

A Timeline for Bonhoeffer and Confessing Church

1906: *Feb 4:* Dietrich and twin sister, Sabine, born in Breslau

1912 Bonhoeffer family move to Berlin

1913 Dietrich enters grammar school after early years of home schooling

1918 Oldest brother, Walter, killed in World War I

1920 At 14, decides he will be a theologian

1921 Confirmed at Grunewald Church, Berlin

1923 Begins theological studies at Tübingen University

1924 Travels to Rome and North Africa with brother Klaus; Begins studies at Berlin University

1927 Receives licentiate in theology, *summa cum laude*; defends doctoral thesis, *Sanctorum Communio*

1928 Assistant pastor of congregation in Barcelona, Spain

1929 Assistant in systematic theology department at Berlin University

1930 Second dissertation, *Act and Being*, qualifies him for teaching position; *July 31:* first public lecture; *Sept. 5:* begins year of study at Union Theological Seminary in New York

1931 *June:* Returns from US after a trip to Mexico with his friend, the French pacifist Jean Lasserre; *July:* meets theologian Karl Barth; *Aug.:* appointed lecturer in theology at Berlin University; *Sept.:* appointed youth secretary of the World Alliance for Promoting International Friendship through the Churches; *Oct.:* appointed chaplain at Technical College, Berlin (serves until 1933); *Nov. 15:* ordained; during this period, “becomes a Christian.”

1932 Teaches confirmation class in poor section of Berlin Takes part in ecumenical conferences in Germany, Czechoslovakia, and Switzerland.

1933

January 30: Hitler is installed as Chancellor.

Feb. 1: Bonhoeffer's radio broadcast on the "Führer principle" cut off the air.

Feb. 27: Reichstag Fire

Feb. 28: Reichstag Fire Edict creates security state situation.

March 4: The US Federal Council of Churches issues a statement condemning "the persecution of Jews in Germany."

March 6-10: Ecumenical Meeting in Dassel

April 1: Hitler announces Day of Nazi national boycott of all Jewish Businesses. The same day, the "Aryan Clause" Civil Service legislation bans Jews from public employment.

April 3-4: German Christian Reich Church Conference promotes "synchronization" of Church and State, adoption of Führer principle and Aryan paragraph against "alien" blood in the pulpit. This spurs a counter-movement, "The Young Reformation," with former U-Boat Captain, now pastor Martin Niemöller involved as a leader, saying: "We confess our faith in the Holy Spirit, and therefore reject, as a matter of principle, the exclusion of non-Aryans from the Church, because it is based on confusion between State and Church. The State is supposed to judge, and the Church is supposed to save."

Bonhoeffer's article "The Church and the Jewish Question" undermines traditional "Two Kingdoms" theology, which doesn't even allow for government to be wrong, and posits three church responses to state action: "question," "service to victims," and "direct political action" to "seize the wheel."

April 25: Meeting to draft constitution of newly united German Evangelical Church. Hitler makes sure his man Ludwig Müller is there.

May 1: Hitler's May Day speech reassures Protestant Church leaders. He sends 'movement fighting troops' in uniform to attend church services, thus making pastors feel that Hitler might be starting a "people's mission" to make the nation Christian again.

May 25: Draft constitution is published.

May 27: The German Evangelical Church attempts to elect Bodelschwingh to Reich Bishop. Müller claims that since the constitution isn't in force, the election doesn't count.

Then a procedural error allows the Nazi Minister of Culture and Religious Affairs, Bernhard Rust, to declare that the church had transgressed its legal limits and therefore lost its entitlement to conduct its own legal affairs. He orders August Jäger to take over church affairs. Jäger allows SA to take over church offices, but a strong backlash causes Hitler to call them off. Bonhoeffer and Hildebrandt suggest direct action—since the state has interfered in the church, it is the State that has violated the “Two Kingdoms” ideal, so the Church can respond by refusing to perform any church funerals. The leaders balk at this idea.

July 14: Hitler personally orders elections to be held for the leadership of the new Protestant Church, to be held July 23. That same day Bishop Theodor Heckel, offers Bonhoeffer a pastorate in London.

July 20: Pius XI, signs the Concordat, an agreement with the Third Reich not to interfere, in exchange for assurances that Catholic Church will not be attacked.

