

ALFRED DELP AND THE “THIRD WAY”: THE MUNICH JESUIT  
CONTRIBUTION TO POLITICAL AND SPIRITUAL RESISTANCE IN NAZI  
GERMANY

by

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*For my family*

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Emily Evans

## ABSTRACT

# ALFRED DELP AND THE “THIRD WAY”: THE MUNICH JESUIT CONTRIBUTION TO POLITICAL AND SPIRITUAL RESISTANCE IN NAZI GERMANY

by

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Adviser: Derek Hastings, Ph.D.

*Alfred Delp and the “Third Way:” The Munich Jesuit Contribution to Political and Spiritual Resistance in Nazi Germany* examines how Jesuit priest Alfred Delp’s theological and uniquely Jesuit formation shaped his resistance to Nazism, arguing that his opposition was as moral and intellectual as it was political. Deeply influenced by Catholic social theory, Delp developed a “Third Way,” an alternative to both capitalism and Soviet Marxism, grounded in natural law, subsidiarity, solidarity, and the inviolable dignity of the human person. Delp’s work on the Third Way was the result of several years of study, culminating with his participation in the discussions of the Kreisau Circle, a group dedicated to creating a society based on Christian principles after the fall of the Nazi regime. Delp’s Christian vision for a world without Nazism, Jesuit identity, and ties—albeit indirect—to the 1944 plot to assassinate Hitler ultimately led to his execution in early 1945. This paper situates Delp within the unique context of Munich, one of Germany’s most Catholic cities and the birthplace of the Nazi Party. Alongside fellow Jesuits Augustin Rösch, his superior, and Lothar König, Delp built a vast network fostering a wide-reaching network of connections across Catholic and Protestant lines, culminating in his participation in the Kreisau Circle in 1942. By examining Delp within this Munich context, his resistance emerges in contrast to the cautious approach of Cardinal Michael von Faulhaber, revealing the distinctive moral, intellectual, and political contributions of Delp and the Munich Jesuits to broader German resistance.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

|                           |                                                                 |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|
| Arch. Apostolico Vaticano | Archivio Apostolico Vaticano                                    |
| Arch. Prov. ECE SJ        | Archiv der Zentral europäischen Provinz der Jesuiten<br>München |
| BVP                       | Bavarian Volkspartei                                            |
| CDU                       | Christian Democratic Union                                      |
| AEMF                      | Archiv des Erzbistums München und Freising                      |
| NSDAP                     | Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei                  |
| SA                        | Sturmabteilung                                                  |
| SS                        | Schutzstaffel                                                   |
| ST                        | <i>Summa theologica</i>                                         |



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## Introduction

While historians have written extensively on secular figures who defied the Nazis, far less attention has been paid to the Catholic resistance, particularly in the city of Munich. Munich was one of the most Catholic cities in Germany, yet it was also the birthplace of the Nazi Party in 1919. Despite this, some Munich Catholics played a crucial role in opposing Adolf Hitler and the Nazi regime. Among these was the Catholic priest Alfred Delp, a social philosopher and Jesuit who became a key member of the Kreisau Circle—a resistance group composed of individuals from diverse backgrounds (except communists) dedicated to envisioning a new social order based on Christian principles after the fall of Nazism.

Delp's contribution to the Kreisau Circle was the development of a social policy aimed at finding a solution to Nazism but also offering an alternative to both capitalism and Marxism. In other words, he sought a "Third Way"—a vision of society distinct from the authoritarian structures favored by many in the conservative faction of the Circle. In 1944, due to his alleged connection to *Operation Valkyrie*, the failed plot to assassinate Hitler, Delp was arrested, tried, and eventually executed in February 1945. His death, however, was not solely the result of his alleged involvement in the conspiracy; it was also due to his unwavering commitment to building a society rooted in Christian principles and from his identity as a Jesuit priest.

While far less attention has been paid to the Catholic resistance, particularly in the Nazi stronghold of Munich, there have been some historians who have written on Alfred Delp and his resistance efforts. In many broader works focusing on the Kreisau Circle,

the Catholic members of the group, like Delp and his superior Augustin Rösch Delp, are mentioned only in passing or accorded a brief summation of their efforts to encourage German bishops to speak out against Hitler and the Nazi regime. Other historians recount Delp's instrumental work in formulating a social program for the Kreisau Circle, which the priest based on Catholic social teaching explicated in Pope Pius XI's encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931), which can be seen particularly in Peter Hoffman's monumental work *The History of the German Resistance*.<sup>1</sup> While these studies provide valuable insights, they often treat Delp in a relatively narrow and isolated manner. This study instead situates Delp within the broader context of Munich, demonstrating how the city's political, religious, and intellectual environment shaped both his thought and his resistance activity.

Early on, Delp was considered a promising social and political philosopher. Mark Riebling notes that Delp possessed "the spirit of a freethinker."<sup>2</sup> At one point, as a youth, he even toyed with Nazi ideas as a youth before he converted to Catholicism in 1921.<sup>3</sup> This eclectic background provides a unique perspective of not only a German Catholic of the time but also a Munich Jesuit as well. For this reason, Alfred Delp, a theologian, philosopher, and Jesuit priest, is a remarkable individual for historians to study, especially in light of the wealth of letters he wrote and ingeniously had smuggled out of

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Hoffman, *History of the German Resistance, 1933-1945*, trans. Richard Barry (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).

<sup>2</sup> Mark Riebling, *Church of Spies: The Pope's Secret War Against Hitler* (New York: Basic Books, 2015), 122.

<sup>3</sup> Riebling, *Church of Spies*, 122.

his Nazi cell from the time of his imprisonment until his death. These writings afford historians and scholars alike the opportunity to try and understand the struggles and difficulties that Delp faced before his execution by the Nazis in 1944 for his alleged involvement in the 1944 conspiracy against Hitler.

More than a decade after Delp's death, an unknown individual collected Delp's writings and letters from prison and published them in the 1956 work *Im Angesicht des Todes* (*In the Face of Death*); this release of Delp's private correspondence necessarily met with enthusiastic scholarly interest in Delp and his involvement with the German resistance.<sup>4</sup> Seven years later, Thomas Merton translated Delp's letters and writings into English as *The Prison Meditations of Father Alfred Delp* (1963), bringing the German priest's writings to an even larger audience. In Merton's introduction to the volume, the scholar purported that Delp's writings were not only quite mystical but also that Delp himself was "open to the broadest ideals of Christian humanism."<sup>5</sup> This can be seen repeatedly throughout Delp's writings, according to Merton, as Delp advocated both for Christian liberty as well as the dignity of the human person.<sup>6</sup>

While the majority of scholarship has not focused extensively on Delp, two biographical accounts of the Jesuit priest have been written in the past forty years, one by Roman Bleistein and the other by Mary Frances Coady. Bleistein's work, written in the

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<sup>4</sup> Mary Frances Coady, *With Bound Hands, A Jesuit in Nazi Germany: The Life and Selected Prison Letters of Alfred Delp* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2003), ix.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Merton, "Introduction," in *Alfred Delp, S.J.: Prison Writings* (New York: Orbis Books, 2004), xxxviii.

<sup>6</sup> Merton, "Introduction," xxxix.

1980s, is considered by many historians to be the most comprehensive study of Delp's life. Bleistein, who was also a Jesuit priest and former writer of the same journal Delp edited, *Stimmen der Zeit*, spent several years collecting Delp's and other Munich Jesuits' writings and letters. In this extensive, five-volume work, Bleistein sought to demonstrate Delp as a "witness" (*Zeuge*) for the Catholic faith whose life and death must be understood through his Jesuit vocation and spiritual and philosophical development rather than primarily through the 1944 plot to assassinate Hitler.<sup>7</sup> In other words, he focuses extensively on what formative aspects of his life that helped shape and contribute to his later resistance activity. However, his work does not situate Delp within the broader narrative of the challenges of resisting the Nazi regime or the relationship of the German episcopacy to the Third Reich.

Coady, conversely, published a condensed work that offers a brief introduction to Delp's life, supplemented at various points with Delp's prison correspondence.<sup>8</sup> Unlike Bleistein, who endeavored to focus greater attention on Delp's philosophy, his relationship with Röscher, and connections with other resistance groups, Coady sought to emphasize the personal character and individuality of Delp himself by detailing aspects of his temperament and personal failings and triumphs. Her work, however, does not explore in significant depth the extent to which Delp was shaped by Catholic social teaching, his concept of the "Third Way," or his engagement with Martin Heidegger, which this thesis aims to expand on.

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<sup>7</sup> Roman Bleistein, *Alfred Delp: Geschichte eines Zeugen* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Josef Knecht, 1989).

<sup>8</sup> Coady, *With Bound Hands, A Jesuit in Nazi Germany*.

Another biographical work by Elke Endraß, *Gemeinsam gegen Hitler: Pater Alfred Delp und Helmuth James Moltke*, gives a brief biographical account of these two individuals and shows how their lives intersected with each other in their resistance activity against Hitler.<sup>9</sup> Even though they came from very different backgrounds—Moltke, a major figure within the Kreisau Circle, was Protestant—they came together to resist the Nazis, which hints at Delp’s desire for interconfessional cooperation between the two faiths. More particularly, Endraß’s work demonstrates that Delp’s resistance activity was not in isolation, but rather was part of a broader Christian resistance network.

Another work, *Alfred Delp: Held gegen Hitler*, is a collection of essays that seeks to demonstrate that Delp was not merely a political resistor, but that his opposition to Nazism stemmed fundamentally from his theological understanding of the world.<sup>10</sup> By highlighting his writings on human dignity, the state of the Church, the “Third Way,” and his critiques of Nazism, the volume argues that Delp’s theology itself functioned as a form of resistance, since his anthropology and metaphysics stood in direct conflict with the Nazi worldview. However, the collection tends toward an apologetic tone, presenting Delp primarily as a Christian martyr and hero. In doing so, it gives insufficient attention to his tensions with his Jesuit superiors—particularly Rösch—which contributed to the delay of his final vows for several years. This imbalance is problematic, as portraying

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<sup>9</sup> Elke Endraß, *Gemeinsam gegen Hitler: Pater Alfred Delp und Helmuth James Graf von Moltke* (Stuttgart: Kreuz, 2007).

<sup>10</sup> *Alfred Delp: Held gegen Hitler*, eds. Rita Haub and Friedrich Schreiber (Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 2005).

Delp through an overly idealized lens risks obscuring the complexity of his character and the distinctiveness of his resistance activity.

Like *Held gegen Hitler*, Helmut Lück's work is also somewhat apologetic. This piece argues that Delp was fundamentally a Jesuit intellectual, whose resistance was primarily spiritual. Opposing Nazism because of his Christian worldview, Lück argues that Delp's ultimate significance lies in his witness, writings, and martyrdom rather than in direct political action. He articulates that his theology was further sharpened by his experience with resistance, imprisonment, torture, and trial.<sup>11</sup> In contrast to these works, this study seeks to avoid hagiography by presenting Delp as he truly was. Doing so, this highlights the uniqueness and complexity of his resistance, revealing the challenging worlds in which he operated—Nazi Germany, the positions of some within the German episcopacy, and even the dynamics of his own Jesuit order.

A piece that has focused extensively on Delp's anthropology, metaphysics, and theology is Michael Pope's work. This excellent scholarship seeks to demonstrate Delp's philosophical and theological influence and his contribution to the Kreisau discussions. Pope spends considerable time explicating Delp's anthropology and metaphysics and explaining how he was shaped by Catholic social theory, particularly the encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931), which was written by Pope Pius XI, who sought to show the ethical implications of a society without Christian principles. With this framework, he shows that Delp developed an alternative to capitalism and bolshevism, a "Third Way,"

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<sup>11</sup> It is important to note that Lück was a Catholic journalist in the post-war period. From 1977 to 1989, he worked as a journalist in the area of church affairs for *Neue Zeit*, the central newspaper of the Christian Democratic Union of Germany in the DDR—a political party in East Germany allied with the Socialist Unity Party. Helmut Lück, *Bewahrung als Thema des Leben* (Berlin: Flügel & Sohn, 1984).

which he saw as “the synthesis of socialism, capitalism, and Christianity.”<sup>12</sup> Pope argues that Delp’s “Third Way” deeply influenced the Kreisau Circle’s vision for the creation of a new society based on Christian principles after the fall of the Nazi regime. In this way, Pope’s work is less about showing Delp’s resistance activity, and more about demonstrating how Delp worked to find an alternative political order based on Catholic social theory.

Since Delp’s prison letters contain a considerable amount of theological imagery, theologian Peter Nguyen seeks to analyze Alfred Delp’s martyrdom through a theological lens. Nguyen utilizes Hans von Balthasar’s theology of sanctity and kenosis<sup>13</sup> to provide the theological basis for Delp’s spiritual journey during his time in prison. According to Nguyen, Delp rejected Ernst Jünger’s nihilism, a world devoid of meaning,<sup>14</sup> by witnessing a more authentic existence which others could emulate. This meant that one had to empty one’s self by radically depending upon God and by not only rejecting sin but also participating in Christ’s redemptive suffering.<sup>15</sup> Nguyen determines that “one can find in Christ true power and freedom, which is love to bear what is deemed

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<sup>12</sup> Michael Pope, *Alfred Delp S.J. Im Kreisauer Kreis: Die Rechts und Sozialphilosophischen Grundlagen in seinen Konzeptionen für eine Neuordnung Deutschlands* (Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald-Verlag, 1994), 129.

<sup>13</sup> This term is derived from Philippians 2:6, which describes how Christ “emptied himself” by becoming human and assuming the role of a servant. Scholars have used a range of terms to describe this theological concept, including “risk,” “self-limitation,” “sacrifice,” “self-giving,” and “self-emptying.” See John Lippitt, “True Self-Love and True Self-Sacrifice,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, vol 66, no. 3 (2009), 133.

<sup>14</sup> Peter Nguyen S.J., *Against the Titans: The Theology and Martyrdom of Alfred Delp* (New York: Lexington Books, 2020), 76.

<sup>15</sup> Nguyen S.J., *Against the Titans*, 212.



unbearable.”<sup>16</sup> Moreover, Nguyen relies heavily on Delp’s writings to trace both Delp’s spiritual journey and the overall progression of the Christian ideals of sacrifice and martyrdom within Delp’s writing. As Nguyen explains, Delp came to understand sacrifice and martyrdom as essentially an act of dependent participation in Christ’s ultimate act of salvation for mankind.<sup>17</sup> In this way, according to Nguyen, Delp equated redemption with participation in God’s own act of sacrifice.

It is clear from these works that Delp’s resistance activity is rarely analyzed within the context of Munich. The city was unique; although one of the most Catholic in Germany, it was unusually open to ecumenism—a surprising stance given the attacks on the Church following the *Kulturkampf*. These particular Catholics rejected ultramontanist and distanced themselves from Catholic political parties, such as the Center Party. Some reform-minded Catholics in the city were even antisemitic and nationalistic, and a few aligned themselves with the early Nazi Party. Despite being the birthplace of Nazism in 1919, Munich became an important center of resistance activity led by Jesuit priests.

For centuries, the Society of Jesus was viewed with suspicion, accused of holding divided loyalties with Rome, building ambitions for global influence, and even pursuing secret ties to Bolshevism. Under the Nazis, this paranoia intensified. Indeed, Delp’s identity as a Jesuit priest marked him as an enemy of the Nazi state, heightening the danger in which Delp placed himself. Even though he was a Jesuit, he struggled to follow

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<sup>16</sup> Nguyen S.J., *Against the Titans*, 212.

<sup>17</sup> Nguyen S.J., *Against the Titans*, 254.

directives from his superiors, especially Augustin Rösch, which caused him to experience difficulties and delays in taking his final vows. It is all the more ironic that a man so profoundly shaped by the Ignatian way of life, a path emphasizing obedience and discernment, ultimately could not follow its basic maxims yet was executed precisely for being a Jesuit. Delp's contemporaries often described him as loud, outspoken, and difficult to get along with, making him in many ways a rogue Jesuit.

Across the chapters that follow, the overarching theme is the development of Delp's "Third Way" and its contribution to Munich's role in the resistance. Unlike many histories that treat the Third Way as an isolated concept, this study argues that Delp's Third Way evolved over time through various personal, societal, and philosophical influences, continuing to be refined even during Delp's imprisonment. Placing Delp's resistance within the context of Catholic Munich reveals not only how his actions contrasted sharply with the passivity of Munich Archbishop Cardinal Michael von Faulhaber and some other members of the German episcopacy, but also how the city's networks enabled him to engage with both Catholic and Protestant resistance members, ultimately leading to his involvement in the Kreisau Circle.

These chapters examine the life, thought, and resistance of Alfred Delp, whose Catholic faith, courage, and vision for a world without Nazism positioned him as one of the most principled Catholic opponents of the Nazi regime. In contrast to Delp, the German episcopacy was, at times, sympathetic to aspects of Nazism, including nationalism, fear of Bolshevism, Christian antisemitism, and partial alignment with the principle of Positive Christianity. Against this backdrop of institutional caution and ideological compromise, the acts of resistance undertaken by individual Catholics were

exceptional, and often isolated from official Church support, which makes Delp's story a notable example of individual Catholic resistance.

From his earliest formation as a Jesuit, his education and experiences shaped a worldview that combined deep philosophical inquiry, moral reflection, and an understanding that natural law is the foundation of society itself. Central to his thinking was the conviction that "humanity without God is not humanity at all," a principle that informed both his critique of Nazism and his vision for a society rooted in Catholic social theory. Unlike many German resisters, such as Claus von Stauffenberg, who initially aligned with Nazi ideology, Delp rejected the regime from the outset of its power in 1933, recognizing that the worldview of National Socialism was fundamentally incompatible with Christian and democratic principles.

Delp's ordination in Munich in 1937 marked the beginning of a period in which his abstract philosophical and theological ideas transformed into concrete action. As editor of the Jesuit journal *Stimmen der Zeit*, he not only covertly critiqued the moral failings of Nazism but further expanded his views on an alternative Third Way between capitalism and Marxism. Under the leadership of Augustin Rösch, Delp and a fellow Jesuit Lothar König, were able to create a vast network and connections that allowed Delp to engage with both Catholic and Protestant resisters, which helped bridge confessional divides. One of these connections enabled him to shelter and hide Jews. During this time, his opposition evolved from philosophical critique to active, tangible resistance.

Through Rösch, Delp formally joined the Kreisau Circle, a resistance group led by Count James von Moltke dedicated to envisioning a post-Nazi Germany based on

Christian principles. Delp contributed the theological and philosophical framework, grounded in Catholic social thought and natural law to the Circle's discussions. While he was not directly involved in *Operation Valkyrie*, the failed 1944 plot to assassinate Hitler, his ideological affiliations and his consequential meeting with Count Colonel Klaus von Stauffenberg led to his arrest by the Nazi authorities and his eventual execution at the hands of Nazi authorities, primarily for his alternative Christian worldview and because he was a Jesuit priest.

Delp's story does not proverbially end with his life. His writings, philosophical reflections, and personal example continued to resonate with surviving members of the Kreisau Circle and contributed, alongside other intellectual and moral influences, to postwar debates about democracy—shaping efforts to articulate a political order distinct from both American and British models and the collectivist ideology of Soviet Russia.

By tracing Delp's life—from his Jesuit formation, philosophical and theological development, and ethical convictions to his active participation in resistance networks—this study illuminates the extraordinary courage of individual conscience under totalitarianism. Delp's story demonstrates that principled resistance was possible even in a society marked by widespread complicity and institutional silence, offering both a historical case study and a model of moral courage. Through this study, one gains insight not only into his life but also into the broader dynamics of Catholic resistance in Nazi Germany and the complex interplay of faith, philosophy, and political action in the struggle against injustice.

## **Chapter 1:**

### **Moral Collapse or Heroic Resistance?: Analyzing the German Church's Stance and Actions towards the Nazi Regime**

Since the publication of the controversial play “The Deputy” by Rolf Hochhuth in 1963, the Catholic Church has faced extensive criticism for its silence and lack of resistance towards the Nazi regime. While the Catholic Church faced great difficulties and challenges living under the Nazi regime, it is important to understand the reasons for the Church's silence towards the plight of the Jews. As will be seen, the Church was in some ways sympathetic to aspects of Nazism, particularly in terms of its adherence to nationalism as well as Christian antisemitism, fear of Bolshevism, rejection of democracy, and partial acknowledgment of a supraconfessional version of Christianity, known as Positive Christianity. These commonalities led some elements within the German episcopacy not only to align themselves with Nazism, but also to openly support aspects of its ideology. Coupled with this reluctance on the part of the episcopacy to resist Nazism as well as the Church's overall sympathetic stance toward aspects of Nazism, resistance on the part of individual Catholics was very limited in scope, with those who chose to resist doing so without the support of the entirety of the German episcopacy.

One of these resisters was Alfred Delp, a Catholic Jesuit priest and scholar, whose resistance activity in Munich had indirect ties to the 1944 plot to assassinate Hitler. Delp tragically faced execution in early 1945 at the hands of the Nazi authorities for his “treasonous” activities against the state, amid the complex social, religious, and political milieu of greater Munich in the early twentieth century. It is vital, then, that to fully

understand Delp's story, which has been largely overlooked by historians,<sup>18</sup> one must trace the rise and formation of the Nazi party within this context and examine not only the Catholic Church's response to this new political force but also the position of the Church leadership in Munich. Studying these aspects of the city of Munich reveals that Delp's resistance activity was somewhat of an anomaly in the sense that it necessarily and openly conflicted with the attitude and position of some within the German episcopacy. Accordingly, this opening chapter will demonstrate that Delp's resistance activity was directed not only against the Nazis, but also against the authority of some within the episcopacy, whose stance towards the Nazis fundamentally conflicted with Delp's principles and conscience.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, because of Delp's ties to secular as well as Catholic resistance movements, it is important to examine general thematic elements of Catholic resistance activity in Munich as well. In doing so, this study will demonstrate the similarities between Delp's efforts and those of the broader resistance movement as well as how Delp's resistance marked a departure from other resisters' activities because of the distinctiveness of his opposition to Nazism, particularly due to his status as a German Catholic priest.

