

**Regional Studies
in
Latter-day Saint
Church History

Europe**

Editors

Donald Q. Cannon
Brent L. Top

**Department of Church History and Doctrine
Brigham Young University
Provo, Utah
2003**

Deliverer or Oppressor: Missionaries' Views of Hitler during the 1930s

Jessie L. Embry

North Ogden native Bertis L. Embry, my father, served a mission for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Germany from 1935 to 1938. As a historian I have often wondered what it was like for him to be in Germany when Adolf Hitler rose to power just before the outbreak of World War II. When I asked him that question in an oral history interview in 1981, my father recalled that while his mother was “actually very scared,” he was not really concerned when he received his call. “I thought it would be an interesting thing to do. I didn’t have misgivings. I didn’t know anything about Germany. I had heard of Hitler but why and how and where [I was called to serve a mission] didn’t make any difference.”¹

Even after he had been in Germany for a year, he was not especially concerned. He wrote to his parents: “You wrote that Brother Card was so worried about his son coming over here. You don’t have to worry. If there was any danger the missionaries would not be sent here. . . . We are trying to do the work of the Lord, and so long as we do our duty we haven’t anything to worry about.”² But he also recalled in the oral history that missionary work was “difficult because Hitler was against all the churches.” He even called that time in Germany “a day of the anti-Christ.”³ His comments reconfirmed my negative views of Hitler.

Later I found out that not all missionaries who served in Germany during the 1930s shared my father’s views of the Nazi regime. I was shocked when I interviewed other missionaries who compared some of Hitler’s views with Mormon programs and claimed that Hitler had declared the Mormon Church and the

National Socialist party the two most perfect organizations on the earth.⁴

These comments piqued my interest, and I decided to examine the views of Latter-day Saint missionaries of Hitler during the 1930s. Recognizing that this would be a limited research project, I focused on American missionaries' opinions of Hitler. Other very interesting papers could be done on the LDS German missionaries and members during the same time period.

What I found after examining a number of sources was that the American missionaries had mixed feelings about Hitler. They received certain favors, but they also were limited in their work. They saw virtues in some of Hitler's arguments, but they also recognized weaknesses. But I also found that these responses were not limited to Latter-day Saints; most churches had mixed feelings about Hitler, and Hitler gave confused messages to religious organizations. This paper will explore Hitler's relationships with churches and then focus on the missionaries' views of the relationship between the The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the Nazi government.

Hitler and Religions

When Hitler first came to power, he spoke positively about churches in general. In 1933 he declared, "The new state wants the church. Not to make a pliable tool of her, but because it knows where the foundations of a people are laid."⁵ However, he supported a German church for Germans rather than any of the number of religions that could be found in the country at the time, explaining that Germany needed "a Christian church in the midst of the German people when it is a Church acting on behalf of the German people, helping the German people in selfless service to recognize and carry out its God-given calling."⁶ Hitler attempted to encourage such a national church when he spoke in favor of a church election in July 1933. His comments, however, prompted a negative response from German church leaders, who called for a unified and centralized church but defined the new church in very traditional terms. That was his only attempt to align himself with a German church.⁷

Although Hitler did not speak in support of a German church again, he continued to comment about religion. His statements sometimes seemed to contradict each other. Some seemed to be very negative about churches in general; others seemed to hold out a carrot of support to religions. A couple of statements regarding youth organizations dramatize his comments. In 1936 Roy Welker, president of the German-Austrian Mission, went with Elmer Peterson, an agricultural specialist visiting from Utah, to talk with the German officials. They were told "that as soon as the Churches were able to take care of the youth of Germany as [they] should, which up to now it had failed to do, the government would be willing to turn the care of [them] to the Churches." After making this comment, the mission manuscript history continued, "These are very significant statements from the officials of the Government since the present trend of the German government is to keep a rigid control of its youth."⁸ A year later though Hitler explained in a speech: "There is only one German people, and therefore there can be only one German youth. . . . This Reich stands and it will build itself up in the future upon its Youth. And this new Reich will give its Youth to no one, but will itself take the Youth and will give [them] its own education and training."⁹

Hitler and Catholics

One of the classic examples of Hitler's relationships with other churches was with the Catholic Church. Hitler had been baptized Catholic and denied rumors that he was leaving the Catholic Church to become a Protestant.¹⁰ In 1933 he signed a concordat with the Catholic Church allowing it to continue and maintain its properties and activities as long as they were "religious, cultural, or charitable." The agreement included provisions that the German youth programs would not prevent Catholic youth from attending church and "that nothing incompatible with their religious and moral convictions and duties will be urged upon them."¹¹ Some of the Catholic students supported Hitler in the early 1930s. In 1933 the Catholic Student Union argued: "It is the destiny and the will of the Catholic Students Union to embody and disseminate the

idea of the Third Reich. . . . Only the powerful National Socialist State, rising out of the Revolution, can bring about for us the re-Christianization of our culture.”¹²

The Catholic Church leaders were not as convinced though. There was some concern with the first concordat that the Catholics would lose their youth organizations;¹³ and those fears were confirmed. As the pope argued in 1937: “No one has the slightest intention of putting any obstacles in the way of the pursuit by the youth of Germany . . . of inviolable loyalty to the fatherland. What we do oppose and what we must oppose is the deliberate and carefully fostered contradiction which is being opened up between these educational objectives and religious ones. . . . He who sings the song of allegiance to his earthly fatherland, must not become a deserter and traitor by disloyalty to his God, his church, and his eternal fatherland.”¹⁴ As a result, some Catholic priests were arrested for “moral indecencies.” As my father recalled in 1937 the Catholics “were warned not to go making any more statements about the German courts or that all the high officials would be made to answer a lot of questions that might prove embarrassing.”¹⁵

Hitler and “Sects”

If Nazi Germany was a difficult time for Lutherans and Catholics, the two prominent churches in the country at the time, the government was even more demanding for smaller religious organizations. The National Socialist government closely investigated what were referred to as sects, complaining that members had contact with Communists, Free Masons, Jews, and international groups and refused to give the German greeting.¹⁶ According to historian Christine Elizabeth King, who studied five smaller religions in Germany during the 1930s, including the Mormons, “By 1933 each sect found itself forced to clarify what survival meant for its members and what it, as a group, held dear and what it was prepared to sacrifice.”¹⁷ As my father recalled: “People called us a sect as they do now. Most people in Germany were either Lutheran or Catholic. There was not much in between, and none of the churches were very strong because Hitler was against all the churches. The Jehovah Witnesses had been completely forbidden to hold meetings or do