July 22: Hitler makes a radio address saying he expected a vote in the church election ‘in favor of the forces that are exemplified by the German Christians who stand so firmly upon the foundation of the National Socialist State.’ He made it the duty of all good Christians who were not Catholics to cast their vote.

July 23: The German Christians get 70% of the vote. Ludwig Müller is appointed Hitler's representative for the Protestant churches and installed as Reich Bishop of the first-ever national church of Germany.

August 15-25: Bonhoeffer, Sasse, Vischer, et al., at work on Bethel Confession, intending to contradict the heresies of the German Christians. But Vischer's strong clause against anti-Semitism and the establishment of racial rules in the church is so watered down by the confession's reviewers that Bonhoeffer withdraws his signature.

September 5: “The Brown Synod”—Brown-shirted German Christians overwhelm General Synod of the Old Prussian Union Church. Throw out any confessional stand, put in new leaders, install Aryan Paragraph, demand “unconditional support for the National Socialist State and the German Protestant Church’ from all clergy and office holders.

September 15-20: At the World Alliance Conference in Sofia, Bulgaria, Bonhoeffer confidentially informs prominent participants about what is happening in Germany.

September 21: Bonhoeffer, with Martin Niemöller, organizes Pastors’ Emergency League, which opposes the “Aryan Clause” excluding Jews from ministry, 2000 pastors quickly sign on.

September 27: Bonhoeffer and others protest against the Wittenberg ‘National Synod’ of the church, dominated by German Christians. Hitler outfoxes the PEL by not allowing the synod to adopt the Aryan Cause, thus stealing a way the PEL could have used to raise international ire. Once again Bonhoeffer is frustrated because a golden opportunity for public protest is resisted by the PEL.

October 17: Begins ministering to two German churches in London.

Oct. 17: Bonhoeffer leaves for England to pastor 2 churches for Germans. There he develops a strong relationship with Church of England Bishop Bell, one of the leaders of the Ecumenical Movement.

November 27-30: Attends conference of expat pastors in Bradford, England, where he tells his colleagues about the situation in Germany.

1934

February 8-9: Heckel, the Reich Church’s International rep, goes to London but fails to persuade the German pastors in England and Archbishop Bell to stay out of the Church struggle.

February 13: Bonhoeffer in Hanover for meeting of PEL Council of Brethren.

March 6-7: Heckel summons Bonhoeffer and demands he cut off his ecumenical contacts. Bonhoeffer refuses.

May 10: Bishop Bell, after detailed consultation with Bonhoeffer, sends his “Ascensiontide Pastoral Letter” on the situation of the German Church to the member churches of the Universal Council for Life and Work.

May 29–31: The Confessing Church is organized at Barmen, Germany, and the Barmen Declaration is adopted, insisting that Christ, not the Führer, is the head of the church.

August 2: German President Paul von Hindenburg dies. Hitler proclaimed as both Chancellor and President.

August 23–30: Bonhoeffer delivers speech on peace to ecumenical conference at Fanø, Denmark.

October: At Bonhoeffer’s urging, Bishop Bell and Archbishop Lang protest against aggravation of the German Church struggle by church ‘legal administrator Jäger. Hitler has Jäger dismissed.

November: Bonhoeffer leads the expatriate German congregations in England to secede from the Reich Church.

1935

April 29: Bonhoeffer returns from England to direct the seminary for the Confessing Church in Zingst on the Baltic Sea.

June 24: Seminary relocates to Finkenwalde. Bonhoeffer publishes influential article on “The Confessing Church and the Ecumenical Movement.”

September: The Nuremberg Laws are passed, canceling citizenship for German Jews.

December: Himmler declares all examinations for the Confessing Church invalid, all training there invalid and all participants liable to arrest.

1936

Declared a “pacifist and enemy of the State,” Bonhoeffer has his authorization to teach at Berlin University terminated.

July: Confessing Church leader and WWI hero Martin Niemöller is arrested.

August: Bonhoeffer's authorization to teach at Berlin University is withdrawn. Olympic Games in Berlin begin. Hitler is quoted as saying of 4-time gold medal champion Jesse Owens, "The Americans should be ashamed of themselves, letting Negroes win their medals for them." He refuses to shake Owens' hand.