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<sup>18</sup> Alfred Delp has been studied by a variety of scholars (philosophers, theologians), but his story has not received as much attention from historians.

<sup>19</sup> See Kevin Spicer, "German Catholicism's Lost Opportunity to Confront Antisemitism before the *Machtergreifung*," in *Religion, Ethnonationalism, and Antisemitism in the Era of the Two World Wars*, eds. Kevin Spicer and Rebecca Carter-Chand (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2022). Spicer argues that the German Church in the late 1920s and early 1930s missed an opportunity to speak out and form a united front against Nazism. Their motivations for failing to confront Nazism were complex (fear of political backlash, fear that they would alienate Catholics sympathetic to nationalist ideas). When they did speak out, their statements primarily focused on protecting the German Church as an institution, rather than condemning Nazism in its entirety. This caution and silence meant that during the height of Nazi power, German Catholics were not prepared to form a united front against Nazism. In this way, it was a lost opportunity, according to Spicer, to not only shape culture, but to also offer a strong center of moral opposition to Nazism itself.

## 1.1 Early Interwar Munich and the Aftermath of World War I

Munich, the capital of the Bavarian state, was arguably one of the most Catholic cities in Germany. Nevertheless, despite its deep Catholic roots, Munich was notable in the sense that it was relatively independent and open to “interconfessional cooperation.”<sup>20</sup> This unique independence was further exemplified by some Catholics in the Bavarian region rejecting ultramontanism—the emphasis on the central authority of the papacy—and outside interference from the Vatican. This is largely the reason why some Munich Catholics distanced themselves from the Catholic political parties (the Catholic Center Party as well as its local chapter, the Bavarian Volkspartei or BVP) in Germany as these parties accepted the “allegedly unhealthy role played by ultramontanism within German Catholicism.”<sup>21</sup> This interconfessional version of Catholicism helped to shape a German Catholic national identity that the Nazis utilized to attract Catholics to their movement, particularly through their appeals to Positive Christianity.<sup>22</sup>

Some of these reform Catholics, who, early on, aligned themselves with the Nazi party were radical nationalists, bent on creating confessional cooperation and “moral purity” in the German state, a euphemism for a racial-eugenics policy against people deemed undesirable.<sup>23</sup> Unsurprisingly, a major group that was targeted in pursuit of this idea of “moral purity” was people of Jewish descent. Since the end of World War I,

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<sup>20</sup> Derek Hastings, *Catholicism and the Roots of Nazism: Religious Identity and National Socialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 17.

<sup>21</sup> Hastings, *Catholicism and the Roots of Nazism*, 19.

<sup>22</sup> Hastings, *Catholicism and the Roots of Nazism*, 33.

<sup>23</sup> Hastings, *Catholicism and the Roots of Nazism*, 36.

chauvinistic and antisemitic libel against Jews had only increased, particularly since many across Germany blamed the Jews for the defeat and surrender of Germany itself. These measures by völkisch Catholic thinkers in Munich created a foundation for what would become the central tenets of early Nazi ideology.<sup>24</sup>

Viewed against this background, Munich was an ideal location, politically, religiously, and socially for the Nazi party to establish itself in 1919. With the subsequent growth of the Nazi party in Munich, some clergy and Catholic leaders initially were open to and supportive of the Nazi party and its ideology, with some in the Church, including clergy, actively involved in campaigning for and promoting the party.<sup>25</sup> For many Catholics, Nazism provided an attractive alternative to the Weimar Republic as the former promoted traditional values like the family and rejected the “immorality” of Weimar culture, which was often associated with moral decadence, cabaret culture, and sexual experimentation. As a result, völkisch Catholics in Munich came to view Nazism as the only political solution able to restore morality within Germany.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> The term völkisch had roots in the writings of nineteenth-century racial theorists such as Houston Stewart Chamberlain and Arthur de Gobineau, who emphasized that race was the most important factor in human history. Völkisch ideology argued that the community (*Volksgemeinschaft*) would bring all Germans together in a racially pure community. Jews and other races that were considered dangerous to the community would be necessarily excluded. In the late nineteenth century, radical antisemites began to blame the Jews for virtually all societal and economic problems. By the 1890s, in fact, völkisch ideology entered an even more radical stage when militant German nationalist ideology utilized völkisch ideology to create various nationalist groups that attempted “to establish mass support for nationalist goals.” See Jackson J. Spielvogel and David Redles, *Hitler and Nazi Germany: A History* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 9-10.

<sup>25</sup> For an insightful account of pro-Nazi Catholic clergy during the Nazi regime see Kevin Spicer, *Hitler's Priests: Catholic Clergy and National Socialism* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2008).

<sup>26</sup> Spicer, *Hitler's Priests*, 5.



This early support by Catholics changed drastically, however, after the failed Beerhall Putsch and the imprisonment of Hitler in 1923. Moreover, due to the influence of the völkisch movement, with many Catholics being part of the NSDAP (*Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei*), extensive anti-Catholicism swept through Munich. A proponent of this vehement anti-Catholicism in Munich was notably advanced by Erich Ludendorff, a World War I hero and one of the leaders of the Beer Hall Putsch. While Ludendorff was acquitted at the trial that followed the Putsch, most likely because of his prestige and renown, he blamed the failure of the Putsch on the Catholic Church, and more particularly on Cardinal Faulhaber, the archbishop of Munich.<sup>27</sup> This episode reveals that anti-Catholic sentiment was already embedded within segments of the völkisch movement by the early 1920s, a hostility that would later inform strands of National Socialist ideology.

It was not until November 12, 1923, however, when a group of university students protested the violent suppression of the Putsch, that anti-Catholic bigotry reached a new stage of radicalism. While ironically this protest was organized by a Catholic fraternity, Archbishop Faulhaber quickly became an object of suspicion and faced accusations of conspiring with Gustav von Kahr, head of the Bavarian government, to undermine the Putsch. Specifically, anti-Catholics charged Faulhaber with attempting to bribe Kahr so that he would suppress the Putsch.<sup>28</sup> Faulhaber was also accused of

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<sup>27</sup> Derek Hastings, "How 'Catholic' Was the Early Nazi Movement? Religion, Race, and Culture in Munich, 1919-1924," *Central European History* 36 no. 3 (2003), 419.

<sup>28</sup> Hastings, "How 'Catholic' Was the Early Nazi Movement?," 422.

being involved in a Jewish-Catholic conspiracy.<sup>29</sup> While these charges were, of course, false, they had the effect of turning many party members against the Church, even though, in reality, some local clergy had aided the Nazis in achieving political legitimacy within Munich.

These rumors perpetuated by anti-Catholic forces only helped to fan the flames of discontent as völkisch radicals attacked Faulhaber's residence in the aftermath of the Putsch. These assaults on both Faulhaber's character and his residence convinced many Catholics in Munich that the Nazi party's true intent had finally been revealed. Many, like Faulhaber, equated the current attacks with a renewed persecution of the Church, comparable to Bismarck's battle against the Church during the nineteenth-century *Kulturkampf*. As such, a large number of Catholics left the movement in 1924; Catholics who remained in the movement often did so at the cost of their religious convictions.<sup>30</sup> Regardless, Hitler reflected on the demise of the völkisch movement in *Mein Kampf*:

The men who suddenly discovered, in 1924, that the highest mission of the patriotic movement was to fight ultramontanism, have not succeeded in smashing ultramontanism, but they succeeded in splitting the patriotic movement. I have to guard against the possibility of some immature brain arising in the patriotic movement which thinks that it can do what even a Bismarck failed to do. It will be always one of the first duties of those who are directing the National Socialist Movement to oppose unconditionally any attempt to place the National Socialist Movement at the service of such a conflict. And anybody who conducts a propaganda with that end in view must be expelled forthwith from its ranks.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Michael Brenner, *In Hitler's Munich: Jews, the Revolution, and the Rise of Nazism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022), 258-59.

<sup>30</sup> Hastings, "How 'Catholic' Was the Early Nazi Movement?," 429.

<sup>31</sup> Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trans. James Murphy (London: Hurst and Blackett Ltd., 1939), 449.

While Hitler broke ties with Ludendorff after the Putsch because of Ludendorff's increasing radicalism, Hitler would later change his position towards the Catholic Church. Hitler would become far more hostile and aggressive towards the Church than some of the members of the NSDAP had been in the early 1920s. Thus, while many Catholics, especially those in Munich, initially supported and advanced Nazism, the continued attacks on Faulhaber and the Catholic faith after Putsch convinced many Catholics to doubt National Socialism's true intentions regarding the Church.

### **1.2 Motivations Behind the German Episcopacy's Pre-1933 Stance on Nazism**

After the collapse of the German empire and the establishment of the Weimar Republic, some Catholics were initially open to the new German democracy. After all, Pope Leo XIII, who wrote extensively on social policy and political theory, had permitted Catholics to participate in a democracy.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, the Weimar Republic had decidedly improved conditions for Catholics, granting the Catholic Church the freedom to form new ecclesiastical establishments and bishoprics. Most importantly, the Catholic Center Party became one of the leading political parties in Germany during the interwar years. In allying itself with the Social Democrats and the German Democratic Party, the Catholic Center Party served as a bulwark against far-right parties like the Nazis. According to historian Peter Gay, "the Catholic Center was well named; it acted for much of the Weimar period as a parliamentary center of gravity."<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Klaus Scholder, *The Churches and the Third Reich, Volume One: Preliminary History and the Time of Illusions, 1918-1934* (London: SCM Press, 1977), 13.

<sup>33</sup> Peter Gay, *Weimar Culture: The Outsider as Insider* (New York: W.W Norton & Company, 2001), 75. Also see Rudolf Morsey, *Die Deutsche Zentrumspartei, 1917-1923* (Düsseldorf: Dorste, 1966) for a comprehensive historical study of the German Center Party (Zentrumspartei) during the late German Empire through the early Weimar Republic.

Even still, right-wing Catholics remained deeply suspicious of democracy since, in democratic thought, power derived from the people, rather than God.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, Cardinal Faulhaber believed that democracy posed a serious threat to the Catholic Church, fearing that democracy—based on the will of the people—could foster radicalism, either in the form of socialism or communism.<sup>35</sup> Coupled with the chaos of the German Revolution, this negative disposition toward democracy exacerbated the bishops' reservations about the Weimar Republic. The final breaking point, however, came with the introduction of two policies within the Weimar Republic: the exclusion of religion in public schools, and the separation of church and state. These policies seemingly attacked Christianity, heightening the bishops' anxieties that Germany would in the end become a godless state.<sup>36</sup>

Yet, while many within the Catholic Church distrusted democracy and liberal reform within Germany, many were far more fearful of communism. In the view of several Catholic leaders, such as Faulhaber, communism's adherence to atheism and its ruthless pursuit to remove Christianity from society directly threatened the Christian faith. After all, Europeans had recently witnessed the fate of the Orthodox Church at the hands of the Russian Bolsheviks. So, even though Bolshevism was seen as a serious threat not only to the Catholic Church, but Europe as a whole, this threat was felt even more keenly during the German Revolution.

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<sup>34</sup> Scholder, *The Churches and the Third Reich*, 17.

<sup>35</sup> Theodore, S. Hamerow, *On the Road to the Wolf's Lair: German Resistance to Hitler* (Cambridge MA: Belknap Press, 1999), 23.

<sup>36</sup> Scholder, *The Churches and the Third Reich*, 19-20

Following the end of World War I, after the Bavarian monarchy dissolved in 1918, a group of socialists led by Kurt Eisner seized power in Munich. This socialist power grab sent shockwaves across traditional, conservative Bavaria, particularly in Catholic communities. In the words of historian Derek Hastings, Eisner's rise appeared to destroy "the existing God-given order and [was] ushering in a period of apocalyptic and perhaps irreparable devastation."<sup>37</sup> Archbishop Faulhaber lambasted this revolution as high treason.<sup>38</sup> While Catholic clergy and writers saw the socialist government under Eisner as something essentially catastrophic, so too did the rest of Germany. Consequently, the German military and Freikorps (volunteer paramilitary units), violently removed the "soviet republic," executing hundreds of people. Amid all this chaos, Bavaria swung to the opposite end of the political spectrum.<sup>39</sup>

These violent developments made Bolshevism a much more imminent threat to the Catholic episcopacy, particularly in the view of the papacy. Eugenio Pacelli, the future Pope Pius XII, believed that the Vatican should focus on curbing the spread of communism.<sup>40</sup> As papal nuncio, Pacelli witnessed the Revolution in Munich, during

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<sup>37</sup> Hastings, *Catholicism and the Roots of Nazism*, 49

<sup>38</sup> Guenter Lewy, *The Catholic Church and Nazi Germany* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2000), 5.

<sup>39</sup> Bavaria's conservative roots stretch back hundreds of years. According to Hastings, the conservatism and the particularism of the BVP and its allies helped to ensure that Bavaria would become in the early 1920s a haven for right-wing extremists of various coloring. This would prove to be very important not only for the formation of the Nazi party, but also Hitler himself after the failure of the Beerhall Putsch in 1923. See Hastings, "How 'Catholic' Was the Early Nazi Movement?," 387.

<sup>40</sup> Michael Phayer argues that Pius believed that Germany was essentially a bulwark against communist aggression and progression. Because of this, Pius desired to keep Germany intact. In the early years of World War II, Pius disavowed the Versailles Treaty (1919), believing that it would not guarantee peace. At the same time, he argued that Germany was vital for European unity as a whole. This is not to say that Pius supported Hitler and his regime, which is not the case. Rather, Pius desired a strong Germany to exist without Hitler. Since he viewed Germany as the last bulwark against communist aggression, he hoped

which time his life was threatened when socialist revolutionaries broke into the nunciature in late 1918. Pacelli was even forced to flee to Switzerland until conditions improved in Munich.<sup>41</sup> The Vatican for its part also believed that Germany had to be protected from communism, because of the importance of Germany's geographic location in Central Europe.<sup>42</sup> For this reason, "it had to serve as a bulwark against further advances from the east."<sup>43</sup> Historian Kevin Spicer contends that Hitler's promise to extirpate communism had essentially won him the support and trust of the German episcopacy.<sup>44</sup> Because of this, as will be seen with the 1933 Concordat and the position of many of the German clergy, the Church initially willingly cooperated and even worked with the Nazi regime to gain a potential political ally against the growing threat of communism.

While Hitler's hatred of communism appealed to many Catholics, his adoption of a supraconfessional version of Christianity, known as Positive Christianity, also proved attractive. For the Nazis, though, Positive Christianity was essentially a political tool, "to make Nazism appear Christian."<sup>45</sup> At the same time, Positive Christianity, according to

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for a German victory. See Michael Phayer, "Pope Pius XII, the Holocaust, and the Cold War," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 12, no. 2 (1998): 233-36.

<sup>41</sup> Stewart A. Stehlin, *Weimar and the Vatican: German-Vatican Diplomatic Relations in the Interwar Years* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 40-41.

<sup>42</sup> Stehlin argues that the Nazis played upon the Church's fear to the party's advantage so as to gain the support of the Church and lessen the Allies' demands and restrictions on the Third Reich. See Stehlin, *Weimar and the Vatican*, 41.

<sup>43</sup> Stehlin, *Weimar and the Vatican*, 41.

<sup>44</sup> Spicer, *Hitler's Priests*, 229.

<sup>45</sup> Dean G. Stroud, ed., *Preaching in Hitler's Shadow: Sermons of Resistance in the Third Reich* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2013), 6. Also see Richard Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich: Nazi Conceptions of Christianity, 1919-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University

Hitler, was designed to help solve the religious problems within Germany, by not favoring one confession over another.<sup>46</sup> This can be seen most particularly in Article 24 of the 1920 Nazi party platform.

We demand freedom of religion for all religious denominations within the state so long as they do not endanger its existence or oppose the moral senses of the Germanic race. The Party as such advocates the standpoint of a positive Christianity without binding itself confessionally to any one denomination. It combats the Jewish-materialistic spirit within and around us, and is convinced that a lasting recovery of our nation can only succeed from within on the framework: common utility precedes individual utility.<sup>47</sup>

While the concept of Positive Christianity intended to ensure peace between the confessions, Hitler also purported that Positive Christianity could help prevent another *Kulturkampf*. As evident in the party platform, Hitler and the early Nazis also espoused a form of Christianity that was antisemitic, exclusionary, and aligned with the goals of the state.<sup>48</sup> As historian Dean Stroud emphasized, “the idea of positive Christianity allowed the Nazis to attack

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Press, 2003), 13-50. Steigmann-Gall argues that Nazism attempted to redefine Christianity in radical nationalist, antisemitic terms. The Nazis believed at the outset that it would be better to reconcile Christianity and Nazism. The Nazism still demanded that Christianity be devoid of its Jewish influence, particularly emphasizing that Jesus was not a Jew, but an Aryan. The Nazis also maintained that Christianity was a movement of struggle and national renewal, which allowed the Nazis to present Positive Christianity as a morally grounded movement.

<sup>46</sup> Richard Steigman-Gall, “The Nazis’ ‘Positive Christianity’: A Variety of a ‘Clerical Fascism,’” *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 8 no. 2 (2007), 316.

<sup>47</sup> “25 Points of NSDAP,” (1920), Virginia Holocaust Museum, <https://www.vaholocaust.org/25-points-of-nsdap/>

<sup>48</sup> The Nazis would later reject positive Christianity, when they adopted a neo-pagan religion based on a “theology” of race and blood. This pseudo-religion centered around the cult of Hitler, who demanded faith and perfect obedience. The beginnings of religion based on race can already be seen in the 1920 party platform. See John Conway, *The Nazi Persecution of the Churches, 1933-1945* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 140-142.

whatever aspect of Christianity they deemed ‘negative.’”<sup>49</sup> In other words, Positive Christianity enabled the Nazis to shape Christianity however they saw fit.

While Positive Christianity was indeed a departure from Catholic teaching, for many Catholics, Positive Christianity could be interpreted in favorable terms. The reason for this is that the Catholic Church had suffered quite extensively under Bismarck.<sup>50</sup> During the *Kulturkampf*, Bismarck attempted to exert supreme authority over the Catholic Church by imposing stringent measures that reflected state control over the Church.<sup>51</sup> Bismarck believed the Church’s loyalty to Rome made Catholics both unreliable and untrustworthy German citizens; they were perceived to be internal enemies of the state.<sup>52</sup> Although Bismarck’s movement to oppress the Church failed, his efforts, nevertheless, left deep scars.

For this reason, the Church sought to overcome this prejudice against German Catholics that viewed them as unpatriotic and disloyal to the German state. In the end, the

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<sup>49</sup> Stroud, *Preaching in Hitler’s Shadow*, 7.

<sup>50</sup> Bismarck instituted severe restrictions against the Catholic Church. “Beginning in 1871, the so-called ‘Kanzelparagraph’ (Pulpit Paragraph) prohibited clergy from speaking out about ‘matters of state’ in a manner ‘endangering public peace,’ a ruling that remained in effect until the 1950s and was among other things used by the National Socialists. In 1872, clerical school supervision was replaced by state supervision, and the Jesuit order was banned; subsequent laws concerned the training of clergy (1873), the introduction of civil marriage (1874–75), a general abolition of monasteries (1875), and state support for the clergy, the so-called ‘breadbasket laws’ (1875) which forced the clergy to be financially dependent on the state.” See Daniel Weidner, “Till Death Do Us Part: The Political Theology of the ‘Kulturkampf,’” *Angelaki* 29, no. 3 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.1080/0969725X.2024.2360333>.

<sup>51</sup> See Ronald Ross, *The Failure of Bismarck’s Kulturkampf: Catholicism and State Power in Imperial Germany, 1871-1888* (Washington DC: Catholic University of America, 1998). Ross argues that Bismarck’s systematic attack on Catholic political power as well as Catholic loyalty to Rome failed against German Catholics primarily because of the limitations of the German state as well as the resiliency of Catholics in Germany itself. Moreover, he articulates that Bismarck’s measures strengthened the political organization of Catholics in Germany, particularly of the Catholic Center Party, which became a significant political party within Germany itself.

<sup>52</sup> Weidner, “Till Death Do Us Part.”



*Kulturkampf* had left the German episcopacy “burdened with a deep-seated national inferiority complex.”<sup>53</sup> The Nazi party’s direct appeal to Germans’ nationalism, then, influenced Catholic support for the Nazi party, as the episcopacy did not want other Germans to view Catholics as unpatriotic.<sup>54</sup> Additionally, further seeking to prove their patriotism and loyalty to the Fatherland, many Catholics became ardent supporters of the German war effort. As such, many bishops placed the nation above their faith following the outbreak of World War II, regardless of whether Nazism was in line with Catholic teaching or not.<sup>55</sup> More particularly, historian Kevin Spicer posits, “this social and cultural uneasiness caused Catholics to overestimate and value too highly their own nationalism.”<sup>56</sup>

Accordingly, as did many Germans in general, many Catholic Germans rejected the Versailles Treaty (1919), and welcomed Hitler’s expansionist aims in Europe, placing their full support behind the German war effort. The bishops preached that Catholics must serve the Fatherland and the Volk;<sup>57</sup> there was no question of whether the war was

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<sup>53</sup> Lewy, *The Catholic Church and Nazi Germany*, 15.

<sup>54</sup> Spicer, *Hitler’s Priests*, 229.

<sup>55</sup> The German episcopacy also sought to prove their patriotism during World War I, with many Catholic bishops proclaiming the righteousness of the German cause. After Hitler’s accession to power, many of the bishops liked to point out that many Catholics had given their lives during the War to further demonstrate Catholics’ love for Germany. See Lewy, *The Catholic Church and Nazi Germany*, 224.

<sup>56</sup> Spicer, *Hitler’s Priests*, 229.

<sup>57</sup> For further discussion of Catholic priests serving in the Wehrmacht, and of the tensions between chaplains’ religious duty to minister to German soldiers and their moral responsibilities as priests amid widespread evil and destruction, see Doris Bergen, *Between God and Country: Military Chaplains in Nazi Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023) and Lauren Faulkner Rossi, *Wehrmacht Priests: Catholicism and the Nazi War of Annihilation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015).

just or not.<sup>58</sup> As sociologist Gordon Zane contends, “The German bishops tarnished the luster of their noble resistance to Hitler’s tyranny at home by giving their flocks to understand that it was their Christian duty to fight for the triumph of the Nazi anti-Christ, the inhuman fiend [communism] who tortured and murdered millions of men, women, and children.”<sup>59</sup> The bishops believed so strongly that it was the Christian duty of Catholics to serve in the war effort, that those that refused could be denied the sacraments.<sup>60</sup> The episcopacy weaponized the sacraments—rites which in Catholic teaching are necessary for salvation—so as to further demonstrate their loyalty to the German nation.

