entanglement. I couldn’t see the enemy line, but I could see the flash from their rifles. Sometimes the Russians would shoot with the “Stalinorgel,” a rocket gun which could fire many rockets at once. When a rocket hit the ground, the detonation looked like a big mushroom of fire. It was pretty to see, and while watching that, I got careless. I felt the touch of a hand on my back. My corporal had come up behind me. He reminded me of the danger and that I should protect myself. He told me the Stalinorgel is not very accurate, makes lots of noise, and seldom hits its target. While we were not bombarded with it, it could still stray over to hit us. The next morning I went along the trench and visited the place where the rockets had hit our line. There were the first dead I saw, and I told myself to be more careful in the future. It made a deep impression on me.¹⁶

Another young German Saint, Jared H. B. Kobs, told of a violent encounter with the enemy in the terrible winter of 1944–45:

Our rifles were frozen again and our ammunition almost out. And when the nerves break down there is nothing left but to admit that one can’t handle the situation and shoot oneself. I was ready to do so[.] I had one hand grenade left to blow myself up. I thought better this way than be murdered from the Russians or be run over from a Russian tank. I asked my comrade who was in my hole if we could pray together? The answer was “who believes in God?” I took my helmet from my head and put it on top of my small shovel to find out where the enemy was. . . . It took just a minute and I had a shot thru my helmet. I

prayed by myself as I was taught by my mother—and suddenly I heard a voice saying to me, get out of here—get out of here. It was really suicidal to do so. But as fast as I could do so I was climbing out of the hole and running like a rabbit zigzag from one tree to the other tree to cover myself. O[h], I hear it still today that shooting toward me, which hit mostly into the heavy big trees. I really didn't know where to run to, because Russian tanks (T34) came already from behind us. Finally I saw a Ranger station (cottage) close by, and was running to the Ranger station. I went inside in disbelief. I saw the casualty rates, the seriously wounded downstairs in the basement. I must say catastrophic the figures were irreversible and damning. But there was no time for me to think about it, just follow the voice to get out of here on my own thru the forest. On my way out I met another German soldier and another wounded soldier on the roadside. We made a human chair to sit on our hands and carried him along the road till a German tank came toward us, which took the wounded fellow to the nearest Field hospital. On our way out we heard the Ranger station and our own unit is surrendered by Russian troops, there is no way to go back and I never heard anything anymore from our company or battalions.¹⁷

Although death and destruction were everywhere, many of the Latter-day Saint German soldiers felt divine assistance amidst the danger. Latter-day Saint Philipp J. Bauer, a member of the German Army, described pleading for divine protection during one of his first combat experiences:

I was scared, scared to death. I thought this would be my end. I prayed to the Lord like I prayed never before. I promised him, if I would come out alive of this terrible shooting, I would serve him and do whatever he asked me all my life. I never forgot this incident, and always remember this promise when I need to.¹⁸

The story of another Church member, Horst K. Hilbert, provides a similar example of divine intervention experienced by other Latter-day Saint soldiers. Hilbert's unit had been deployed to the Russian front where many German soldiers experienced horrible conditions. While on guard duty one day, he and his comrades were attacked by the Russians. The only shelter he had was a little shack with a straw roof:

I was very afraid and since I was forbidden to leave the post, I wanted to pray. I could feel the power of the destroyer. But I could not utter

one word of prayer, my tongue felt paralyzed. To think, that the first words in my life were prayers on my mother's lap. All I was able to say was: if my mother could pray for me right now, so the Lord might hear the prayer of a righteous woman. With this thought I looked to the east, and felt prompted to look north. When I did this and turned, a bullet passed and in passing hit the coat at my stomach. Had I not turned, it would have struck my stomach. After this incident the shooting stopped. Some days later I received a letter from my mother. In this letter she wrote me, that in the night of January 6 she woke hearing me call her Mama, also she heard the sound of shooting. She got up quickly, woke up my four sisters and said: we have to pray fast, Horst is in mortal danger and needs our prayers. The five women knelt down, and mother pleaded with the Lord to keep His protecting Hand over me. After the prayer, my mother told my sisters to go back to sleep and be of good cheer—Horst has been in danger, and the Lord has helped him.¹⁹

During an assault of Allied bombers during an air raid in June 1944, German Latter-day Saint Wilhelm Krisch responded to spiritual promptings which he later credited for saving his life:

The first thing I did that afternoon was to dig a hole, so that when enemy airplanes came I could protect myself from the bombing attacks. There was a row of trees. In between the trees were shrubs. Some foxholes were already dug there. Others probably already had been there, so that they had dug the holes. I happened to be the first one in the group to arrive there. I stood by the foxhole. I did not know if I should enter the foxhole. It was as if someone said to me, "Here come the enemy bombers." At first I did not know what I should do. I went in and out of the hole. How many times I went in and out of the hole, I do not know. I had no peace, I had to come out. It was as if someone had said to me, "There is going to be a direct hit from enemy bombers in this hole."²⁰

Krisch described digging another foxhole with his bare and bleeding hands and thus gained protection during the succeeding days. Those who used the first hole he abandoned were killed by a direct hit by Allied bombers. Reflecting on his feelings of protection, Krisch felt that his life was preserved for a special mission.

The Allied invasion of Normandy in June 1944 was a key turning point of the European war. One of the Latter-day Saints present on D-Day was a German by the name of John L. Flade. Flade