1937

February: At ecumenical meeting in London, Bonhoeffer resigns as youth secretary in protest of the World Alliance's failure to speak out for the Jews.

September: The Gestapo closes the seminary at Finkenwalde.

November: 27 Pastors and former Finkenwalde students are arrested. In November, Bonhoeffer publishes *Discipleship*.

Pope Pius XI issues "With Burning Anxiety," protesting Hitler's infractions of their earlier agreement, the Concordat of 1933.

December: Bonhoeffer leads "collective pastorates" for clandestine training of clergy.

1938

January 11: Bonhoeffer and other Confessing Church teachers are forbidden to live or work in Berlin.

February: Bonhoeffer makes his initial contact with members of the German Resistance, including Canaris, Oster and Sack.

March 12: Austria is annexed by Germany.

April: All German pastors are ordered to take an oath of allegiance to Hitler in recognition of his 50th birthday.

September: Bonhoeffer writes *Life Together*. Bonhoeffer's sister Sabine, her Jewish husband Gerhard Leibholz and two daughters escape to England by way of Switzerland.

November 9: A nation-wide (including parts of Austria) organized riot, *Kristallnacht*, takes place, bringing the destruction of nearly 300 synagogues across Germany, the looting of 7,500 Jewish-owned shops, and the arrest of 30,000 Jewish men.

1939

March: In London, meets with Bishop Bell, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Dutch ecumenical leader Willem Visser't Hooft.

June 2: Travels to U.S. for lecture tour and possible removal from Germany during oncoming war.

July 8: Decides he must return to Germany and suffer with his people.

August: The War begins. Bonhoeffer applies without success to become a chaplain. Instead, he becomes civilian agent of the *Abwehr*, German military intelligence agency.

August 25: Hans von Dohnanyi works in the Military Intelligence department of the *Abwehr*. He is Bonhoeffer's brother-in-law, and for years has been collecting damning legal information against Hitler. It was he who arranged for Bonhoeffer to meet Oster and Sack to discuss Resistance.

1940

Mar: Collective pastorates closed by Gestapo

Sept.: Bonhoeffer banned from speaking publicly, told to report all his movements to authorities.

Oct.: Bonhoeffer enters into *Abwehr* staff in Munich, stays at Ettal, a Benedictine abbey nearby. Begins work on *Ethics*.

1941/42

Meets Barth and Visser't Hooft in Switzerland to prepare for aftermath of Hitler's assassination. Forbidden to publish because of "subversive activities." Travels to Norway, Sweden, and Switzerland on behalf of resistance.

1943

Jan: Engaged to Maria von Wedemeyer;

Apr. 5: Arrested and held in Tegel Prison, Berlin.

Apr. 29: Charged with “subversion of the armed forces.”

May 15: Eberhard Bethge, his friend, marries Renate Schleicher, his niece.

July: Interrogated intensely; writes letters to Eberhard Bethge and others that later form “*Letters and Papers from Prison*”

1944

March: Daylight bombing raids over Tegel prison

April 30: Writes first “theological letter”

July 20, 1944: Final unsuccessful attempt on Hitler by Claus von Stauffenberg of Canaris circle. Succeeding events and discovery by Nazis implicate Bonhoeffer and family members.

Sept. 22: Gestapo discovers incriminating *Abwehr* “Zossen files.”

October: Gestapo arrests brother Klaus, brother-in-law Rüdiger Schleicher, and others. Bonhoeffer moved to Gestapo prison on Prinz Albrecht Strasse in Berlin.

1945

February-July 1945: *Feb. 7:* moved to Buchenwald concentration camp; *Apr. 3:* moved to Regensburg; *Apr. 5:* in Hitler’s midday conference, order given to annihilate the Canaris resistance group, which includes Bonhoeffer; *Apr. 6:* moved to Schönberg; *Apr. 8:* moved to Flossenbürg concentration camp and court-martialed; *Apr. 9:* hanged with six other resisters; brother-in-law Hans von Dohnanyi executed at Sachsenhausen concentration camp; *Apr. 23:* brother Klaus and brother-in-law Rüdiger Schleicher killed for their role in conspiracy; *July 27:* Bonhoeffer’s parents learn of his death via London broadcast of memorial service