Although Nazism and Catholicism offered incompatible worldviews, many German Catholics and clergy struggled to accept this contradiction. According to Robert Erickson, Christians’ loyalties were divided between their faith and their national identity.<sup>61</sup> This can be seen in the case of Cardinal Faulhaber. Faulhaber was not a Nazi, and privately opposed the regime in his personal diaries. But he was also an ardent nationalist. This dichotomy between his faith and his desire to serve the Fatherland led him to, at least in public, choose concession and cooperation with the Nazi regime.

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<sup>58</sup> Gordon S. Zahn, *German Catholics and Hitler’s Wars: A Study in Social Control* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 68.

<sup>59</sup> Zahn, *German Catholics and Hitler’s Wars*, 58.

<sup>60</sup> Zahn, *German Catholics and Hitler’s Wars*, 57.

<sup>61</sup> Robert Erickson, “Resistance or Complicity?: Balancing Assessments of German Churches Under Nazism,” *Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte* 28, no. 2 (2015): 246.

One of the most important elements in understanding the Church's role in collaborating and cooperating with the Nazi regime is antisemitism.<sup>62</sup> For centuries, many in the Catholic Church had practiced a form of Christian antisemitism, which blamed the Jews for the death of Christ. This prevalent belief led to the persecution of Jews in Christian Europe, who were subject to various forms of bigotry and prejudice, including Jews being forced to live in ghettos in some cases and wear specific articles of clothing for identification purposes. This form of antisemitism, though, was far from the radical form of antisemitism, practiced by the Nazis, which was based on extreme racial hatred.<sup>63</sup> Though many in the Church were, to some degree, antisemitic, it is important to emphasize that official Church teaching, for the most part, did not believe in or condone this virulent form of antisemitism. This can be seen in the encyclical *Mit brennender Sorge* (1937), which will be discussed in greater detail below.

Even so, most historians agree that the Church played a critical role in demonizing the Jews, contributing to the environment in which Nazi racial ideology was embraced by the German population. According to Guenter Lewy, "the Nazis' ferocious assault upon European Jewry took place in a climate of opinion conditioned for such an outrage by centuries of Christian hostility to the Jewish religion and people."<sup>64</sup> This can be seen most clearly during the nineteenth century, when the Jews were granted equal

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<sup>62</sup> Spicer, "German Catholicism's Lost Opportunity to Confront Antisemitism before the Machtergreifung," 105.

<sup>63</sup> This antisemitic background can be seen in the Jesuit order itself. An example of this can be seen in the case of the Jesuits not allowing the entrance of an individual, whose Christian ancestry did not go back five generations. This was ironically more stringent than the Nazi racial laws. See Vincent Lapomarda, *The Jesuits and the Third Reich* (New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1989), 12.

<sup>64</sup> Lewy, *The Catholic Church and Nazi Germany*, 269.

rights in Western Europe; instead of celebrating this, the Church strongly rejected the granting of equal rights to Jews as the act was perceived as posing a pressing threat to Europe as a whole.<sup>65</sup>

In reaction to this supposed “threat” to Europe, the Catholic Church spread paranoid rumors that the Jews intended to enslave all Christians, and, furthermore, warned Catholics that their Jewish neighbors were part of a secret world conspiracy responsible not only for capitalism but also for communism.<sup>66</sup> The German Church, in particular, remained highly suspicious of Jews because, as Lewy asserts, “many prominent Jews participated in the anti-Catholic drive of the 1870s. . .”<sup>67</sup> In this way, the German Church saw that some forms of antisemitism were perfectly acceptable, leading many German Catholics and some clergy to support and even in some cases become active collaborators in the persecution of the Jews.

This fear and suspicion of the Jews, only increased during the Weimar Republic.<sup>68</sup> During the Weimar Years (1919-1933), German Jews were able to achieve equal rights with other German citizens, wherein they could vote and even hold political office. In addition, many German Jews belonged to the middle class, playing a prominent role in

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<sup>65</sup> For additional information on antisemitism and the Holocaust, see Peter Hayes, *Why? Explaining the Holocaust* (New York: Norton, 2017) and Beth Greich-Polelle, *Antisemitism and the Holocaust: Language, Rhetoric, and the Traditions of Hatred* (London: Bloomsbury, 2023).

<sup>66</sup> David I. Kertzer, “The Roman Catholic Church, the Holocaust, and the Demonization of the Jews: Response to “Benjamin and Us: Christianity, Its Jews, and History” by Jeanne Favret-Saada,” *Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 4, no. 3 (2014), <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.14318/hau4.3.020>.

<sup>67</sup> Lewy, *The Catholic Church and Nazi Germany*, 270.

<sup>68</sup> See Susanne Wein and Martin Ulmer, “Antisemitism in the Weimar Republic,” in *Oxford Handbook of the Weimar Republic*, eds. Benjamin Ziemann and Nadine Rossol (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 404-426.

various professions and industries. Furthermore, because of this increasing equality within German society, many German Jews were able to make contributions to German culture through the arts, sciences, film, and music.<sup>69</sup> Unfortunately, however, German Jews' largely successful integration into German society angered far-right nationalists and antisemites, who demanded that Germans try to stem the tide of "excessive" Jewish influence on German society.<sup>70</sup>

Some German Catholics aligned themselves with this ideological framework, becoming active supporters of the Nazi party or other far-right nationalist groups. It is important to emphasize, however, that the Catholic Church was viewed as highly suspicious and an international threat to the Nazis as well.<sup>71</sup> In conjunction, then, with its adamant desire to prove its loyalty to the German government, the Church, according to Doris Bergen, sought to disaffiliate itself from the other "international threat," of the Jews. This helped, Bergen states, "to legitimize and reinforce anti-Jewish sentiment. In asserting their own Germanness, church leaders implied it was not Nazi accusations of Jewish treachery that were unjust, only their application to Catholics."<sup>72</sup> Ultimately, because of the Church's paranoia, Christian antisemitic history, and attempts to disassociate from and further demonize the Jews, the Church hierarchy helped to further

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\*<sup>70</sup> Marion Kaplan, *Between Dignity and Despair: Jewish Life in Nazi Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>71</sup> Beth Ann Greich-Polelle, "Jesuits, Jews, and Communists: Portrayals of Jesuits and Other Catholic Religious in Nazi Newspapers During the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939," in *"The Tragic Couple: Encounters Between Jews and Jesuits"*, eds. James Bernauer and Robert A. Maryks (Boston: Brill, 2014), 177.

<sup>72</sup> Doris L. Bergen, "Catholics, Protestants, and Christian Antisemitism in Nazi Germany," *Central European History* 27, no. 3 (1994), 333.

create an environment of fear, suspicion, and hatred towards the Jews. This indicates that the Church unfortunately laid some of the groundwork for the Nazis' persecution and destruction of the Jews. Thus, due to the Church's fear of Bolshevism, its rejection of democracy, and its antisemitism, some German bishops and ordinary Catholics viewed Nazism as the protector of German Catholicism, rather than its enemy.

### **1.3 Resistance, Adaptation, and Collaboration**

As the party became more extreme, however, many of the clergy and Catholic leaders began to distance themselves from the Nazis, disavowing the party's growing, fanatical nationalism, based on blood and race.<sup>73</sup> As Guenter Lewy writes, "The concept of 'positive Christianity,' under which the Nazi leaders demand a German God and a German Christianity, in effect involved the establishment of a German national church."<sup>74</sup> In other words, Nazism clashed with Catholic teaching and theology because it advanced an alternative worldview based on social-Darwinism. Between 1930 and 1932, German bishops issued several pastoral letters exhorting Catholics to be wary of Nazism, due to the increased attacks on the Church and Catholic teaching. In the summer of 1932, the German episcopacy condemned Nazism and its evils in the Fulda Episcopal Conference, even going so far as to deny Catholics who were wearing an SA uniform from receiving communion at mass. More importantly, though, the conference, "went on record against Catholic membership in the party."<sup>75</sup> Even so, as Guenter Lewy

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<sup>73</sup> Lewy, *The Catholic Church and Nazi Germany*, 8.

<sup>74</sup> Lewy, *The Catholic Church and Nazi Germany*, 9.

<sup>75</sup> W. M. Harrigan, "Nazi Germany and the Holy See, 1933-1936: The Historical Background of Mit brennender Sorge," *The Catholic Historical Review* 47, no. 2 (1961), 166.

articulates, this ban was not as strong as it could have been as they left this prohibition up to the discretion of the clergy.<sup>76</sup>

While not all of the episcopacy supported this measure, many feared that the Nazis might remove the concept of Positive Christianity from their party platform, due to the existing tensions with the Catholic Church. In their view, the loss of Positive Christianity could result in a renewed persecution of the Church; to avoid this possibility, many bishops believed that it was far safer for the Church to endorse a supraconfessional form of Christianity, as opposed to outright condemning Nazism itself. Seeing this lack of unity within the German episcopacy,<sup>77</sup> the Nazis “exploit[ed] the bishops’ fear of the left-wing parties, [where] they continued to stress in their agitation that only the assumption of full political power by National Socialism could protect Christianity from its mortal enemy, Marxism.”<sup>78</sup>

When Hitler received significant dictatorial powers in 1933,<sup>79</sup> he promised to protect the rights of the churches. In his speech to the Reichstag on the Enabling Act,

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<sup>76</sup> Lewy, *The Catholic Church and Nazi Germany*, 20.

<sup>77</sup> Ironically, while the Nazis were making the claim to the Catholic Church that they were a bulwark against communism, the Nazis accused the Jesuits and even the Church of undermining the German state by seeking compromises with the Bolsheviks. More particularly, the Jesuits were seen as part of a greater Judeo-Bolshevik threat to destroy the German nation. See Beth Ann Greich-Polelle, “Jesuits, Jews, and Communists,” 177. See Beth Ann Greich-Polelle, “Jesuits, Jews, Christianity, and Bolshevism: An Existential Threat to Germany?,” *Journal of Jesuit Studies* 5 (2018), 42.

<sup>78</sup> Lewy, *The Catholic Church and Nazi Germany*, 14.

<sup>79</sup> Hitler gained significant dictatorial powers on March 23, 1933, after the infamous Reichstag fire. While it is still unclear who ignited the fire, Hitler used this event as a pretense to further strengthen and consolidate his own power by suppressing his political opponents. His staunchest political opponents were the communists, and unsurprisingly Hitler blamed the communists for the fire, whereupon he set out to ruthlessly remove them from German society. Most importantly, though with the passing of the emergency clause (the Enabling Act), Hitler assumed full dictatorial powers, which effectively eliminated the Weimar Republic and its parliamentary system. See Spielvogel and Redles, *Hitler and Nazi Germany*, 100-101.

Hitler proclaimed that, “The rights of the Churches will not be curtailed and their position vis-à-vis the State will not be altered.”<sup>80</sup> This had the effect, essentially, of convincing the episcopacy that Hitler could be trusted, a quite surprising turn of events, in light of the fact that in early 1932 at the Fulda Episcopal Conference, Catholics had been banned from becoming Nazi members. Shortly thereafter, however, Pacelli began negotiating a concordat with the Nazis; this same conference voted to remove the 1932 ban. As James Carroll writes, “The bishops expressed, as they put it, ‘a certain confidence in the new government, subject to reservations concerning some religious and moral lapses.’ Swastika bearers would now be welcomed at the communion rail.”<sup>81</sup>

Even though the Church was quite willing to work with the new regime, the relationship between Nazism and the Catholic Church was proving to be difficult, due to the growing restrictions on Catholicism within Germany.<sup>82</sup> This can be seen particularly in regards to the attacks on Catholic education, Catholic youth organizations, and the appointment of bishops exclusively by the Church.<sup>83</sup> Nevertheless, Hitler, eager to avoid a religious conflict, presented the Vatican with the possibility of creating diplomatic ties with his regime. The establishment of a concordat with the Nazi regime was important in

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<sup>80</sup> Adolf Hitler, “Speech on Enabling Act 1933,” <https://www.worldfuturefund.org/reports2013/hitlerenablingact.htm>.

<sup>81</sup> James Carroll, *Constantine’s Sword: The Church and the Jews, a History* (New York: Mariner Books, 2001), 498. It is important to note that many historians have been critical of the overly simplistic nature of Carroll’s approach, See the critical review of Thomas F. X. Noble, review of *Constantine’s Sword: The Church and the Jews, a History* by James Carroll, *First Things*, no. 113 (May 2001): 59-63.

<sup>82</sup> For an account of the grieving tensions between the Church and the Nazi, see Kevin Spicer, *Resisting the Third Reich: The Catholic Clergy in Hitler’s Berlin* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2004).

<sup>83</sup> Lewy, *The Catholic Church and Nazi Germany*, 54-55.



the sense that it was the first time that the Vatican had formed a concordat with Germany since before the Protestant Reformation in 1517.<sup>84</sup> While the Church sought the concordat to protect ecclesiastical rights and privileges in Germany, Hitler desired the agreement to achieve his ultimate goal of “remov[ing] the Catholic clergy in Germany from party politics.”<sup>85</sup> In other words, this concordat would be essential for eliminating political Catholicism within Germany. At the same time, however, the concordat served as a means of keeping the Church in check for a few years at least, until Hitler finally dealt with the Church once and for all. As Hitler himself declared,

We should trap the priests by their notorious greed and self-indulgence. We shall thus be able to settle everything with them in perfect peace and harmony. I shall give them a few years' reprieve. Why should we quarrel? They will swallow anything in order to keep their material advantages. Matters will never come to a head. They will recognize a firm will, and we need only show them once or twice who is master. They will know which way the wind blows.<sup>86</sup>

Finally, Hitler believed this agreement could help persuade the German episcopacy to support the Nazis.<sup>87</sup> John Rodman and J.P Rossi add that Hitler desired the concordat because diplomatic ties to the Vatican would give moral legitimacy to the Nazi regime.<sup>88</sup> Regardless, the Vatican was cautious when presented with this proposition,

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<sup>84</sup> John Brown Mason, “The Concordat with the Third Reich,” *The Catholic Historical Review* 20 no.1 (1934), 24. It is important to note that there had been treaties with individual German territories like Bavaria. See Stehlin, *Weimar and the Vatican*, 368-448. See particularly chapter 7, which discusses the Cartier treaties with Bavaria (1924), Prussia (1929), and Baden (1932).

<sup>85</sup> John Jay Hughes, “The Pope’s ‘Pact with Hitler’: Betrayal or Self-Defense?,” *Journal of Church and State* 17 no.1 (1975): 64.

<sup>86</sup> Hermann Rauschning, *The Voice of Destruction* (New York: Pelican Publishing House, 2003), 53.

<sup>87</sup> Scholder, *The Churches and the Third Reich*, 271.

<sup>88</sup> John Rodden and John P. Rossi, “Was Pius XII ‘Hitler’s Pope’? The Concordat of 1933,” *Society* 51 (2014), 411. Also see Frank J. Coppa, *Controversial Concordats: The Vatican's Relations with Napoleon, Mussolini, and Hitler* (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1999).

harboring serious doubts as to whether Hitler would uphold the contents of the treaty.<sup>89</sup> Cardinal Faulhaber cautioned that the Vatican needed to be wary of establishing diplomatic ties with the Nazi regime as he argued that Nazi leaders could use the agreement for propaganda purposes. Interestingly, Faulhaber also stressed that German Catholics might not understand why the Vatican sought diplomatic ties since many Catholic officials were currently being imprisoned or had been illegally removed from office, especially after the Night of the Long Knives (1934).<sup>90</sup> Even so, the Vatican believed that a concordat with the new regime would be essential for the security of the German Church. As historian John Brown Mason asserts, the Church desired the concordat because its rights would be protected, while the Nazis saw the concordat as a way to gain the support of the country's estimated twenty million Catholics, "most of whom had previously adopted a suspicious and generally hostile attitude towards it."<sup>91</sup>

With the signing of the concordat in 1933, the Nazis guaranteed to the Church the right to operate freely in the pastoral sphere, including the administration of the sacraments. The concordat also guaranteed the continued existence of Catholic schools, the Catholic press, Catholic youth organizations, and financial support for the clergy.<sup>92</sup> While these groups appeared to be protected, the language used, especially in Article 31, was ambiguous and failed to clearly define the elements subject to the Church's

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<sup>89</sup> Hughes, "The Pope's 'Pact with Hitler,'" 64.

<sup>90</sup> Ronald, J Rychlak, *Hitler, The War, and The Pope* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing, 2010), 79. It is important to note that Rychlak's work is a strong, polemical defense of Pius XII, which stands in contrast to the work of more objective scholars like Michael Phayer.

<sup>91</sup> Mason, "The Concordat with the Third Reich," 23-24.

<sup>92</sup> Rodden and Rossi, "Was Pius XII 'Hitler's Pope'?", 412.

authority.<sup>93</sup> This would prove to be problematic.<sup>94</sup> Many of the bishops, such as Cardinal Faulhaber, hoped that the concordat would put limitations on the regime.<sup>95</sup> Later, though, the cardinal's attitude changed as he ultimately advocated for cooperation with the Nazis, believing that this would be the best way to protect the Church within Germany.<sup>96</sup> Unfortunately, according to Jon Conway, the Church's collaboration opened the door to Nazi infiltration within Catholic ranks and, in adopting this position, effectively forfeited its ability to create a form of political resistance against Nazism as the Church previously had adopted during the *Kulturkampf*.<sup>97</sup>

While the Church in theory gained favorable terms in the concordat itself, part of the compromise that the Vatican had to make was the removal of the German clergy from the political sphere, prohibiting their involvement in political parties. This did not mean that the clergy, however, were prohibited from speaking out on moral issues and Church teaching, a quite significant factor given the silence of the German episcopacy during the war. Regardless, the concordat was more important for the Vatican's interests than the German Church as the German episcopacy primarily viewed the concordat as a way for

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<sup>93</sup> Lothar Schöppe, *Konkordate seit 1800: Originaltext und deutsche Übersetzung der geltenden Konkordate* (Frankfurt am Main; Berlin: Alfred Metzner Verlag, 1964), 35, <http://www.ibka.org/artikel/ag97/reichskonkordat.html>

<sup>94</sup> Ernst Christian Helmreich, *The German Churches Under Hitler: Background, Struggle, and Epilogue* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1979), 248.

<sup>95</sup> Mary Alice Gallin, "The Cardinal and the State: Faulhaber and the Third Reich," *Journal of Church and State* 12, no. 3 (1970), 393.

<sup>96</sup> Gallin, "The Cardinal and the State: Faulhaber and the Third Reich," 393.

<sup>97</sup> Conway, *The Nazi Persecution of the Churches*, 23.

the Vatican to unduly influence their authority. In this way, the German Church feared that the concordat helped strengthen the central authority of the curia.<sup>98</sup>

Unsurprisingly, shortly after the signing of the concordat in July 1933, Hitler violated its terms. In early 1934, the Catholic press was attacked, Catholic schools were forcibly shut down, and priests and other clergy were accused of child sex abuse.<sup>99</sup> Moreover, the Nazis even attempted to ban the Old Testament in the churches, since it was “Jewish.” Cardinal Faulhaber condemned this attack against the Old Testament, due to its connection with the Jewish Torah. Faulhaber regarded this as an affront to Christianity itself, stating that,

When racial research itself is not a religious matter, makes war upon religion and attacks the foundations of Christianity; when antagonism to the Jews of the present day is extended to the sacred books of the Old Testament and Christianity is condemned because it has relations of origin with pre-Christian Judaism, . . . then the bishop cannot remain silent.<sup>100</sup>

This statement came from a series of Advent sermons delivered by Faulhaber, in which he protested the German Christian movement (*Deutsche Glaubensbewegung*) and racial ideologists’ attacks on the Old Testament and Catholic doctrine.<sup>101</sup> Because Faulhaber upheld that the Catholic faith was not subordinate to racial or nationalist ideology, his

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<sup>98</sup> Scholder, *The Churches and the Third Reich*, 146. It is important to note that this is Scholder’s interpretation of how the German episcopacy viewed the Concordat with the Third Reich. According to Scholder, the German Church appreciated the legal protections that the Concordat offered, but it feared that the Concordat strengthened the central power of Rome itself.

<sup>99</sup> Rodden and Rossi, “Was Pius XII ‘Hitler’s Pope’?”, 412.

<sup>100</sup> Michael Faulhaber, “The Religious Values of the Old Testament and Their Fulfillment in Christianity,” in *Judaism, Christianity and Germany*, trans. Rev. George D. Smith (New York: MacMillan Company, 1935), 3-4.

<sup>101</sup> For additional information on the Eisenach institute, which sought to remove the Old Testament from Christianity see chapter 2 of Susannah Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).

sermons attracted many people, including Protestants and Jews. The reason for this was that “for thousands of people who flocked to these sermons, it was less a question of coming to listen to an apology for the Holy Scriptures than to hear opposition to coercion, spiritual suppression and ideological standardization.”<sup>102</sup>

At the same time, Faulhaber’s sermons infuriated the Nazis, which led them to violently attack his residence in November 1934.<sup>103</sup> The reason for this was not only the content of the sermons themselves but more particularly because the sermons were delivered in Munich, the birthplace of the Nazi party. For Hitler, Munich had become the spiritual center of the Nazi party, where the mausoleum of the Beer Hall Putsch “martyrs” had become a virtual pilgrimage site for Germans.<sup>104</sup> For this reason, it can be argued that in Munich any form of resistance or dissent equated not only to treason against the state, but to an act of sacrilege against Nazism and, indeed, against the Führer himself.

Due to his outspoken sermons as well as the Nazi attack upon the bishop’s palace, Faulhaber was seen by many as a potential leader of the Catholic resistance. Faulhaber, however, strongly rejected this association.<sup>105</sup> For Faulhaber, these sermons were not

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<sup>102</sup> Menahem R. Macina, “Cardinal Faulhaber and Nazi Anti-Semitism in the Thirties,” English translation of the French original, *Le cardinal Faulhaber et l’antisémitisme nazi des années trente*, *Bulletin Trimestriel de la Fondation Auschwitz*, no. 64 (juillet-septembre 1999, Bruxelles), [https://www.academia.edu/4613440/Cardinal\\_Faulhaber\\_and\\_Nazi\\_anti\\_Semitism\\_in\\_the\\_Thirties2](https://www.academia.edu/4613440/Cardinal_Faulhaber_and_Nazi_anti_Semitism_in_the_Thirties2).

<sup>103</sup> Lewy, *The Catholic Church and Nazi Germany*, 275.

<sup>104</sup> Derek Hastings further emphasizes this point, “School groups and Hitler Youth delegations took spiritual pilgrimages—in the form of curricula field trips—to the Temple of Honor, and schoolchildren across Germany had to memorize, in addition to grammatical rules and multiplication tables, the names of the sixteen heroes of the nation interred there.” See Derek Hastings, *Nationalism in Modern Europe: Politics, Identity, and Belonging since the French Revolution* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2023), 205.

<sup>105</sup> After Cardinal Faulhaber was celebrated as a defender of the Jews, Faulhaber had his secretary write a widely published letter to the World Jewish Congress, stating that his Advent sermons were meant

intended to condemn the Nazis' treatment of the Jews but rather to defend the Catholic Church and its authority. For in many of the German bishops' views, Faulhaber's included, the Church should only protest the Nazi government if it personally affected the Church and its authority; otherwise, it was best to remain silent.

The silence of the German episcopacy and even of the Vatican itself has created a considerable amount of controversy in recent decades.<sup>106</sup> Because Pope Pius XII followed a strict policy of neutrality, members of the episcopacy were discouraged from directly condemning Nazism, particularly regarding the persecution of the Jews.<sup>107</sup> The bishops, in turn, also discouraged their priests from condemning Nazi evils. According to Kevin Spicer, "Although the bishops provided room for priests to question the state's actions, their statements placed greater emphasis on restraint and patience than on action and involvement in regard to their counteractivity against the state."<sup>108</sup> The silence of the German episcopacy, though, was due not only to the policy of the papacy but also to the

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to defend the Old Testament. He wanted to make it clear that he was not making a condemnation or taking a position on the so-called "Jewish question." See Lewy, *The Catholic Church and Nazi Germany*, 275.

<sup>106</sup> The silence of Pope Pius XII has generated a vast historiographical debate, rightly called the "Pius Wars," which has yet to achieve a consensus amongst historians. For additional information on this historiographical debate. See Michael Phayer, *Pius XII, the Holocaust, and the Cold War* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008); Susan Zuccotti, *Under His Very Windows: The Vatican and the Holocaust in Italy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000); John Cornwell, *Hitler's Pope: The Secret History of Pius XII* (New York: Penguin Group, 1999); Peter Godman, *Hitler and the Vatican: Inside the Secret Archives That Reveal the New Story of the Nazis and the Church* (New York: Free Press, 2004); Rychlak, *Hitler, The War, and The Pope*; David I Kertzer, *The Pope at War* (New York: Random House, 2022); David G. Dalin, *The Myth of Hitler's Pope* (Washington DC.: Regnery Publishing Co., 2005); Susan Brown-Fleming, "Pope Pius XII and the Holocaust: A Historiographical Essay," in *The Holocaust and the Catholic Conscience: Cardinal Aloisius Muench and the Guilt Question in Germany* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006); Mark Ruff, *The Battle for the Catholic Past in Germany, 1945-1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017). It is important to note that some of these polemical works are indeed problematic.

<sup>107</sup> Lewy, *The Catholic Church and Nazi Germany*, xx.

<sup>108</sup> Spicer, *Resisting the Third Reich*, 50.

deep disunity that existed among the German bishops. The two opposing camps were headed by Cardinal Bertram of Breslau and Bishop Preysing of Berlin. Cardinal Bertram, on the one hand, believed that the Church should be cautious in denouncing the Nazis for fear of potentially imperiling the unity of Germany.<sup>109</sup> Eager to maintain a peaceful relationship, in 1940 Cardinal Bertram even sent Hitler a personal birthday message on behalf of the Fulda bishops' conference, which greatly angered Bishop Preysing and almost resulted in Preysing resigning.<sup>110</sup> Bishop Preysing, on the other hand, pursued a much stronger line of opposition against Hitler,<sup>111</sup> on several occasions engaging in public protests against the Nazis' numerous crimes against humanity.<sup>112</sup>

Andrew Bartley argues that the disunity that existed between these two clerics was more of a theological issue, rather than a political problem.<sup>113</sup> According to Bartley, Cardinal Bertram, like many in the episcopacy, believed that the primary responsibility of the Church was to save souls. Since the Churches were still open, Cardinal Bertram saw no reason to protest the regime for fear of potentially antagonizing the Nazis. Bishop Preysing, though, saw the issue in a different light, believing it was the Church's role to protect and safeguard human rights, based on natural and moral law.<sup>114</sup> Like Bertram and

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<sup>109</sup> Lewy, *The Catholic Church and Nazi Germany*, xx.

<sup>110</sup> Spicer, *Resisting the Third Reich*, 61.

<sup>111</sup> For an insightful account of Preysing's life and career, see Stephan Adam, *Konrad Kardinal von Preysing: Ein Lebensbild* (Regensburg: Pustet, 2010).

<sup>112</sup> Lewy, *The Catholic Church and Nazi Germany*, xx. Also, see Spicer, *Resisting the Third Reich*, 58-71, which discusses in more detail Preysing's acts of opposition towards Nazism itself.

<sup>113</sup> Andrew Bartley, *Catholics Confronting Hitler: The Catholic Church and Nazism* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2016), 203.

<sup>114</sup> Bartley, *Catholics Confronting Hitler*, 203.

other bishops though, Preysing did not encourage his congregation to protest and resist the Nazis; rather, he emphasized that the presence of Nazism was an opportunity to share in Christ's sufferings.<sup>115</sup>

Even though Bishop Preysing did clash with the Nazis at times, he shied away from condemning the Nazis' persecution of the Jews. The reason for this was that Bishop Preysing feared that a public protest could further undermine the already shaky relationship between the German bishops. He also feared that a public protest could result in the inability of the episcopacy to protect mixed marriages between Catholics and Jews or even Catholics of Jewish descent. Moreover, Guenter Lewy states, "Preysing also feared that a public protest against the murder of the Jews, involving an issue of crucial importance to the Nazis, would lead to a complete rupture of relations between the Church and the state."<sup>116</sup>

Cardinal Faulhaber argued in a similar light fearing that a public protest against the Nazis would cause Germans to see Catholics as being disloyal to Germany. He also worried that if Germany lost the war, Germans would blame their defeat on Catholics' "disloyalty."<sup>117</sup> Faulhaber even went as far as to write to Cardinal George William Mundelein, the archbishop of Chicago, begging him to use his influence to prevent the American press from publishing reports on German atrocities. Faulhaber believed that even international bishops speaking out against Nazis or reports detailing Nazi aggression

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<sup>115</sup> Spicer, *Resisting the Third Reich*, 70.

<sup>116</sup> Lewy, *The Catholic Church and Nazi Germany*, xxi.

<sup>117</sup> Hamerow, *On the Road to the Wolf's Lair*, 342.



could potentially worsen the situation in Germany.<sup>118</sup> In the end, though, the silence of the German episcopacy and the Vatican “only confused Catholics.”<sup>119</sup>

This position of the German episcopacy has led many historians to argue that the policy of compromise and cooperation with the Nazis made the Church essentially an accessory to the evils of the regime itself, as many stipulate that silence equals complicity. Theodore Hamerow states, “By adopting this strategy of acquiescence, however, the leaders of the church subordinated the transcendent moral imperatives of their faith to its practical denominational needs.”<sup>120</sup> The reality is that the Church, which has claimed throughout its existence to be the epicenter of truth and love, had forsaken its “transcendent moral imperatives” by placing the concerns of the Church above the plight of the Jews and other persecuted people. This can be seen most clearly when Cardinal Faulhaber wrote about the Jews in April 1933 to Bishop Theophil Wurm, who was initially sympathetic to Nazism. Faulhaber believed that if the Church spoke out in defense of the Jews, the Church could potentially be attacked next, a contention that perhaps was not completely unfounded.<sup>121</sup> The reality, though, was that the higher the position of a cleric, the more popular support he received from Catholics in his diocese. Thus, a bishop was less likely to be attacked or persecuted by the Nazis for fear of a popular uprising.<sup>122</sup> In Cardinal Faulhaber’s case, because he was popular amongst

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<sup>118</sup> Rychlak, *Hitler, the War, and the Pope*, 66.

<sup>119</sup> Donald Dietrich, “Christianity in the Third Reich,” in *Confront! Resistance in Nazi Germany*, ed. John J. Michalczyk (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2004), 14.

<sup>120</sup> Hamerow, *On the Road to the Wolf’s Lair*, 138.

<sup>121</sup> Scholder, *The Churches and the Third Reich*, 271.

<sup>122</sup> Hamerow, *On the Road to the Wolf’s Lair*, 132.

Bavarian Catholics, his cooperation with the Nazi regime could be seen as encouraging Bavarian Catholics' support for the Third Reich.<sup>123</sup>

Towards the end of the letter, though, Faulhaber stated that the Jews were capable of taking care themselves, which he pointed out they had been doing for centuries.<sup>124</sup> While it is tempting to outright condemn the Church for its moral failure, it is important to remember that the Church was in a difficult position, facing these challenges in real-time. Ultimately, it was Hitler's goal to destroy the churches. Because of this, many bishops and clergy remained silent in the hope of not further aggravating the Nazis' opposition towards the Church. In this way, while the German bishops indeed should have taken a more staunch, public stance against the Nazis, based on core Christian teachings, their actions stemmed from a very real fear that if the Church potentially angered the Nazis too much, it could be destroyed by them. Thus, the Church was trying everything in its power to survive.

#### **1.4 The Nazi Persecution of the Church and the Catholic Resistance**

While the bishops themselves failed in many regards, many Catholics found ways to contest Nazi rule. Historians have distinguished two types of opposition. The first, resistance (*Widerstand*), referred specifically to opposition based on political reasoning, while the second, *Resistenz*, represented a form of opposition grounded in civil disobedience, such as refusing to give the Hitler salute. *Resistenz* has also been defined as the "continu[ation] [of the] infus[ion] [of] potent religious values into a society

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<sup>123</sup> Zahn, *German Catholics and Hitler's Wars*, 112.

<sup>124</sup> Ludwig Volk, ed. *Akten Kardinal Michael von Faulhaber: 1917-1934* (Mainz: Matthias-Grünewald-Verlag, 1975), 705.

dominated by National Socialist ideology.”<sup>125</sup> In this way, then, because the Church continued to exist within Nazi Germany and did not completely break under Nazi pressure, like many of the Protestant churches had, it could be argued that in and of itself, this was still a form of resistance. The reason for this was that the Nazis demanded that everything in German culture, including religion, politics, and even daily life fall into strict conformity with Nazi ideology (*Gleichschaltung*). An institution continuing to exist that was morally and ideologically at odds with Nazi ideology, was, indeed a hindrance to the Nazis’ total control of Germany.

For this reason, Hitler sought to eliminate Christian theology and the Church itself, viewing it as a threat to Nazi authority. Hitler’s war on the Church (*Kirchenkampf*) included suppression of Catholic schools, trade unions, youth organizations, and presses. Clergy were also attacked and targeted for prosecution, due to their supposed criminality and immorality. These show-trials were meant not only to discredit the clergy, but to essentially turn the German public against the Church. According to Ernst Helmreich, the persecution of the Church was most severe in Bavaria. The Nazis not only desired to eradicate the Church in the most Catholic region in Germany, but also acted in response to the Bavarian episcopacy’s prior support for the Bavarian People’s Party before Hitler and the Nazi Party rose to power.<sup>126</sup> The Nazis, still paranoid over this support, feared the rise of political Catholicism in Bavaria, where they believed that it had the potential to become a threat to the Nazis’ power.

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<sup>125</sup> Spicer, *Resisting the Third Reich*, 5.

<sup>126</sup> Helmreich, *The German Churches Under Hitler*, 251.

Because of these direct assaults against the Church, Faulhaber spoke out against the Nazis, specifically concerning their attacks on Catholic schools, youth organizations, and, most particularly, the institution of the Church itself. This further prompted Faulhaber to help Pacelli and Pope Pius XI to write an anti-Nazi encyclical, *Mit brennender Sorge* (“With Burning Anxiety”), which was issued in March 1937. The encyclical condemned not only the breaching of the Concordat, but also the Nazis’ ideological view of racism and paganism.<sup>127</sup> This document was smuggled into Germany, where copies were printed secretly in various parts of the country and distributed to parishes and priests to be read at the pulpit on the following Sunday. It was precisely this document that altered the Western political sphere’s view towards the Vatican and the German Church, as many saw this document as an act of resistance. This indicated to many that the Vatican and the German Church had positioned itself as an adversary to the Nazis.<sup>128</sup>

Faulhaber, though, was not the only Catholic to resist in some form against the Nazis in Munich and the region of Bavaria. One of the more prominent figures in Munich to resist the Third Reich, Rupert Mayer, a Jesuit priest, boldly proclaimed that a Catholic cannot be both a Nazi and a Catholic.<sup>129</sup> He is recorded on several instances mocking Hitler and Alfred Rosenberg, the infamous author of “The Myth of the Twentieth

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<sup>127</sup> Pius XI, *Mit brennender Sorge* (“With Burning Sorrow”), 1937, [https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-xi\\_enc\\_14031937\\_mit-brennender-sorge.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_14031937_mit-brennender-sorge.html)

<sup>128</sup> Rodden and Rossi, “Was Pius XII ‘Hitler’s Pope,’?” 412.

<sup>129</sup> See Roman Bleistein’s biography of Rupert Mayer for a detailed analysis of his life--Roman Bleistein, ed., *Rupert Mayer, S.J.: Leben im Widerspruch* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Josef Knecht, 1991).

Century,” a piece of anti-Christian propaganda.<sup>130</sup> Because of this, Mayer was arrested on the dubious charge of working with a royalist resistance group and was sent to the notorious concentration camp Oranienburg-Sachsenhausen in November 1939. Mayer was placed in solitary confinement under horrible living conditions. Potentially through Faulhaber’s influence, Mayer was able to be moved to a Benedictine monastery, where he was placed under permanent house arrest until the conclusion of the war in 1945. He died shortly after, due to his harsh treatment by the Nazi regime.

Willi Graf, another Catholic who resisted the Nazis, was a member of the White Rose Movement, a student-led resistance group in Munich.<sup>131</sup> Graf was a medical student who was forced to serve on the Eastern Front. During his time there, he met Hans Scholl.<sup>132</sup> Both shared the same convictions and were highly critical of the Nazis, leading them to become close friends. When they returned to Munich to complete the remainder of their medical studies, Graf joined the White Rose movement by helping to distribute leaflets to rouse the German people to end the war and overthrow Hitler and the Nazis. Graf not only helped compose the fifth and sixth leaflets, which were by far the most strongly worded, but he also sought to make contact with other resistance groups so as to create a network for the White Rose Movement itself.

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<sup>130</sup> John Murray, “An Apostle of the Great City: Father Rupert Mayer, S.J. 1876-1945,” *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 44 no. 174 (1955), 233.

<sup>131</sup> For additional information on the Willi Graf’s life, see Tatjana Blaha, *Willi Graf und die weisse Rose* (Munich: Saur, 2003).

<sup>132</sup> During their time on the Eastern front, these students witnessed terrible atrocities committed against the civilians, Jews, and prisoners of war in concentration camps. These experiences helped to sharpen their conviction that not only must the war end, but also that Hitler must be stopped. See George Wittenstein, “The White Rose: A Commitment,” in *Confront!*, 215.

In arguably their greatest act of defiance against the Nazis, in February 1943 Graf and two other White Rose members painted the words “freedom” on the walls all around the city of Munich. Unfortunately, the Nazis caught the members of the White Rose movement in early 1943 after they were discovered distributing leaflets. The Nazis took swift action, executing all of them shortly thereafter, except Graf, who was executed last of all, after suffering torture, intimidation, and threats from Gestapo agents for seven months, even after he was already condemned to death.<sup>133</sup>

A Catholic writer and journalist who also had ties to the White Rose Movement was Karl Muth (1867-1944). Muth founded the Catholic journal, *Hochland*, which published articles on a variety of subjects and disciplines in an attempt not only to generate a broad discussion on these particular topics but also to encourage Catholics to engage in German culture and society.<sup>134</sup> According to Hastings, *Hochland*, “was by common acclaim the leading Catholic cultural forum in the German-speaking world.”<sup>135</sup> During the Nazis’ dictatorial reign over Germany, *Hochland* produced several articles written by leading Catholic philosophers and intellectuals who criticized aspects of Nazi

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<sup>133</sup> There was also one more member of the White Rose Movement that became Catholic shortly before his death, Christopher Probst. Probst, because he was a young father, was not as involved in the resistance activity of the White Rose movement, so as to protect his wife and family (Probst did not even write letters). Probst did, however, create the layout for the sixth and final letter. Unfortunately, the Gestapo discovered his last letter with his handwriting on it, in his pocket, which led to his condemnation and death in February 1943. See Richard Hanser, *A Noble Treason: The Revolt of the Munich Students Against Hitler* (New York: Putnam, 1979).

<sup>134</sup> Jeffery T. Zalar, “‘Knowledge Is Power’ the ‘Borromäusverein’ and Catholic Reading Habits in Imperial Germany,” *The Catholic Historical Review* 86 no. 1 (2000), 21.

<sup>135</sup> Hastings, “How ‘Catholic’ Was the Early Nazi Movement?,” 389.

ideology and government, some more covertly than others, which led to the journal being forcibly shut down in 1941.<sup>136</sup>

Despite the suppression of the journal, however, Muth, continued his oppositional activities against the Nazis. As an intellectual, Muth owned a large library filled with books that the Nazis considered to be ideologically dangerous. When Muth met the Scholls in 1943, he invited them to read and discuss with him these banned works, which gave the Scholls further moral and intellectual guidance and framework for their resistance activities.<sup>137</sup> Muth also introduced the Scholls to several intellectuals who were involved in various forms of resistance against Hitler, which enabled the Scholls to form a small network across Germany. Most importantly for the Scholls, though, Muth provided them with the moral and intellectual guidance that gave them much needed encouragement and moral strength for their dangerous activity.<sup>138</sup>

While the actions of these Catholic figures in Munich were heroic, the reality was that Catholic resistance activity was limited in scope, and, most importantly, very few Catholics resisted at all.<sup>139</sup> Michael Phayer argues that because the bishops did not

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<sup>136</sup> There was another Catholic Jesuit journal in Munich, *Stimmen der Zeit*, which was essentially a Catholic forum for Catholic scholarship, and which acted as a Catholic approach to current events. It was later closed due to its criticisms of the Nazi regime and its failure to promote Nazi propaganda. (Alfred Delp was the editor of this paper until it was forcibly shut down by the Nazis.) See Martin F. Ederer, "Propaganda Wars: Stimmen der Zeit and the Nazis, 1933-1935," *The Catholic Historical Review*, 90 no. 3 (2004).

<sup>137</sup> Hanser, *A Noble Treason*, 123.

<sup>138</sup> Hanser, *A Noble Treason*, 170.

<sup>139</sup> While there were other Catholics that resisted the Third Reich and other bishops that spoke out in some form against the Nazis, for the scope of this paper, I have decided to focus on Catholic resisters within the city of Munich. For further information on Catholic resistance within Germany see Spicer, *Resisting the Third Reich*. Bartley, *Catholics Confronting Hitler*. Lapomarda, *The Jesuits and the Third Reich*. Donald J. Dietrich, "Catholic Resistance in the Third Reich," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 3 no. 2, (1988).

become active resisters themselves, this lessened the chance that Catholics would resist at all.<sup>140</sup> This indicates that any resistance activities that Catholics participated in were done so without the support of the German hierarchy, demonstrating that resisters were solitary witnesses.<sup>141</sup> Most likely, then, this made the decision to resist more difficult for individual Catholics, not only because of the fear of punishment and retribution from the Nazis but also because of the fear of isolation they would suffer. Charles Maier argues that the existential loneliness of resisters is seen in a more tragic light because even if the resistance activity was successful, these resisters would still be perceived as traitors to the state.<sup>142</sup> The existence of individual resisters does not mean, however, that the majority of Catholics were any different than the German episcopacy; many individuals were antisemitic, nationalistic, and anti-democratic. Nevertheless, the actions of the Catholics who did resist, “produced men whose readiness to suffer for their faith saved the church from total apostasy during the most tragic and fateful chapter of German history.”<sup>143</sup>

## 1.5 Conclusion

As this chapter has shown, the German episcopacy’s stance towards the Nazis can be seen as morally problematic. According to the Catholic doctrine, the Church’s faith, theology, and tradition are objective truths. This has led the Catholic Church to be judged much more critically by historians than the Protestant Churches. The German Catholic

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<sup>140</sup> Michael Phayer, “Questions About Catholic Resistance,” *Church History* 70, no. 2 (2001), 333.

<sup>141</sup> Charles Maier, “German Resistance in Perspective,” in *Contending with Hitler: Varieties of German Resistance in the Third Reich*, ed. David Clay Large (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 150.

<sup>142</sup> Maier, “German Resistance in Perspective,” in *Contending with Hitler*, 142.

<sup>143</sup> Conway, *The Nazi Persecution of the Churches*, 338.



Church's passive and, in some instances, active collaboration with the Nazis was due to several factors, primarily stemming from prejudice, paranoia, and a desire to prove their loyalty to the German nation. These factors not only influenced its position towards the Nazis but also provided the framework for the Nazis to utilize these fears to their own benefit. In other words, the German bishops' fear of speaking out against the Nazis, coupled with their nationalist sympathies and paranoid fear of bolshevism, made it seem in many ways that, at least in the public sphere, the German Church was somewhat sympathetic to or supportive of the Nazi regime.

Despite this, there were some German Catholics who resisted the Nazis. This can be seen through the heroic actions of ordinary lay and ordained Catholics. These individuals acted without the support of the German episcopacy but still in many cases utilized Catholic teaching as moral guidance and justification for their actions. This is especially evident in the case of Alfred Delp, a Jesuit scholar who utilized Catholic social teaching to create a Christian social policy to be implemented after the fall of the Nazi regime. Delp's academic background made it even more apparent to him that all human beings possess innate dignity and value and ultimately should be respected and protected because they are created by God.

The stance of the German episcopacy makes the decisions and actions of Delp unconventional and unusual, as can be seen with the small number of Catholic priests who actively resisted the Nazis. In an environment of fear and uncertainty, the German bishops chose to remain silent, yet because of the German Church's policy of compromise and collaboration with the Nazis, it can be argued that Delp literally defied the Church's position, thereby jeopardizing the position of the Catholic Church within

Germany. Even so, Delp chose to follow his conscience rather than seeking to preserve his life and the position of the Church in Germany.

## **Chapter 2:**

### **Alfred Delp's Early Years (1907-1937): The Religious and Philosophical Development of a Resistor**

This chapter will trace the personal trajectory of Delp up to his arrival in Munich and examine the beginning of his resistance activity. Delp's formation as a Jesuit exercised a major influence on his later resistance activity as well as on the development of his philosophical and theological ideas. This was due both to his experience as a teacher at a boys' boarding school (Stella Matutina) and, more particularly, to his academic study of the German philosopher Martin Heidegger, from whose work Delp would come to form critical points of view that would provide the framework for his own understanding of the world. One of the key elements of Delp's philosophical outlook is "that humanity without God is not humanity at all."<sup>144</sup> It can be argued that this statement served, in many ways, as the philosophical and theological basis for his entire resistance activity against the Nazi regime.

At the same time, as will be seen, Delp's rejection of Nazi ideology began from his earliest contact with Nazism. This is unlike many of the German resisters like Claus von Stauffenberg, the man who attempted to assassinate Hitler in the tragic and failed July 20<sup>th</sup> 1944 plot. Stauffenberg, like many of the resisters were either sympathetic to Nazi ideology early on or were even members of the Nazi party itself in the formative years of the Nazi movement. It will be argued that Delp's formation as a Jesuit not only further formed him as an individual, but also reinforced Delp's views regarding

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<sup>144</sup> Alfred Delp, *Gesammelte Schriften IV* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Josef Knecht, 1985), 63.

democratic governance and the value and dignity of the human person. From the outset, Delp understood Nazism and Christianity to be fundamentally opposed worldviews.

## 2.1 Delp's Early Life

Delp was born on September 15, 1907, into a Germany still marked by deep religious divisions left by the *Kulturkampf* under Otto von Bismarck. During the *Kulturkampf*, Bismarck and other Protestant nationalists sought to curtail the influence of the Catholic Church through a series of restrictive measures, including the expulsion of the Jesuit order from Germany.<sup>145</sup> These efforts were driven by the belief that Catholics posed a threat to German nationalism due to their perceived divided loyalty to the Roman episcopacy. Moreover, many nationalists claimed that Protestantism—particularly Lutheranism—was the only authentic religion of Germany. Within this framework, to be truly German was to be Lutheran, while other religious confessions, especially Catholicism, were regarded as potential enemies of the state.

While conditions improved for Catholics after the death of Bismarck, many Germans maintained biases against Catholics. Delp's own father, Friedrich Delp, a Lutheran, even held such beliefs. He refused to marry Delp's Catholic mother after the birth of their first child, and it was only after the birth of their first son, Alfred Delp, that he reluctantly married Delp's mother, Maria. While Friedrich Delp's reluctance to marry could potentially be attributed to the disparity between social classes—Delp's father was of a higher class than Delp's mother—the difference between their religion was probably

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<sup>145</sup> For additional information on the *Kulturkampf* and Bismarck's attack on the Catholic Church and the Jesuit order. See Michael Gross, *The War Against Catholicism: Liberalism and the Anti-Catholic Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2004) and Roisin Healy, *The Jesuit Specter in Imperial Germany* (Boston: Brill, 2003).

the most significant reason for his refusal to marry her.<sup>146</sup> In early twentieth century Germany, the stigma against interconfessional marriages, especially between Catholics and Lutherans, was common.<sup>147</sup>

Even though Delp was baptized Catholic, he was raised Lutheran despite the direct wishes of his Catholic mother.<sup>148</sup> Delp would eventually leave the Lutheran faith. As a boy, Delp interacted with Father Johannes Unger at his small church, St. Andreas, near the Lutheran church Delp attended. The discussions that the two had often revolved around theological and philosophical questions. On one occasion, Delp became so engrossed in conversation that he arrived late for his religious instruction, prompting his Lutheran pastor to slap him. It remains unclear whether this act was motivated by jealousy or by irritation at Delp's engagement with a Catholic priest on theological matters.<sup>149</sup> Shortly thereafter, Delp left the Lutheran faith and converted to Catholicism in June 1921. This conversion, however, was not simply a reaction to the pain or humiliation of that incident; rather, Delp was drawn to Catholicism because he believed it offered more compelling theological and philosophical answers than Lutheranism. Delp's experience within the Lutheran tradition also proved formative for his later outlook.

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<sup>146</sup> Coady, *With Bound Hands*, 2.

<sup>147</sup> For additional information on the resistance towards interconfessional marriages in Germany so as to maintain confessional as well as national unity, see Eric McKinley, *Intimate Strangers: Inter-marriage Among Jews, Catholics, and Protestants in Germany, 1875-1935* (PhD Diss., University of Illinois, 2015).

<sup>148</sup> According to Franz von Tattenbach, who would preside over Delp's final vows, confessional difficulties persisted in Delp's family. While Delp deeply loved his father, it would take his Protestant father several years to accept his son's choice of profession. See Franz von Tattenbach, "P. Alfred SJ," in *Das Erzbistum München und Freising in der Zeit der nationalsozialistischen Herrschaft*, Band II, ed. Georg Schwaiger (München: Verlag Schnell & Steiner, 1984), 211.

<sup>149</sup> Coady, *With Bound Hands*, 3.

Although he recognized significant theological differences between confessions, this early exposure likely contributed to his belief that Christians should engage with other religious traditions with nuance, rather than viewing them in prejudicial or adversarial terms.

After his conversion, Delp entered the Dieburg minor seminary with the intention of studying for the priesthood. While in seminary, Germany underwent significant changes, especially after the conclusion of World War I. Disaffected and angered by the outcome of a war that they believed they should have won, Germans accused the leaders of the new democratic republic, who signed the humiliating terms of the peace, of being traitors to the state. Conspiracy theories circulated claiming that Germany had lost the war because of the nefarious actions of Jews, communists, and democratic leaders, leading many Germans to believe that they had been “stabbed in the back.”<sup>150</sup> Along these same lines, Germany viewed itself as both demoralized and humiliated, while at the same time suffering economic and military ruin. It is therefore unsurprising that this environment provided fertile ground for the growth and embrace of radical political groups.

As a student at Dieburg, Delp became actively involved in *Neudeutschland*, which had ties to the Catholic Center Party. During this period, many Germans—especially youth—developed a romantic longing for the return of a pure, untarnished Germany. Criticism of the German educational system particularly appealed to Protestant

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<sup>150</sup> See for example, the collection of documents and analytical essays, *The Stab in the Back Myth and the Fall of the Weimar Republic*, eds. George Vascik and Mark Sadler (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

youth in northern Germany.<sup>151</sup> Catholic youth organizations, however, often framed their critiques through Catholic social teaching and democratic political engagement rather than ethnic nationalism. While many of these groups were initially created to improve conditions within Germany and to restore justice, a significant number would later become receptive to völkisch nationalist ideology.<sup>152</sup>

In contrast to the more Protestant-oriented youth groups, the Catholic youth groups were based on the Catholic social principles put forward by Pope Leo XIII in the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891). The German episcopacy believed they had a dual task: to “Catholicize” the positive elements of youth culture, such as hiking and outdoor recreation, while also protecting Catholic youth from what it perceived to be the harmful effects of other youth organizations.<sup>153</sup> This became even more pressing for the Church in Germany since they recognized that many elements of the other youth groups could be arguably defined as ideologically motivated and against Catholic teaching.<sup>154</sup> As such, German bishops desired to avoid having young people’s groups motivated by non-Catholic political ideology. For this reason, they wanted to create a supplemental pastoral group that would further shape the Catholic German youth.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Ronald Warloski, *Neudeutschland, German Catholic Students, 1919-1939* (Hague, Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff, 1970), xxv-vi

<sup>152</sup> Warloski, *Neudeutschland, German Catholic Students*, 5.

<sup>153</sup> Warloski, *Neudeutschland, German Catholic Students*, xi.

<sup>154</sup> Warloski, *Neudeutschland, German Catholic Students*, xi.

<sup>155</sup> Warloski, *Neudeutschland, German Catholic Students*, 12.

Distantly rooted in the memory of the Kulturkampf, the creation of Catholic youth groups also served as a means of demonstrating loyalty to the state by helping to raise patriotic German boys.<sup>156</sup> According to Mary Frances Coady, the formation of *Neudeutschland* was intended to show “genuine service to the battered Fatherland and a desire to transcend class conflicts and party division.”<sup>157</sup> Delp embraced this approach to Catholicism and patriotism, appreciating its emphasis on “replacing old concepts with fiery new ideas about patriotism and serving God.”<sup>158</sup> He eventually became a leader of *Neudeutschland*, which he saw as crucial both for the development of personal faith and for fostering a healthy appreciation and love for one’s country. Delp, like many bishops, was angered when the Nazis abolished Catholic youth groups in 1934, recognizing that the regime saw *Neudeutschland* as a direct threat to Nazi ideology. Beyond building his patriotism, Delp’s time in the group was deeply formative for his intellectual and spiritual development, exposing him to Catholic social teaching and the principle that society and government should serve the common good—ideas that would later shape his vision of Christian socialism.

## 2.2 Delp Enters the Jesuit Seminary

Delp’s exceptional academic ability—evidenced by his graduating at the top of his class and earning the highest grade on his *Abitur* exam—attracted the attention of Fr. Unger. Recognizing Delp as a promising theologian and philosopher, Fr. Unger arranged,

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<sup>156</sup> See Chapter 1 for an analysis on why the Catholic Church sought to prove its loyalty to the German state and why Catholics were seen as a virtual threat to the German state.

<sup>157</sup> Coady, *With Bound Hands*, 5.

<sup>158</sup> Coady, *With Bound Hands*, 5.



with the support of Delp's bishop, for him to attend the Germanicum in Rome, widely regarded as the premier seminary for Germany's most gifted students. However, as a headstrong and opinionated individual who often struggled to get along with others, Delp resisted this path, which would have been highly advantageous for a young man pursuing an academic priesthood. Instead, he wished to join the Jesuit order. Shocked, Fr. Unger wrote, "What is he thinking! He has disgraced me! With the Jesuits, he'll waste away somewhere as prefect of students."<sup>159</sup>

Delp had first encountered the Jesuits as a boy in the *Neudeutschland* movement, through his Jesuit contacts and by reading the lives of Jesuit saints. He later attended a retreat based on St. Ignatius of Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises*, which deepened his interest.<sup>160</sup> Interestingly, despite his reputation for being independent and headstrong—one biographer even described him as "hot-headed"<sup>161</sup>—Delp initially remained silent about his intentions, fearing to disrupt the plans laid out for him. Eventually, he had his mother, Maria Delp, write to Fr. Unger to inform him that her son had decided instead to become a Jesuit. Delp himself explained simply, "I think that I can best serve the Savior there."<sup>162</sup> In 1926, he departed for Tisis, Austria, to begin the discernment process as a Jesuit novitiate.<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> Bleistein, *Alfred Delp*, 33.

<sup>160</sup> Coady, *With Bound Hands*, 6.

<sup>161</sup> Bleistein, *Alfred Delp*, 54.

<sup>162</sup> Bleistein, *Alfred Delp*, 34.

<sup>163</sup> It is important to note that when the Jesuit order was expelled during the *Kulturkampf* in the 1870s, the Jesuit seminaries relocated to other parts of Europe, where many remained even after the ban was revoked in 1917. See Coady, *With Bound Hands*, 7

During his time as a novice, Delp's days were structured around strict discipline, prayer, and silence, reflecting the Ignatian way of life, which emphasized examination of conscience, manual labor, and physical exercise.<sup>164</sup> Central to Jesuit formation is the principle of finding God in all things and doing it all "for God's greater glory" (*Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam*).<sup>165</sup> Delp embraced this dictum as a guiding principle, and it became a cornerstone for understanding his life and thought. The Ignatian focus on discernment, service, and hope shaped his conviction that Germany could and should be restored to a Christian society. This formation instilled in him a resilience and moral clarity that remained unshaken even in the face of death. In 1945, as he confronted execution, his enduring faith and hope were evident in his final words: "In a half an hour, I'll know more than you do,"<sup>166</sup> reflecting a profound trust and faith in God.

In addition to learning and practicing the Ignatian way of life, Delp's time as a novice not only served to prepare him to become a priest but also helped shape his worldview. One of the changes that occurred to Delp at Dieburg was that he ultimately came to "plac[e] God at the center of his consciousness."<sup>167</sup> Delp's focus on silence, meditation, and submission to God's will shaped Delp, a transformation that became especially evident in the final six months of his life.<sup>168</sup> In 1928, Delp professed his

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<sup>164</sup> Coady, *With Bound Hands*, 10.

<sup>165</sup> Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, trans. George E. Ganss SJ, <https://cise-spirituali.net/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/The-Spiritual-Exercises-of-Saint-Ignatius-EN.pdf>, accessed February 9, 2026.

<sup>166</sup> Bleistein, *Alfred Delp*, 408.

<sup>167</sup> Coady, *With Bound Hands*, 11.

<sup>168</sup> Coady, *With Bound Hands*, 11.

religious vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Subsequently, his superiors sent him to Berchmanskolleg, in Pullach, south of Munich, to study philosophy.<sup>169</sup> The spiritual discipline and intellectual training he received during this period would remain central to Delp's thought and later resistance.

Unlike other religious orders, the Jesuits were often viewed as more progressive in their approach to theology and philosophy. For centuries, Catholic intellectual life was heavily shaped by the medieval philosophical tradition of scholasticism. As the Church encountered new social and intellectual challenges to its authority and teachings, this called for different approaches to Catholic morality and teachings. The problem was that many in the Church were unwilling to adapt to new philosophical ideas or approaches to Catholic doctrine. This was most evident in the 1860s when Pope Pius IX condemned essentially all forms of modernity in his encyclical the *Syllabus of Errors* (1864), due to the ambiguity of the final error.<sup>170</sup> He also pronounced the Catholic doctrine of papal infallibility (1870) to further strengthen his reactionary, ultramontane views. This view within the Church persisted well into the twentieth century, which made the Church appear, especially in Germany, as antiquated and reactionary against new ideas.

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<sup>169</sup> Delp appears to have struggled at times with obedience to his superiors. Rösch later recalled receiving a letter from Provincial Hayler during Delp's philosophy studies at Pullach in which Hayler remarked, "If he doesn't do this and that, he should leave." Although Rösch does not specify what Delp had failed to do, the comment suggests that tensions with authority were not limited to Rösch alone. Such difficulties may help explain the delay in Delp's final vows. See Augustin Rösch, "Rösch: Bemerkungen zu einem Buch über P. Delp," April 22, 1956, in *Augustinus Rösch: Leben im Widerstand: Biographie und Dokumente*, ed. Roman Bleistein (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Josef Knecht, 1998), 309.

<sup>170</sup> The final error that Pius IX articulated was, "The Roman Pontiff can, and ought to, reconcile himself, and come to terms with progress, liberalism and modern civilization. —Allocution 'Jamdudum cernimus,' March 18, 1861." The question remains though what the Pope meant by asserting that he should not reconcile himself to liberalism. Was it simply in terms of politics, or did he also refer to technology, culture? See Pius IX, *Syllabus of Errors* (1864), <https://www.papalencyclicals.net/pius09/p9syll.htm>, accessed September 29, 2025.

The Jesuit order, though, stood at the forefront of adapting different philosophic perspectives to support and defend Catholic teaching; however, many staunch, ultraconservative Catholics considered them to be modernists and a threat to traditional Catholicism. With the ascent of Pope Leo XIII, though, the Catholic Church's perspective on other philosophical approaches and social theories began to change, as seen in Pope Leo's ground-breaking encyclical *Rerum Novarum*.<sup>171</sup> In *Rerum Novarum*, written during the height of the Industrial Revolution, the pope strove to uphold the dignity of the human person and to condemn the abuses committed against workers in factories, since humans often were treated as mere tools in the industrialists' desire for profits and power. More particularly, though, the encyclical was meant also to act as a Catholic alternative to socialism and capitalism as Pope Leo advocated for a balance between the two economic theories.<sup>172</sup>

Pope Leo's work influenced the work of other Catholic social theorists, like Georg von Hertling, Viktor Cathrein, Joseph Mausbach, Theodor Meyer, and most particularly, Heinrich Pesch. Pesch reintroduced to modern society the idea that natural law is intertwined with humanity and solidarity, meaning that an economy and society can function only under Christian ethics and natural law. Without these principles,

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<sup>171</sup> See Jay Corrin, *Catholic Intellectuals and the Challenge of Democracy* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002), chapter 3. This chapter focuses on *Rerum Novarum* and its early responses to it.

<sup>172</sup> Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum* (On Capital and Labor) (1873), [https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_l-xiii\\_enc\\_15051891\\_rerum-novarum.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_15051891_rerum-novarum.html), accessed February 9, 2026.

according to Pesch, a just society does not exist.<sup>173</sup> Another Catholic social theorist,<sup>174</sup> Max Scheler, whose work greatly influenced Delp, found much of his inspiration following the defeat of Germany in 1918. Scheler believed that a spiritual crisis existed among Catholics following the end of World War I. He called for Christian solidarity, the rejection of capitalism, and aid to those suffering from the effects of the war. As a proponent of natural law, he believed this philosophy enabled man to follow and adhere to objective absolutes. According to Scheler, “Person and man as a social component are not mutually exclusive but enhance each other. Man is essentially person and social man, man as I and man as We.”<sup>175</sup> Like Scheler, Delp recognized that the individual and social dimensions of human life are mutually reinforcing rather than antagonistic. This understanding forms a cornerstone of Delp’s concept of Christian Socialism, which emphasizes the common good. It also explains his opposition to Nazism, which violated human dignity and deliberately pitted individuals against the social community, thereby rejecting the common good. Collectively, thinkers such as Pesch and Scheler developed three principles that dominated Catholic social theory in the twentieth century: the dignity of man, solidarity, and subsidiarity (the recognition of the rights of smaller social groups such as family).

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<sup>173</sup> Henrich Pesch SJ, *Liberalism, Socialism, and Christian Social Order: Modern Socialism*, trans. Rupert J. Ederer (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 2006).

<sup>174</sup> The Jesuit order experienced a resurgence of academic thought in the Weimar Republic, due to the renaissance of scholastic Jesuit thinkers in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Germany, where they laid a solid foundation for Catholic social theory. They posited a personalist and voluntarist conception of the human relationship with God throughout history. See Róisín Healy, “Jesuits in Germany—Post-Restoration” (2018), Brill, <https://referenceworks.brill.com/display/entries/JHO/COM-206153.xml>, accessed February 9, 2026.

<sup>175</sup> Max Scheler, *Christentum und Gesellschaft* (Leipzig: Der Neue Geist, 1924), 10.

With this increased interest in Catholic social theory, Pope Leo's revolutionary document changed the trajectory of the Church's approach to the modern world. Following the massive societal changes after World War I, Pope Pius XI wrote *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931), a continuation of Pope Leo's work. While Pope Leo discussed the plight of the workers, Pope Pius examined the ethical implications of the existing social and economic order, demonstrating the dangers of living in a society devoid of Christianity. In this way, Pius offered a Christian alternative to communism as well as capitalism.<sup>176</sup> While this new philosophy and theology "would take several more decades to mature . . . students of Delp's generation reaped the benefits as Catholic social thought took root."<sup>177</sup>

During the 1930s, Delp emerged as an expert on Catholic social teaching, particularly *Quadragesimo Anno*. This expertise later contributed to his invitation to join the Kreisau Circle. His engagement with Catholic social thought shaped not only his theological outlook but also his political judgment during the crises of the Weimar Republic. The economic collapse following the Stock Market Crash of 1929 and the dramatic rise in unemployment and poverty created conditions in which extremist political movements gained traction.<sup>178</sup> The reason for this was that these extremist parties gained support by presenting radical solutions to problems that appeared

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<sup>176</sup> See Charles Curran, *Catholic Social Teaching: 1891-Present* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2002), chapter 6. See chapter 6 for his discussion of *Quadragesimo Anno*.

<sup>177</sup> Coady, *With Bound Hands*, 13.

<sup>178</sup> Karl Polanyi was the most famous economist to make this argument in his work *The Great Transformation*. Polanyi argued that the rise of fascism and totalitarianism in the 1930s was a direct result of the destabilization caused by the Stock Market Crash in 1929. See Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1944).

overwhelming within the existing political system. Delp recognized the danger inherent in such instability. Grounded in Catholic social principles—especially the dignity of the human person, solidarity, and the pursuit of the common good—he rejected radical solutions that subordinated moral order to ideological expediency.

Instead, he believed Catholics should support the Center Party, not only because of its moderate political stance but also because it provided institutional protection for the Church. In a letter to his brother Ewald shortly before the September 1930 election, Delp warned that if the Center Party lost power, Ewald might “visit [his] brother in exile in a few years. If certain political movements get the majority, they will come for us first with a knife.”<sup>179</sup> This statement reveals that Delp feared a renewed *Kulturkampf* and the marginalization of Catholic institutions, including the Jesuits. Subsequent Nazi policies—the dissolution of the Center Party, the suppression of Catholic organizations, and increasing hostility toward religious orders—confirmed the legitimacy of these concerns.

### **2.3 Delp’s Time at Stella Matutina**

In the aftermath of the September 1930 elections, which significantly increased the Nazis’ political power, Delp continued his formation as a Jesuit by entering the next phase of his training, the regency period, during which time he formally began apostolic work. In 1931, his superiors moved him to Feldkirch, Austria, where he became a prefect of the boys’ boarding school, Stella Matutina. In charge of eighty-seven boys, ranging from seventeen to nineteen years-of-age. Delp instructed his students according to the Jesuit style of education, which emphasizes learning to argue and support one’s positions

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<sup>179</sup> Alfred Delp, *Gesammelte Schriften V* (Frankfurt Am Main: Verlag Josef Knecht, 1988), 38.

through logic and reason.<sup>180</sup> At the same time, Delp adopted a teaching style akin to a partnership rather than a strict delineation of authority, which endeared him to the boys. This angered Delp's Jesuit superior Augustin Rösch, though, who believed Delp was not strict enough with the boys. While Delp did admire Rösch, who was a World War I veteran, the two of them clashed frequently on matters involving discipline with the students. The reason for this was that Rösch harbored a great love for the military, particularly its adherence to order and discipline. Delp apparently harbored a love for the military as well. In a letter to Rösch, he wrote "Yesterday I secretly indulged my wanderlust and once again watched the soldiers at the parade on the festival grounds . . . I would have loved to have been a soldier."<sup>181</sup> This is interesting in that this admiration was complicated by Delp's struggle as a Jesuit to fully embrace one of the military's key principles: obedience. His difficulty in following orders continued to cause problems for Rösch, further creating friction in their relationship.

Tensions between Rösch and Delp intensified during Delp's tenure at Stella Matutina. Independent and headstrong, Delp often struggled with rigid obedience and resisted certain established practices. He rejected the traditional form of student exercise, which largely consisted of supervised walks, and instead introduced elements reminiscent of the *Neudeutschland* movement. Under his guidance, students engaged in flag-waving, games, and marching songs that emphasized a distinctly Catholic spirit of allegiance. Delp sought to replace conventional forms of discipline and deportment with a more

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<sup>180</sup> Coady, *With Bound Hands*, 15.

<sup>181</sup> Alfred Delp, *Gesammelte Schriften IV*, 38.



dynamic and consciously Catholic identity, which angered more traditional Jesuits such as Rösch.

Yet Delp's reforms also served as a means to protect the Catholic youth. As the Hitler Youth grew increasingly attractive to German boys, Delp appears to have recognized the need to offer a compelling Catholic alternative.<sup>182</sup> He aimed to shield his students from the ideological pull of National Socialism, which was proving to be quite attractive to German youth.<sup>183</sup> He also addressed the dangers of Nazism directly in discussions and talks, preparing his pupils to confront its claims critically.<sup>184</sup> One former student later recalled that Delp's "pedagogical work was a constant battle for our young souls, whereby the circumstances of the time and consideration for the existence of the college set an unpleasant limit. That was his suffering."<sup>185</sup> This suggests that Delp understood that the education of the youth was becoming an act of moral resistance within increasingly constrained conditions.

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<sup>182</sup> During this time, Delp developed a real talent for working with young people. He believed it was his mission to protect and prepare them against anti-Catholic forces in the world, most particularly with the rise of Nazism in 1933. This attitude can be further seen when Pope Pius XII reiterated "Catholic Action" to German youth on October 27, 1933, which was a major theme of his predecessor Pope Pius XI, especially in his encyclicals "Ubi Arcano" (1922) and "Non Abbiamo Bisogno" (1931). While Pius XII hoped to spark greater lay commitment in the German youth, it did not receive much support in Germany. Delp though saw this as a great opportunity to better prepare the youth to face the evils of the world. See Peter Kern, "St. Blasien und die Studienjahre 1934–1936: Vom Ringen Alfred Delps in den Anfangsjahren der totalitären Machtentfaltung," in *Alfred Delp – Ein Leben für die kommende Welt, Zum 80. Todestag*, Alfred-Delp-Jahrbuch, vol. 14, ed. Peter Kern (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2025), 17.

<sup>183</sup> According to Peter Kern, many parents wanted their child to join the Hitler Youth because they believed it would help them attain good careers as adults, which probably was not a completely unfounded idea. Kern, "St. Blasien und die Studienjahre 1934–1936," 14.

<sup>184</sup> Bleistein, *Alfred Delp*, 78.

<sup>185</sup> Bleistein, *Alfred Delp*, 79.

During his time at Stella Matutina, Delp also authored an Advent play “The Eternal Advent”. It depicted many of the thematic elements of Delp’s philosophy: a lost people, hungry, sick, and lonely, with one means of overcoming their suffering, except through God.<sup>186</sup> The prevalent theme throughout the play is that “God touches us.”<sup>187</sup> In each act, Delp addressed themes aimed at guiding youth: challenging “virile fundamentalism,” discovering true fulfillment even amid difficult circumstances, and promoting social justice for workers in the face of industrialization’s abuses committed against workers.<sup>188</sup> Embedded within this theological vision is Delp’s conviction that true freedom was found in God rather than in the world itself.<sup>189</sup> This belief foreshadowed Delp’s later need to wholeheartedly rely on God during his sufferings, trial, and eventual death. At the same time, it demonstrated continuity within his theological development, especially in his prison writings, where he insisted that even amid suffering and confinement the human person remains inwardly free when centered on God.

Furthermore, “The Eternal Advent” presents a continuation of Delp’s theological and philosophical understanding of the world. As has been shown above, God has to be at the center of one’s consciousness. This point is key to understanding Delp’s theological and philosophical outlook. Delp believed that the modern world had lost God and needed to regain what he called the missing center (God) to be complete and whole again. The

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<sup>186</sup> Endraß, *Gemeinsam gegen Hitler*, 61.

<sup>187</sup> Alfred Delp, “The Eternal Advent” (1935), in *Alfred Delp, Priest and Martyr, Advent of the Heart: Seasonal Sermons and Prison Writings, 1941–1944*, trans. Abtei St. Walburg (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006), 193.

<sup>188</sup> Nguyen, *Against the Titans*, 28-9.

<sup>189</sup> Delp, “The Eternal Advent,” in *Alfred Delp, Priest and Martyr, Advent of the Heart*, 214.

missing center “[was] the separation from God, the supporting foundation of all individual and social being, [which is] what led to the error of man [himself].”<sup>190</sup> This framework was in turn utilized to interpret Germany’s historical distress. As Delp’s thinking further developed, it became clear to him that it was his mission “[to] help[] his country discover its missing center.”<sup>191</sup>

This philosophic outlook primarily stemmed from his deep study of the German philosopher, Martin Heidegger, particularly Heidegger’s work on existentialism and ontology.<sup>192</sup> Delp focused his work on Heidegger’s concept of *Dasein*, which essentially refers to existence and the unique ways in which beings exist in the world. While Delp was influenced by Heidegger’s writings, he believed there was a deep-seated flaw in Heidegger’s philosophical outlook: mainly the limitations the philosopher placed on humanity’s existence as well as his rejection of traditional metaphysics.<sup>193</sup> In Heidegger’s philosophy, man is unable to achieve immortality. Because of this, people develop deep

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<sup>190</sup> Pope, *Im Kreisauer Kreis*, 165.

<sup>191</sup> Coady, *With Bound Hands*, 24.

<sup>192</sup> Peter Kern articulates that Delp most likely became interested in Heidegger’s work shortly after the publication of Heidegger’s work *Being and Time* in 1927. Friends of Delp stated that he tirelessly studied this work in order to uncover its philosophical and theological core so as to primarily counter the “heroism of nothingness, which was directly opposed to the Catholic teachings of immortality and the resurrection of the dead. According to Heidegger, after one’s death, one essentially becomes nothing; hence the idea of the “heroic” individual facing nothingness. See Kern, “St. Blasien und die Studienjahre 1934–1936,” 16.

<sup>193</sup> It is important to note that Heidegger himself was a dedicated member of the Nazi party (he joined in 1933) and used his philosophy as way to legitimize Nazism itself. Due to his antisemitism and anti-modern, völkisch ideas, he believed that Nazism was the means by which Germany could achieve a national resurgence. In Heidegger’s view, Hitler’s goal of world domination was really the manifestation of the destiny of the German people. This makes it all the more interesting that Delp attempted to reconcile such opposing worldviews. For a more in-depth view of Heidegger’s ties to Nazism as well as how his philosophy was used, not necessarily as propaganda, but more as a philosophical framework for Nazi ideology, see Tom Rockmore, *On Heidegger’s Nazism and Philosophy* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992).

anxieties based on the knowledge of their finitude and eventual “non-existence.” Delp saw his philosophy as nihilistic, in which relationships are shaped primarily by anxiety and the anticipation of non-existence. Delp believed Heidegger’s philosophy would lead people to be lost<sup>194</sup> as it is “a call to a ‘tragic existence,’ an existence that ultimately led to meaninglessness and hopelessness.”<sup>195</sup> Ultimately, “this being-in-the-world is dominated by a tremendous inner pessimism, whose most significant achievement is no more than possessing the courage [to say] ‘yes’ to the [ultimate] crash into nothingness.”<sup>196</sup>

In this way, Delp saw Heidegger’s view of anxiety as being thrown into nothingness—it left existence devoid of transcendence.<sup>197</sup> As Delp writes, “Behind [them] lies the nothingness of [their] future, which consists of decay, collapse, and extinction in death. Dasein is finite because its future is finite.”<sup>198</sup> Seen in this light, existence is meaningless, devoid of “substance and depth.”<sup>199</sup> For this reason, Delp believed that Heidegger had left the question of existence unanswered. Left without reason or purpose to live, man “must live and die without dignity amid a chaotic and desperate time.”<sup>200</sup> Since man, according to Delp, is a rational being, he must seek

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<sup>194</sup> Lück, *Bewahrung als Thema des Leben*, 6.

<sup>195</sup> Coady, *With Bound Hands*, 23.

<sup>196</sup> Alfred Delp, *Gesammelte Schriften II* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Josef Knecht, 1983), 119.

<sup>197</sup> Nguyen S.J., *Against the Titans*, 24.

<sup>198</sup> Delp, *Gesammelte Schriften II*, 95.

<sup>199</sup> Delp, *Gesammelte Schriften II*, 95.

<sup>200</sup> Delp, *Gesammelte Schriften II*, 140.

meaning somewhere; when that meaning is no longer grounded in God, man replaces God by worshipping himself. In this way, existence is reduced to a form of solipsism, erasing the distinction between God and humanity.<sup>201</sup> He writes, “The creature supersedes God. The creature finds itself with itself and is completed thereby with itself.”<sup>202</sup> This self-divination only further contributes to the atomization of society, eroding solidarity and willing the good of the other. As he writes, “The sign of our times is that people will separate themselves from one another.”<sup>203</sup> Ultimately, the “tragedy” of Heidegger’s philosophy was the missing center. As Delp remarked, “One does not encounter humanity because one does not find God, and one does not find God because one has no humanity.”<sup>204</sup>

According to Delp, only by recovering the “missing center” could humanity “overcome the crisis of the contemporary time.”<sup>205</sup> Delp’s intensive study of Heidegger from 1928 to 1935 led to the 1935 publication of his analysis and critique of Heidegger in the work “Tragic Existence.” Interestingly, Delp was the first Catholic to not only write about Heidegger but also to try to reconcile Heidegger’s existential philosophy with the Catholic view of transcendence and man’s relationship with God. While it was considered an “immature” attempt by a young student, it marked a decisive stage in

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<sup>201</sup> Nguyen S.J., *Against the Titans*, 25.

<sup>202</sup> Delp, *Gesammelte Schriften II*, 127.

<sup>203</sup> Delp, *Gesammelte Schriften II*, 127.

<sup>204</sup> Delp, *Gesammelte Schriften II*, 143.

<sup>205</sup> Nguyen S.J., *Against the Titans*, 25.

Delp's intellectual formation.<sup>206</sup> According to Delp's fellow Jesuit, Franz von Tattenbach, although his nihilistic interpretation is now outdated, it was quite plausible at the time Delp wrote it, given the philosophical knowledge then available.<sup>207</sup> Philosopher Peter Kern emphasizes that Delp's intensive study of Heidegger helped Delp recognize the dangers of Heidegger's philosophy and, in another sense, further solidified Delp's opposition to Nazism.<sup>208</sup>

While Delp loved his time at Stella Matutina and enjoyed working with young people, the environment in Germany was rapidly changing for the worse. In January 1933, Hitler was appointed Chancellor of Germany and quickly began to consolidate power following the Reichstag fire in February. Following the infamous fire, Hitler attacked and imprisoned political enemies like the communists, socialists, and proponents of democracy. While Hitler originally maintained the pretense of working with the Church as evidenced by the signing of the Concordat in 1933, he very quickly threw off any pretense of protecting and defending the Catholic Church. Unleashing a war against the Church in early 1934 (*Kirchenkampf*), Hitler proceeded to attack Catholic education.

This hostility against Catholic education affected Stella Matutina. In 1934, the regime imposed a fine of one thousand Reichsmarks on German citizens residing outside the Reich (*Reichsfluchtsteuer*), a measure that disproportionately affected Jesuit institutions, many of which were located beyond Germany's borders. As Elke Endraß

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<sup>206</sup> Nguyen S.J., *Against the Titans*, 26.

<sup>207</sup> Tattenbach, "P. Alfred Delp SJ," 212.

<sup>208</sup> Kern, "St. Blasien und die Studienjahre 1934–1936," 17.

notes, these fines functioned merely as a ploy to exert pressure and control over the Jesuit order.<sup>209</sup> The financial strain contributed directly to the closure of Stella Matutina in Austria and forced its relocation to St. Blasien in the Black Forest.<sup>210</sup> This led Delp to directly confront the Nazis' attempt to subordinate religious institutions to political authority. This episode likely played a formative role in Delp's development as a resistor, as it marked his first direct confrontation with a political order that sought to encompass all facets of life, society, and culture, leaving no space for authentic human freedom or personal autonomy.

## **2.4 The Completion of his Studies and the Beginning of his Resistance Activity**

Shortly after Stella Matutina was moved to St. Blasien, Delp departed for Ignatiuskolleg in Valkenburg, Netherlands, to embark on his theology studies. Like Stella Matutina, Ignatiuskolleg was another Jesuit institution that had been forced to move outside of Germany, due to Bismarck's stringent measures during the *Kulturkampf*.<sup>211</sup> While Delp continued his theological studies, Hitler continued his attack on the churches. Shortly after the signing of the concordat in 1933, Hitler dissolved Catholic organizations and youth groups and monitored priests for any anti-Nazi sentiments contained in their preaching. Eventually, Hitler made it illegal for a young man to enter the Jesuit order, yet even before the implementation of this decree, Jesuits had been held in suspicion. For this

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<sup>209</sup> Endraß, *Gemeinsam Gegen Hitler*, 61.

<sup>210</sup> Coady, *With Bound Hands*, 19.

<sup>211</sup> See Healy, *The Jesuit Specter in Imperial Germany*.

reason, according to Coady, “a family’s standard was lowered in the eyes of the Nazis when a son entered the Society of Jesus.”<sup>212</sup>

The Nazis, in fact, were not the first group to be suspicious of the Jesuits, which had been regarded with wariness and distrust throughout the intervening centuries because of prevalent and pervasive rumors.<sup>213</sup> Reported to be secretive, the entire order allegedly housed individual Jesuits who were seen to be manipulative, materialistic, and greedy.<sup>214</sup> Furthermore, the Machiavellian maxim “the ends justify the means” became almost synonymous with the Jesuits, thus connecting the religious order with the Bolsheviks and the Jews as well. By connecting this “association” with the “dissenting” factions of the Bolsheviks and Jews, the Jesuits were seen as seeking world domination. Accordingly, the Nazis accused the Jesuits and even the Catholic Church of undermining the German state by seeking compromises with the Bolsheviks.<sup>215</sup> All of this propaganda indicated to the public that the Church was not a bulwark against communism, as it claimed, but rather was an ally of the Bolsheviks and, thereby, posed a serious risk to Nazism itself. In this way, the Jesuits were seen as part of a greater Judeo-Bolshevik threat to destroy the German nation.<sup>216</sup> The Nazis made it very clear that they were the

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<sup>212</sup> Coady, *With Bound Hands*, 22.

<sup>213</sup> The Nazis also further tried to discredit and demonize the Jesuit order by claiming that Ignatius of Loyola was actually a baptized Jew, which to the Nazis demonstrated that many of the Jesuits themselves were working towards the same ends as the Jews as a whole. See Beth Ann Greich-Polelle, “Jesuits, Jews, Christianity, and Bolshevism,” 42.

<sup>214</sup> Greich-Polelle, “Jesuits, Jews, Christianity, and Bolshevism,” 33. Also see Healy, *The Jesuit Specter in Imperial Germany*.

<sup>215</sup> Greich-Polelle, “Jesuits, Jews, and Communists,” 177.

<sup>216</sup> Greich-Polelle, “Jesuits, Jews, Christianity, and Bolshevism,” 33. Also see Derek Hastings, “Competing Visions of Anti-Communism in Interwar Germany: Catholic and Nazi Portrayals of the ‘Judeo-Bolshevik’ Threat,” *Twentieth-Century Communism* 19 (2020): 6-25.



only group capable of truly understanding the great struggle between Christianity and the Bolshevik-Jewish threat.<sup>217</sup>

Since many Jesuits resided within Germany itself, they were viewed as “internal enemies” and were subject to discrimination and persecution from the Nazis.<sup>218</sup> Moreover, because of the Jesuits’ close ties to the papacy, they appeared to be a threat to the German state. Many within Germany who were already inclined toward an anti-clerical bias utilized the Jesuit order as their scapegoat when something went wrong within society.<sup>219</sup> Later, Hitler tried to prevent the Jesuits from serving in the Wehrmacht in 1941, due to their “moral unfitnes,”<sup>220</sup> since they were deemed anti-German.<sup>221</sup> This is why, according to Vincent Lapomarda, the Jesuit order was the most persecuted out of all of the religious orders within the Catholic Church, with, actually, the highest number of victims out of any religious order to suffer in the concentration camps.<sup>222</sup>

With this background, it is in many ways unsurprising that Delp would oppose the Nazi regime from the outset of its rise to power in 1933. But Delp’s opposition also stemmed from the regime’s direct attacks on the Catholic Church, and Delp’s deep-seated belief that Nazism not only stripped man of their dignity but also forcibly attempted to

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<sup>217</sup> Greich-Polelle, “Jesuits, Jews, and Communists,” 163.

<sup>218</sup> Greich-Polelle, “Jesuits, Jews, Christianity, and Bolshevism,” 33.

<sup>219</sup> Lapomarda, *The Jesuits and the Third Reich*, 10.

<sup>220</sup> Lapomarda, *The Jesuits and the Third Reich*, 19.

<sup>221</sup> Coady, *With Bound Hands*, 162.

<sup>222</sup> Most of the Jesuits were sent to the concentration camp, Dachau. See Vincent A. Lapomarda, “The Jesuits and the Holocaust,” *Journal of Church and State* 23, no. 2 (1981): 244.

sever man's connection with God and replace it with a neo-pagan religion based on race and blood. Delp believed that this loss of God in contemporary society was at the forefront of why Germans had rejected God in favor of a neo-pagan religion.

Delp continued to expand on this conviction throughout his time at Valkenburg, evidenced by a four-part homily series he wrote that directly attacked the Nazi regime; these homilies were subsequently published in 1935 in the monthly journal "Chrysologus – Blätter für Kanzelberedsamkeit."<sup>223</sup> In one of his sermons during Advent, Delp wrote, "The original religious meaning of Advent is rejected. People believe they no longer need a divine homeland to which to immigrate. God is within them; they are ultimately God themselves; and there is no God above them."<sup>224</sup> Covertly, Delp was speaking of the Nazis. He would likely have seen their actions as claiming divine authority, particularly in their attempts to undermine and destroy the Church. The sermon also critiques the Aryan view of the world, which is reminiscent of Heidegger in that their existence is their final reality, thus rejecting the Christian worldview of life after death.<sup>225</sup> Moreover, he maintains that since the Germans see the Church merely as an institution "as the result of a priestly will for power," then they are inevitably bound in viewing their existence in terms of race and materiality, thus rejecting the mission of the Church in helping souls achieve eternal life.<sup>226</sup>

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<sup>223</sup> Kern, "St. Blasien und die Studienjahre 1934–1936," 17.

<sup>224</sup> Delp, "Advent 1935," in *Alfred Delp, Priest and Martyr*, 218.

<sup>225</sup> Delp, "Advent 1935," in *Alfred Delp, Priest and Martyr*, 219.

<sup>226</sup> Delp, "Advent 1935," in *Alfred Delp, Priest and Martyr*, 220-221.

Delp was deeply concerned with what he saw as many Germans' growing obsession with a "Nordic" worldview. He argued that this Nordic ideology functioned as a religion—though not a traditional one grounded in ethical commandments or religious obligations.<sup>227</sup> Rather, it was a purely materialist creed in which God was rejected in favor of race. As Delp wrote, "Religion becomes a biological, racially limited pantheism. Everything is measured against conformity with the racially determined characteristic and is not subject to any other judgment. This religion is basically nothing other than the monstrous attempt at national self-deification."<sup>228</sup> In this formulation, Delp contended that the German people were not merely elevating race but were, more profoundly, divinizing themselves. As he observed elsewhere, "He makes god in his own image, of human blood and kind he is to be descended."<sup>229</sup> This critique parallels themes found in Heideggerian existentialism. Since eternal life was rejected, existence becomes purely material, and meaning is confined to historical struggle. By this logic, Aryanism reduces transcendence to biological existence and transforms race into an object of worship.

Delp extended this criticism to the ideal of the "Nordic hero." In his view, this figure was subject to no moral law beyond a self-defined "law of honor," which ultimately led to self-destruction.<sup>230</sup> Existence became framed primarily in terms of combat and struggle for self-realization. Such self-realization rejected divine authority

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<sup>227</sup> Alfred Delp, *Gesammelte Schriften I* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Josef Knecht, 1983), 124.

<sup>228</sup> Delp, *Gesammelte Schriften I*, 124.

<sup>229</sup> Delp, *Gesammelte Schriften I*, 125.

<sup>230</sup> Delp, *Gesammelte Schriften I*, 177.

and instead relied upon “one’s own powers.”<sup>231</sup> Without hope of eternal life, redemption was sought in heroic self-realization, culminating in a glorious death—what Delp described as an “eternal tragedy.”<sup>232</sup> For Delp, this was tragic precisely because it reduced the human person to a purely material being locked in perpetual racial struggle, rather than willing the good of the other.

Delp’s opposition towards Nazism especially emanated from a deep concern over the Nazis’ destruction of the dignity of the human person, which aimed at the stripping of one’s personhood and the subordination of individuals to the state. In a letter to his friend Karl Thieme, a German historian and political scientist, Delp discussed an anthropologically grounded Third Way between capitalism and Marxism, where individual and social forces harmonized in the idea of “man before himself.”<sup>233</sup> This would later take the form of his concept of personal socialism, which will be discussed later.

This discussion must have inspired Delp to further expand on these ideas as he invited thirteen Jesuit professors at Valkenburg, including the theologian Karl Rahner (1904-1984), whose work was later highly influential at the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), to compose a work detailing a new, ideal society to be formed once the Nazi regime had been removed from power. Entitled “The Rebuilding” (*Der Aufbau*), the book at its completion was to contain topics outlined by Delp and written by the various

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<sup>231</sup> Delp, *Gesammelte Schriften I*, 176.

<sup>232</sup> Delp, *Gesammelte Schriften I*, 176.

<sup>233</sup> Pope, *Der Kreisauer Kreis*, 134.

authors according to their expertise. Through their work, the authors hoped “to identify [a] positive potential for a re-foundation of German life, to identify. . . [a] Catholic fulfillment and expansion of these possibilities” as Josef Neuner, one of the Jesuits involved in the project, explained.<sup>234</sup> Neuner also stated that the goal of this project was “to argue against the National Socialist ideology that proved to be totalitarian, but also to find an alternative from this differentiation and to gather the strength for a better rebuilding.”<sup>235</sup>

With the book, Delp hoped to fulfill what he believed to be his duty to expose the lies and deceptions to other Germans and to reveal Nazism as it truly was—a neo-pagan religion.<sup>236</sup> One of Delp’s friends, Georg Straßenberger, later told Roman Bleistein:

As I recall, his intention was to 'capture' the few positive elements of Nazi ideology (as it soon turned out, only slyly inserted as eye-catchers) and to present them in depth from a Christian perspective. As soon as he then realized how clearly the entire movement was proceeding, it became clear to him that there was nothing left to 'capture' and save, and he abandoned the plan.<sup>237</sup>

What Delp had composed up to that point, however, clearly articulated the need for Germans to return to God and his belief that the word of God was deeply embedded within the German people. This profound religiosity amongst the German people, Delp stressed, demanded from them adherence to basic divine laws that included respect for the dignity of all human beings and the avoidance of acts in opposition to natural law.<sup>238</sup>

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<sup>234</sup> Bleistein, *Alfred Delp*, 92.

<sup>235</sup> Bleistein, *Alfred Delp*, 92.

<sup>236</sup> Kern, “St. Blasien und die Studienjahre 1934–1936,” 21.

<sup>237</sup> Bleistein, *Alfred Delp*, 92.

<sup>238</sup> *Der Aufbau*, Arch. Prov. ECE SJ: 47-23, NR. 11.

And while Delp certainly saw this as a dark period in Germany's history, he remained hopeful that Germany could return to a good and just society so long as the German people unified to achieve this rebuilding of German society.<sup>239</sup> Moreover, Delp believed that Germany must restore its Christian roots to be an example to the East, especially Russia and its "irrational Marxism."<sup>240</sup> Most importantly, Delp rejected one of the key ideological principles of Nazism, proclaiming that the foundation of German society cannot be based on blood and race; rather, German society must overcome this false view of man and society through faith in God. In Delp's view, the only true society is one built on Christ and his teachings.<sup>241</sup> Even though Delp ultimately abandoned *Der Aufbau* under the growing threat of the Nazi regime, this book can be seen as a turning point in his opposition to Nazism as he took the important step of moving from simply internally opposing the Nazis to actively planning a world without the Nazis. In this way, Delp had made the conscious decision to resist the Nazis.<sup>242</sup>

## 2.5 Conclusion

Shortly after Delp abandoned the project outlining a post-Nazi society, he left for Munich, the birthplace of the Nazi Party in 1919, to be ordained a priest. As this chapter has shown, Delp's early life was deeply formative, especially in terms of his spirituality

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<sup>239</sup> *Der Aufbau*, Arch. Prov. ECE SJ: 47-23, NR. 11.

<sup>240</sup> *Der Aufbau*, Arch. Prov. ECE SJ: 47-23, NR. 11.

<sup>241</sup> *Der Aufbau*, Arch. Prov. ECE SJ: 47-23, NR. 11.

<sup>242</sup> This project has not received much attention in the secondary literature, leaving many scholars to believe that Delp's resistance activity did not begin until the 1940s, which is simply not the case as discussed above. Peter Kern, one of the leading academics on Delp, notes that Roman Bleistein first drew historians' attention to *Der Aufbau* in his biography of Delp. Despite this, the project has largely been overlooked in the historiography, contributing to the misconception that Delp's resistance began in the 1940s.

and philosophical outlook. Unlike many of the other resisters, Delp recognized Nazism as a neo-pagan religion from its outset and, for this reason, even tried through various means to protect Catholic youth from the ideological onslaught of the Nazi regime. He also attempted to make other Germans aware of the great threat Nazism posed to Germany itself through his homilies and other writings.

As a social philosopher, Delp was deeply concerned about the rejection of biblical truths (natural law) and the destruction of the dignity of the human person. Like other Catholic priests, including the German hierarchy, Delp despised the Nazis' war on the Church and its encroachment on Catholic youth groups and schools. Ultimately, this led Delp to form a group of Jesuits to formulate a post-Nazi society based on Christian principles. This important move to resistance was different from most in the German hierarchy, who protested the Nazis based largely on religious concerns, especially after the Nazis repeatedly broke the terms of the Concordat. Delp, one of the earliest Catholics to actively oppose the regime, resisted for religious as well as political reasons as can be seen with the project, *Der Aufbau*.

While Delp's decision to resist the Nazis emanated primarily from his deep faith and his formation as a priest, these reasons do not entirely account for his ideological resistance since many priests and bishops opposed the Nazis when the Nazis broke the terms of the Concordat. In this way, it can be argued that Delp's ideological resistance against the Nazis lies both with his temperament and his intensive study of Heidegger, which enabled him to see clearly many of the problematic elements of Heidegger's philosophy, particularly his ideas on the German nation and antisemitism. In the end,

these years prepared Delp spiritually, intellectually, and emotionally to face the evils of the regime in the dark days ahead in the final years of his life in Munich.



### **Chapter 3:**

#### **Alfred Delp's Interim Years (1937-1941): From Abstract Criticism to Active Resistor**

On June 24, 1937, Cardinal Michael Faulhaber ordained Alfred Delp in Munich's St. Michael's Church. Delp's humanistic education, Jesuit formation, and study of Heidegger deeply shaped his theocentric worldview and enabled him to recognize the evils of Nazism early in the Third Reich, prompting him, along with fellow Jesuits, to formulate a post-Nazi society based on Christian principles. As a result of these earlier experiences, by the time of his arrival in Munich, Delp already was an ideologically committed opponent of the Nazi regime.

After ordination, Delp remained in Munich. His time there proved formative for him. As this chapter will show, before joining the Kreisau Circle—which sought to establish a democratic order after Nazism—Delp served as editor of the Jesuit journal *Stimmen der Zeit*. In this capacity, he sharpened his critique of the Nazi regime while simultaneously advancing his thinking on Catholic social theory and articulating a utopian vision for a society rebuilt on Christian principles. At the same time, by moving to the city of Munich, Delp found himself at the epicenter of the Jesuit resistance network, headed by his superior, Augustin Rösch. This location enabled Delp to create contacts and connections with both Catholic and Protestant resistance members as well as other Nazi resisters before he formally joined the Kreisau Circle in 1942. Additionally, through this network, Delp joined a group of Catholics who protected and sheltered Jews. While Delp did engage in what could be termed ideological resistance against Nazism with *Der Aufbau*, as discussed in chapter 2, his opposition shifted significantly from 1937

to 1941. As a seminarian, he had previously critiqued the Nazis abstractly and philosophically, but during his time in Munich, he became involved in physical, concrete action against the regime and thus positioned himself as a dangerous and potent enemy of the Nazi state.

While Delp's ordination was a source of joy for him, the reality was that it was a difficult time to be an oppositional priest in 1937 Nazi Germany. The German Catholic Church had been subject to abuses ranging from the suppression of certain aspects of public worship to the persecution of clergy as a means of establishing Nazi ideology as the sole spiritual and political force in German life. Moreover, many National Socialists distrusted the Jesuits and attacked the Jesuits vehemently in a series of propaganda suits from 1935 to 1936 during the *Sittlichkeitsprozesse*.<sup>243</sup> They were accused of a variety of misdeeds: homosexual acts—especially because they taught at schools and universities—financial misconduct, and disloyalty to the Fatherland, Jesuits were portrayed as such a threat to Munich that the Gestapo ordered that they should be monitored very closely. The report further stipulated that “public appearances of the Jesuits are to be reported immediately, and even if no activities are observed, a report is to be made on the 30<sup>th</sup> of every month starting from May 30, 1935.”<sup>244</sup> This statement reveals the Nazis' paranoia of and obsession with the Jesuits. These tensions were not isolated incidents: according to documents in the *Erzbistum Archiv* in Munich, forty to fifty Jesuit priests—roughly 80% of those living in the city—were in conflict with Nazism in 1935. By 1940–1941,

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<sup>243</sup> Rodden and Rossi, “Was Pius XII ‘Hitler’s Pope’?”, 412.

<sup>244</sup> Walter Mariaux, *The Persecution of the Catholic Church in the Third Reich: Facts and Documents* (New York: Longman, Green, 1942), 64.

approximately 87% of Jesuits (20 out of 23) were in some capacity opposed to or at odds with the regime, demonstrating that Delp's resistance was part of a broader pattern within the order in Munich itself.<sup>245</sup>

It can further be argued that Delp was shaped by the outspokenness of one of his senior Jesuit associates in Munich, Rupert Mayer.<sup>246</sup> Considered by Nazi authorities in Munich as one of the most dangerous priests in the city, Mayer was arrested and sentenced to prison in 1937, shortly before Delp's ordination to the priesthood. Facing accusations that he "improper[ly] use[d] [] the pulpit,"<sup>247</sup> Mayer, as early as 1923, had condemned Nazism by arguing that a Catholic could not be a Nazi party member. As a self-described "fanatic for the truth," Mayer would endure many prison sentences and even spend time in the Sachsenhausen concentration camp. Eventually, he was moved to solitary house arrest, possibly because of Cardinal Faulhaber's efforts.<sup>248</sup> Mayer's visible

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<sup>245</sup> Peter Claus Hartmann, *Kampf und Widerstand in München: 1922-1945* (Regensburg: Schnell & Steiner: 2018), 160-161.

<sup>246</sup> See Bleistein, ed., *Rupert Mayer, S.J.: Leben im Widerspruch*.

<sup>247</sup> Coady, *With Bound Hands*, 2.

<sup>248</sup> Faulhaber's efforts to have Mayer released were discussed at length with Pacelli beginning in 1937. The two of them began to discuss Mayer even before he was arrested because they were concerned with Mayer's preaching. While in the series of letters, both Faulhaber and Pacelli exhibit concern for Mayer, the correspondence indicates that the two were more worried with Mayer breaking the terms of the Concordat by speaking too "politically." They even had Mayer issue a statement stating that he would respect the laws of the state. Mayer also stated that, "Despite my temperament as a people's preacher, I will endeavor to comply with the legal regulations in my speeches." After Mayer was arrested, Faulhaber wrote to the Reich Minister for Ecclesiastical Affairs, citing not only articles I and V in the Concordat but also the fact that Mayer was a decorated World War I veteran. While it is possible that Faulhaber's efforts were partially responsible for Mayer's move to solitary house arrest, it is more likely that the Nazis wanted to avoid creating a martyr figure for the popular priest in Munich. Even so, what makes this episode even more interesting is that while Faulhaber tried in some capacity to help Mayer, Faulhaber was silent after Delp was arrested in 1944 and did not attempt in any way to help Delp, who was accused of having ties to *Operation Valkyrie*. Shortly following Delp's arrest, Faulhaber condemned the plot and reaffirmed his loyalty to the Führer with Delp ultimately being executed by the Nazis in early 1945. See AEMF-BA002/1, 8318, Predigtverbote-1937-1938 and AEMF, Rupert Mayer SJ (Informativprozess 1937-1951), 5975.

courage and defiance within Delp's own Jesuit province likely provided a concrete model of resistance for the young Jesuit.<sup>249</sup>

The Nazis also spread anti-Jesuit publications, invoking old, anti-Jesuit stereotypes. Hubert Hermann's 1933 pamphlet, "The Jesuit: The Obscurantist without a Homeland,"<sup>250</sup> invoked the long-standing prejudice against Jesuits. Hermann warned against the alleged "dark" influence of the Jesuits, disparaging its members as "public vermin" (*Volksschädlinge*).<sup>251</sup> Like Hermann, Alfred Rosenberg, the infamous author of *The Myth of the Twentieth Century* (1930), and NSDAP ideologist charged:

The fact that the Church did not condemn the doctrine of corpselike obedience shows that it strove for the latter, like its tool, the Society of Jesus. And just as the Syrian-African order wished to work for the very greatest praise of God, so the Jesuit order worked conscious of its goal, *Ad maiorem dei gloriam*, for the disintegration of the Nordic-Germanic West, and naturally wormed its way in everywhere that a wound appeared in the national body.<sup>252</sup>

This passage criticizes Catholicism from a racist perspective, portrays Jesuit obedience as inherently authoritarian, and depicts the Society of Jesus as a parasitic force within the national body—using imagery strikingly similar to that employed against the Jews. Delp was so disturbed by this attack on the Jesuit order that, in December 1936, he even planned to confront Rosenberg himself. According to Roman Bleistein, Delp "wanted to

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<sup>249</sup> Coady, *With Bound Hands*, 30.

<sup>250</sup> For a brief analysis of anti-Jesuit stereotypes, see chapter 2.

<sup>251</sup> See Hubert Hermann, "The Jesuit: The Obscurantist without a Homeland" (propaganda pamphlet, 1933), [http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_image.cfm?image\\_id=2068](http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_image.cfm?image_id=2068), accessed September 11, 2025.

<sup>252</sup> Alfred Rosenberg, *The Myth of the Twentieth Century*, trans. Vivian Bird (NS Requiem Publications, 2022), 156-157.

talk to the man once, to be sure, what to expect and what not.”<sup>253</sup> It was unclear what Delp’s intentions were for the meeting. However, before Delp followed through on his plan, his Jesuit superior, Rösch, dissuaded him from this course of action.<sup>254</sup> The episode illustrates Delp’s willingness to challenge National Socialist ideology directly and suggests a certain boldness in confronting a regime capable of severe reprisals. As Rösch later said Delp never concealed his opposition to Nazism in any way.<sup>255</sup>

Shortly after Delp’s ordination, he left Munich for a short time to complete the remainder of his studies at Frankfurt, receiving his licentiate in theology in July of 1938. After completing his degree, Delp moved to Starnberger See, south of Munich, to finish his post-ordination formation. Known as the tertianship, it included a thirty-day silent retreat usually taken immediately before making final vows. However, due to complications, Delp did not take his vows until December 8, 1944, while he was being held in Tegel prison a couple of months before his death. The delay was unusual. Some evidence suggests that Delp’s strong personality and outspokenness caused concern among his superiors, contributing to hesitation regarding the timing of his final profession.<sup>256</sup> At the same time, broader political conditions also played a decisive role. By 1939, the Nazis had forcibly closed seminaries; Jesuit institutions were specifically targeted as the Nazis shut down Jesuit schools and journals, confiscated Jesuit property,

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<sup>253</sup> Bleistein, *Alfred Delp*, 121.

<sup>254</sup> Bleistein, *Alfred Delp*, 121.

<sup>255</sup> Augustin Rösch, “Rösch: P. Alfred Delp, 2. 2. 1945 Berlin-Plötzensee,” January 22, 1956, in *Augustinus Rösch: Leben im Widerstand*, ed. Roman Bleistein, 302.

<sup>256</sup> Rösch, “Rösch: P. Alfred Delp, 2. 2. 1945 Berlin-Plötzensee,” 299.

and arrested and harassed Jesuits themselves. In other words, they systematically created an environment that made taking such vows dangerous, both personally and for the order itself. In the midst of this increasingly hostile political climate, and coupled with Delp's tensions with his Jesuit superiors, it is unsurprising that his final vows were delayed.

Following the completion of his studies as a Jesuit, he aspired to enter the University of Munich. With the permission of his superiors, Delp applied in the spring of 1939 for a doctoral program in philosophy. By 1939, the government closely monitored and controlled university life, especially impacting the acceptance process. Delp's opposition to Nazism ensured that his application was rejected as the Gestapo and Nazi authorities had already singled him out as a potential subversive. In fact, the Nazis did not believe Delp would ever be sympathetic to or supportive of Nazism. A background check on Delp included an assessment by an unnamed Obersturmbannführer in Berlin, who declared: "A positive commitment from Delp to Nazism can never be expected."<sup>257</sup> Since the Nazis demanded ideological conformity within academic institutions, this evaluation effectively ended Delp's prospects for admission to the doctoral program.

Greatly disappointed, Delp endeavored to serve the Church in another capacity. With the outbreak of World War II in 1939, he thought he could best serve the Church as a chaplain for the Wehrmacht.<sup>258</sup> On August 31, 1939, he appealed to the bishop of the Wehrmacht, Franz Justus Rarkowski, who was happy to recommend Delp for service.<sup>259</sup>

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<sup>257</sup> Obersturmbannführer to the University of Munich (1939), Arch. Prov. ECE SJ, ABT. 47-23, NR. 7.

<sup>258</sup> For additional information on the Catholic priests serving in the Wehrmacht, see Bergen, *Between God and Country* and Rossi, *Wehrmacht Priests*.

<sup>259</sup> Delp's Correspondence with the Bishop of the Wehrmacht, Franz Justus Rarkowski, Arch. Prov. ECE SJ, Abt. 47-23, NR. 8.

In his letters to Rarkowski, Delp explained that he wanted to serve his country in some capacity similar to the other men in his family, who were serving at the front. He explained that he felt uncomfortable that he was at home, while the men in his family were at the front.<sup>260</sup> Delp reiterated his desire for service in subsequent letters to Rarkowski. The bishop soon tired of Delp's persistence, accusing him of being too ambitious and over-zealous.<sup>261</sup> In the end, Rarkowski informed Delp that Munich officials objected to a member of a religious order serving in the Wehrmacht.<sup>262</sup>

Given what is known about the role of military chaplains under the Nazi regime, it may seem surprising that Delp—who was critical of National Socialism—would consider serving in such a capacity. However, this apparent contradiction becomes more understandable in light of his vocational trajectory. Delp had originally been oriented toward an academic career, and when this path unexpectedly closed, he appears to have sought another form of priestly service. In this way, this decision was not an endorsement of the regime, but rather an opportunity to exercise pastoral ministry within the limited options available to him.

### **3.1 *Stimmen der Zeit***

As Delp had not yet found a suitable apostolate, his religious superiors assigned him as the editor of *Stimmen der Zeit* (“Voices of the Times”), a Jesuit-run theological

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<sup>260</sup> Delp's Correspondence with the Bishop of the Wehrmacht, Franz Justus Rarkowski, Arch. Prov. ECE SJ, Abt. 47-23, NR. 8.

<sup>261</sup> Delp's Correspondence with the Bishop of the Wehrmacht, Franz Justus Rarkowski, Arch. Prov. ECE SJ, Abt. 47-23, NR. 8.

<sup>262</sup> Delp's Correspondence with the Bishop of the Wehrmacht, Franz Justus Rarkowski, Arch. Prov. ECE SJ, Abt. 47-23, NR. 8.

journal published in Munich. Founded in 1865, the journal was internationally recognized as a leading forum for Catholic scholarship and commentary on current events.<sup>263</sup>

Amazingly, *Stimmen der Zeit* continued to be published until 1941, avoiding the plight of so many Catholic newspapers and periodicals that the German government closed within a year of Hitler's appointment as Chancellor.<sup>264</sup>

It has fascinated historians that *Stimmen der Zeit* remained in print for as long as it did while simultaneously criticizing the Nazi regime.<sup>265</sup> As Martin Ederer affirms, "Very few overtly Catholic journals—much less those remaining defiant of the new Nazi world order—survived Hitler's *Gleichschaltung*."<sup>266</sup> Andrea Männer maintains that *Stimmen der Zeit* was able to stay in print for as long as it did because it joined in 1935 the Association of the Catholic-Ecclesiastical Press (*Fachschaft der katholisch-*

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<sup>263</sup> Ederer, "Propaganda Wars," 456.

<sup>264</sup> This crackdown against any form of dissent and political opposition was essentially meant to force conformity to the Nazi regime, especially due to the efforts of Joseph Goebbels, head of the propaganda ministry. Shortly after the Reichstag fire in 1933, Hitler banned all other political parties, thus eliminating a large number of German newspapers. The remaining newspapers were terrorized by the Nazis in various ways. In October 1933, Hitler passed the Editors' Law (*Schriftleitergesetz*), which only permitted "racially-pure" Germans to be journalists. Jewish-run newspapers faced forced buyouts that were well below market prices; the newspapers were subsequently sold to Nazi-approved owners. Non-Jewish papers were also subject to other means of Nazi terror through raids on their offices, leading many to be destroyed. When Hitler eliminated freedom of the press, this resulted in mass censorship of the press, culminating in the infamous May 1933 episode of the public display of the burning of all "un-German" books. See Spielvogel and Redles, *Hitler and Nazi Germany*, 206-207.

<sup>265</sup> The Jesuit staff of *Stimmen der Zeit*, including Delp, were all monitored carefully by the Gestapo. According to Martin Ederer, "Father Anton Koch once faced charges for the contents of a sermon; Father Max Pribilla's book, *Fürchtet Euch nicht: Grundsätzliche Erwägungen zur kirchlichen Lage* was seized from Munich bookstores; authorities censored Father Peter Lippert's texts from a 1937 radio Mass; and Father Erich Przywara was heckled and egged at an address he gave at the University of Munich in 1935." See Ederer, "Propaganda Wars," 457.

<sup>266</sup> Ederer, "Propaganda Wars," 457.



*kirchlichen Presse*) for protection from the regime.<sup>267</sup> Because of this, the journal forfeited the ability to critique Nazism. By 1937, it was forced to print Nazi advertising in its journal.<sup>268</sup> Like Ederer, Männer argues that the journal was not pro-Nazi. Due to this difficult situation, its critiques of the Third Reich were masked in subtle and indirect ways.

For Delp, his appointment as editor of *Stimmen der Zeit* only helped to further develop and refine his ideas on social theory. According to Delp, the fundamental problem of German society was the continued secularization of German culture. He argued that Nazism posed a dark and dangerous threat especially since individual Germans had abandoned spiritual and transcendent values. Nazism rejected religious faith and belief in God, replacing morality with a Darwinian concept of survival of the fittest.<sup>269</sup> Delp found this idea repugnant, arguing that it left humanity spiritually bereft and lost.<sup>270</sup> Delp reiterated the reality of a society without God while in prison. In a letter to a friend in December 1944, Delp explained:

Western humanity today is spiritually homeless, naked, and exposed.. . . Such people will never lack followers since there are so many who long for a well-founded communal home to which they can feel they ‘belong.’ Time after time in the end they come to realize that the shelter offered is not all it purports to be—it cannot keep out the wind and the weather. And time and time again the deluded seekers conclude they have been taken in

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<sup>267</sup> Andrea Männer, *Stimmen aus Maria-Laach / Stimmen der Zeit: Die Jesuitenzeitschrift und ihre Redaktion vom Ersten Vatikanischen Konzil bis zum Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Sankt Ottilien: EOS Editions, 2019), 302.

<sup>268</sup> Männer, *Stimmen aus Maria-Laach / Stimmen der Zeit*, 302.

<sup>269</sup> Pope, *Alfred Delp S.J.*, 132.

<sup>270</sup> Lück, *Bewahrung als Thema des Lebens*, 6.

by a mountebank who probably had no intention of deliberately deceiving but was nevertheless a charlatan misleading himself and others. . . .<sup>271</sup>

In Delp's view, the only solution to remedy the problems Germany was facing, was for German society to return to Christianity as its foundation. For Delp, social questions were primarily a religious concern. Every person possessed an innate dignity in that they were created in the image and likeness of God. Anyone who attacked a person's dignity was guilty of blasphemy against God.<sup>272</sup> Delp wrote,

From this immutable divine order of law arise the inalienable human rights, which are given with the God-created nature of man and are therefore independent of every state and political order, and the curtailment and violation of which have the most pernicious consequences for the life of the individual person and the community. This includes, above all, freedom of the spirit, conscience, and faith.<sup>273</sup>

Delp applied his notion of social theory to contemporary Germany. Increasingly, Delp became angered by the Catholic Church's lack of resistance against Nazism, particularly its dehumanization and persecution of individuals deemed undesirable.<sup>274</sup> When Delp

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<sup>271</sup> Alfred Delp, *The Prison Meditations of Father Alfred Delp* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1963), 2.

<sup>272</sup> Antonia Leugers, *Gegen eine Mauer bischöflichen Schweigens—Der Ausschuß für Ordensangelegenheiten und seine Widerstandskonzeption 1941 bis 1945* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Josef Knecht, 1996), 109-136.

<sup>273</sup> Delp, *Gesammelte Schriften IV*, 389.

<sup>274</sup> The pseudo-racial theories of the Nazis were based not only on preexisting antisemitic currents but also on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century racial theorists. These theorists divided different races into categories, arguing that Aryans stood at the top of the racial pyramid. In the view of the racial theorists, the Aryans were light-skinned, tall people who somehow ended up in Europe and became the emissaries of culture. Throughout Hitler's reign as totalitarian leader, he preached that the good German racial pool was being tainted by non-Aryans; because of this, Hitler drew upon the idea that Aryans, the "master race," had the right to destroy all elements that were infecting the Aryan blood, whether it was the disabled, sick, or even other racial groups like the Jews or Roma. In other words, these racial theorists gave Hitler the "justification" to commit euthanasia, forced sterilizations, and even mass murder. See Doris L. Bergen, *War and Genocide: A Concise History of the Holocaust* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009), 37.

learned of the Nazis' euthanasia program, this led to him delivering a series of sermons in 1941 condemning the practice. As Delp wrote,

Never before has society considered it its duty to abandon the suffering person. The doctor, who along opposes the argument against killing, is converted during his walk through a mental asylum. . . . The man who emerges is a different person, and he proclaims: One may, one must kill. Society has fundamentally misunderstood itself, a society that then rejects, and is permitted, willing, and even wants to reject, those who no longer appear as equally beautiful or equally useful members of society. Even if a person's organs are gone, and he can no longer express himself as a human being, he is still human, and there remains a constant call toward an inner nobility and call to love and sacrificial strength for those who live around him. If you deprive people of the ability to nurse and heal their sick, you make human beings into egotistical predators who are interested only in their pleasant life.<sup>275</sup>

In other words, Delp argued that human dignity was not determined by productivity or perceived social utility. When society reduces the person to a purely material being, killing came to be regarded by the Nazis as a moral good. Without acknowledging the spiritual dimension of the human person, society loses the capacity to recognize inherent human dignity.

Through the efforts of König, who maintained extensive connections across Germany, detailed information about the concentration and death camps reached the Munich Jesuits and Count James von Moltke, leader of the Kreisau Circle. In a letter to Fr. Leiber, the Jesuit provincial in Rome, Delp described the extermination of Jews and Poles and inquired what action the Vatican intended to take.<sup>276</sup> Although Delp did not frequently address the fate of the Jews in his public writings, he was certainly aware of

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<sup>275</sup> Alfred Delp, *Gesammelte Schriften III* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Josef Knecht, 1983), 267.

<sup>276</sup> Arch. Apostolico Vaticano. Carte Pio XII, Segreteria Privata 9, fasc. 6, ff. 10r-11v.

their systematic extermination. Philosopher Peter Nguyen maintains that this was purely strategic as he feared that publicly condemning the persecution of the Jews might expose his network of sheltering Jews.<sup>277</sup>

For Delp, the Church's task was not the preservation of its institutions, but the restoration of persons trapped within a totalitarian world—one closed off from authentic relationships. Its mission was to help individuals regain confidence in reality and to reorient their vision toward a God-centered understanding of the world. Rightly angered, Delp saw that the Church's failure to speak clearly against injustice was a theological contradiction: if human dignity was absolute, public defense of it was not optional. In 1941, appearing before a Fulda Conference alongside Rösch and König, Delp boldly criticized the Church, asking: "Has the Church forgotten 'Thou shalt not?' Has the Church forgotten the commandments or is she keeping quiet because she is convinced that her clear and firm preaching is hopeless?"<sup>278</sup>

Because of the profoundly destructive and anti-Catholic nature of totalitarianism, silent neutrality was not an option. Delp believed that a totalitarian society could cause individuals to lose sight of God and truth, numbing their moral sensibilities and rendering them indifferent to violence and atrocity. For this reason, the Church had to fulfill its proper role: by proclaiming Christian truth, it could contribute to the re-humanization of society. Given the gravity of the situation, Delp sharply rebuked the silence of the German Catholic clergy:

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<sup>277</sup> Nguyen, *Against the Titans*, 37.

<sup>278</sup> Delp, *Gesammelte Schriften I*, 278-279.

We [priests and bishops] somehow lack great courage... We are so anxious and go on the run. We flee to Christian antiquity—as if we could ever expect an answer and instruction from the past. We flee to periods of the Christian past—as if we were not assigned a mission for the present age, and thus hold genuine promise for each day. These “continuous renaissances” are signs more of weaknesses than of life. The ever recurring and repeated religious and essentially ecclesiastical concerns indicate a similar manifestation of anxiety of existence and responsibility. Moreover, what is overlooked here—and even more critical for Christianity’s continued existence—is man’s reality.<sup>279</sup>

In this way, Delp maintained that the Church could not ignore the plight of people in the contemporary world, for he saw faith and social justice as inseparable. To divide them would be to reject the Church’s mission of willing the good of the other—that is, love of neighbor. This is why Delp wrote, “No one will accept the message of salvation and the Savior if we do not do everything for the healing of present life and people. We are not permitted, as priests and Levites, to pass by the wounded people in the sanctuary and wait until the strange Samaritan arrives.”<sup>280</sup>

Yet the episcopacy operated within a society in which almost every action and statement carried political consequences, a reality also emphasized by Delp’s friend.<sup>281</sup> Wary of provoking state retaliation against the Church, the bishops often prioritized institutional preservation, which was often additionally shaped by their nationalism, and, in some cases, longstanding theological anti-Judaism. Thus, while Delp perceived silence

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<sup>279</sup> Delp, *Gesammelte Schriften I*, 278.

<sup>280</sup> Delp, *Gesammelte Schriften IV*, 319-320.

<sup>281</sup> Roman Bleistein, “P. Lothar König, der dritte Man im Widerstand,” 12. Arch. Prov. ECE SJ, Abt. 47-32, Nr. 4.

as moral compromise, the episcopacy saw their silence as a necessity for survival. The resulting divergence left figures such as Delp largely isolated in their resistance.

Although Delp devoted significant attention to social theory, his primary concern was not partisan politics but the theological grounding of political authority. For him, the nation existed under a higher obligation: it was bound to “reflect the dignity and authority of God in its relationship to its citizens.”<sup>282</sup> Although he regarded religion and politics as inseparable, he did not believe that the Church’s role was to function as a political actor. Rather, its task was to ensure that the nation’s political life reflected Christian moral principles. This notion largely became the focal point of *Stimmen der Zeit* as Delp deliberated over a third way between capitalism and bolshevism.<sup>283</sup> Delp believed that modern society had become trapped between two reductionist systems: liberal individualism and collective totalitarianism.<sup>284</sup> In contrast to both, Delp sought a vision of political order rooted in the dignity of the human person under God. He later wrote, “That was my purpose I set for my life, to help increase the praise and worship of God, to help people live and be human according to God’s order and in God’s freedom.”<sup>285</sup>

Founded upon the principles of solidarity and subsidiarity, Delp envisioned a society in which, ideally, all Germans could be heard and understood, and all people

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<sup>282</sup> Coady, *With Bound Hands*, 34.

<sup>283</sup> See chapter four for an in-depth analysis of Delp’s third way.

<sup>284</sup> Pope, *Der Kreisauer Kreis*, 129.

<sup>285</sup> Delp, *Gesammelte Schriften IV*, 213.

could share in the fruits of the economy.<sup>286</sup> Delp maintained that “Above all, it is necessary to cultivate the proper community spirit to eradicate class hatred, balance conflicting interests, and thus eliminate the root of class and race struggles. Therefore, everything must be promoted that serves the community, aiming, emphasizing, and supporting the common good.”<sup>287</sup> At the same time, he maintained that fundamental rights — including life, freedom, and property — required a reconfiguration within an economic framework based on socialist lines.<sup>288</sup> Delp called this new approach “personal socialism,” which he saw as the enactment of divine law in Germany.<sup>289</sup>

In light of the growing threat of Nazism, Delp utilized *Stimmen der Zeit* to covertly counteract the ideology of National Socialism. In another way, though, according to Rita Haub, Delp persistently addressed the problem of National Socialism, striving to equip Catholics with the spiritual and intellectual resources necessary to “master their circumstances.”<sup>290</sup> In one of his articles, Delp attacked not only the morality of going to war but also Nazism’s obsession with heroism. In Delp’s view, war was not necessarily an immoral act. Rather, the morality of war is determined by its ends (e.g. is there a just cause for going to war?). Interestingly, he argued that the morality of war

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<sup>286</sup> Interestingly, this third way took further shape during Delp’s work with the supra-diocesan pastoral care for Catholic men since he spent a lot of time discussing with them many of the ideas that formed this new approach.

<sup>287</sup> Delp, *Gesammelte Schriften IV*, 393.

<sup>288</sup> Coady, *With Bound Hands*, 35.

<sup>289</sup> Pope, *Der Kreisauer Kreis*, 134.

<sup>290</sup> Rita Haub, “Alfred Delp—Sein Weg in die Verantwortung,” in *Alfred Delp: Held gegen Hitler*, 39.

itself is also determined by a person's relationship to war, which he believed was revealed by one's inner, spiritual state.<sup>291</sup> While Delp argued it was not the goal of the state to glorify war, the Nazis thought differently as the heroic ideal of the Nazis centered around a cult of self-sacrifice for the Fatherland and the Führer.<sup>292</sup> Delp in turn warned that "service to the world is a dangerous service."<sup>293</sup> Disturbed by this doctrine, Delp pondered how Germans could accept the destruction of the "enemy" as morally justifiable. Delp rejected the idea that the glorification of war belongs to human nature; instead, he contended that the German people's embrace of war and violence arose from a deeper spiritual malaise, caused by their insufficient grounding in the spiritual life.<sup>294</sup> At the same time, according to Delp, the German public had become obsessed with the idea of seeking glorification and heroism by following what Delp termed "fake heroes."<sup>295</sup> In other words, by falling prey to the Nazis' ideal of heroism, Germans had lost their ability to discern what was ethical and just, leading them to blindly participate and serve in the Nazis' acts of violence and aggression. Ultimately, Delp asserted that the

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<sup>291</sup> Alfred Delp, "Der Krieg Als Geistige Leistung" (1940), in *Stimmen der Zeit: Katholische Monatschrift für das Geistesleben der Gegenwart*, Band 137 (1940), 208.

<sup>292</sup> The cult of the Führer was a cult of personality perpetuated by the Nazis and centered around the Führer, Adolf Hitler. The Nazis sought to portray him as a messiah figure, the savior of Germany. Ian Kershaw explains, "And it encouraged those at the centre of the Party to work actively to build up and accept the Führer cult, extolling Hitler as beyond criticism, the font of ideological orthodoxy, and the focus of unquestioning obedience." See Ian Kershaw, *Hitler* (New York: Longman, 1991), 39. Also see, George L. Mosse, *The Nationalization of the Masses: Political Symbolism and Mass Movements in Germany from the Napoleonic Wars Through the Third Reich* (New York: Signet Classics, 1975). Sabine Behrenbeck, *Der Kult um die toten Helden: Nationalsozialistische Mythen, Riten und Symbole* (SH-Verlag, 1996).

<sup>293</sup> Alfred Delp, "Der Kranke Held" (1940), in *Stimmen der Zeit: Katholische Monatschrift für das Geistesleben der Gegenwart*, Band 137 (1940), 82.

<sup>294</sup> Delp, "Der Kranke Held," 81.

<sup>295</sup> Endraß, *Gemeinsam gegen Hitler*, 69-70.



meaning of life was found not in individual achievements or finding glory through conflicts but rather is achieved through a deeper personal fulfillment centered on God.<sup>296</sup>

Delp also attacked the Nazis' Darwinian view of history that saw everything, particularly race, in terms of an eternal struggle between "Aryans" and the Jews.<sup>297</sup> In other words, the Nazis adhered to the idea that history was basically stuck in a perpetual cycle of unending racial conflict. Delp, though, determined that history was not a random process or a struggle of conflict but rather an ordained process, wherein Christians should strive to "bring the shining glory of God's honor" throughout history itself.<sup>298</sup> In other words, history is the entity through which people can prove their worthiness for salvation.<sup>299</sup> Although Delp insisted that history and salvation are inextricably linked, he emphasized that humanity must recognize its own limitations and creatureliness, since it is neither master of history nor of life itself.<sup>300</sup>

In his personal writings, Delp also attacked other aspects of Nazism, particularly its distorted, nationalist view of the general will.<sup>301</sup> The concept of the general will was

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<sup>296</sup> Delp, "Der Kranke Held," 81.

<sup>297</sup> See Richard Weikart, *Darwinian Racism: How Darwinism Influenced Hitler, Nazism, and White Nationalism* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2022).

<sup>298</sup> Alfred Delp, "Weltgeschichte und Heilsgeschichte" (1941), in *Stimmen der Zeit: Katholische Monatschrift für das Geistesleben der Gegenwart*, Band 138 (1941), 252.

<sup>299</sup> Delp, "Weltgeschichte und Heilsgeschichte," 253.

<sup>300</sup> Delp, "Weltgeschichte und Heilsgeschichte," 253.

<sup>301</sup> Historian Derek Hastings further emphasizes this. He states, "On the one hand, the power of Rousseau's general will lay in its inclusive appeal and its ground of political sovereignty in the nation itself; on the other hand, the necessarily inviolable nature of the general will also authorized the exercise of coercive force against members of the nation who might deviate from its prescriptions." See Hastings, *Nationalism in Modern Europe*, 290.

most prominently articulated by the Enlightenment philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In liberal traditions, the general will can be defined as the collective will of a society seeking the common good. Rousseau's concept of the general will, though, becomes problematic as he argued that individuals can be "forced to be free." This means that deviations are not permitted from the general will itself. Nationalists would use this ideology not only as a form of identification but also as a way to coerce people to abide by nationalist principles.

Delp argued that such manipulation brings out the primitive, instinctual side of human behavior. Writing in this context, he warned against the dangers of reducing people to an undifferentiated mass — what he described as the "massification of the people" — in which individuals live as little more than puppets on strings.<sup>302</sup> For Delp, the solution was a social order grounded not in the abstract dictates of the general will, but in laws and institutions derived from Christian principles.<sup>303</sup> Otherwise, society would become a distorted community meant to serve the aims of the state rather than the individual. Ultimately, Delp maintained that man must always carry the light of Christ burning inside them, for it is through Christ that the darkness can be overcome. In other words, God is freedom, and Nazism is slavery.<sup>304</sup>

### **3.2 Life as a Parish Priest**

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<sup>302</sup> Lück, *Bewahrung als Themen des Lebens*, 4.

<sup>303</sup> For a more in-depth understanding of why Delp believed that the German people followed this mass mentality, see his paper "Kirche in der Zeitendewende," in Roman Bleistein, *Alfred Delp: Geschichte eines Zeugen*: 96-115.

<sup>304</sup> Lück, *Bewahrung als Themen des Lebens*, 4.

In the face of the continued threats and pressure from the Gestapo, *Stimmen der Zeit* was forcibly shut down on April 18, 1941, for “the protection of the people and the state.”<sup>305</sup> While this was unsurprising, since most publishing houses had been forced to close, it left Delp once again without a position.<sup>306</sup> His superiors subsequently assigned him as pastor of St. Georg and Heilig Blut in the Munich suburb of Bogenhausen. In response to Bogenhausen’s growing population in the twentieth century, the archdiocese constructed the larger Heilig Blut Church in 1934 to accommodate the community’s needs, designating it as the main parish while St. Georg became its filial church. Because the two parishes had been integrated together, Delp was not responsible for any pastoral duties except for saying Mass.<sup>307</sup> This gave Delp ample time to continue his studies and writing. At the same time, his transition to being a parish priest also afforded him the

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<sup>305</sup> Coady, *With Bound Hands*, 36.

<sup>306</sup> According to Friedrich Schreiber after the closure of *Stimmen der Zeit* in 1941, Delp wrote to the Reich Chamber of Literature (*Reichsschrifttumskammer*) to give him permission to continue to write and publish theological and philosophical texts since he had two books ready for publication. Of course, he was denied, but it is interesting that he wanted to publish in a society he did not think should be allowed to exist because of its rejection of natural law and Christian principles. See Friedrich Schreiber, “Vorkämpfer gegen die Nazidiktatur,” in *Alfred Delp: Held gegen Hitler*, eds. Rita Haub and Friedrich Schreiber (Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 2005), 49. Also see Delp, *Gesammelte Schriften V*, 116-118.

<sup>307</sup> Delp’s transition to a parish priest also saw some significant changes in the young priest. He ceased to wear a cassock and instead decided to wear secular clothes—a suit and tie. He also began to smoke heavily. Tattenbach articulated that, “In these difficult times of crisis, he experienced both: revolt against all laws and conditions that restricted his vital drive for activity, against the pettiness and narrowness of the order’s statutes, and certainly sometimes against the people who upheld them; but also, the fear for his own abilities, the feeling of his diminishing human potential. . . . And he came into conflict with his superiors, who refused to allow him to take the solemn vows due on August 15, 1943. This hit him terribly hard, for he himself had probably already inwardly overcome the height of the crisis. He submitted to the order with renewed loyalty.” The refusal of his solemn vows deeply hurt Delp, intensifying an already fragile period of interior struggle. Yet he later credited his recovery to extended time spent in the countryside, where he encountered God in a renewed and healthier way. Contemplating the beauty of the landscape, he came to see that rigidity does not draw the human person to God. Rather, it is in freedom from rigidity that the human person finds redemption. Tattenbach, “P. Alfred Delp SJ,” 218 and Delp, *Gesammelte Schriften IV*, 293-297.

opportunity to become involved and interconnected with the families of the parish, allowing him the chance to work with youth again, something he especially enjoyed.

Since December 1936 through the “Law Concerning the Hitler Youth,” all other youth groups had been banned or subsumed into the Hitler Youth. Like many parish priests, Delp continued to reach out to parish youth by offering them catechetical lessons. Recognizing that this was a risky venture, Delp instructed the children to leave their bicycles on a street out of view of the church so as not to attract attention or suspicion.<sup>308</sup> He also took the youth on camping trips, leading the youth in discussions about current affairs. Delp wrote to a friend, “The parents of Bogenhausen’s flag-waving youth can be reassured. My youth are in good order.”<sup>309</sup>

By grounding his opposition in Catholic theology, Delp confronted the Nazi regime while fulfilling his duties as a priest. Shortly after his arrival at St. Georg, the Nazis ordered that all religious articles and images be removed from Catholic schools. Delp, along with other priests in Bavaria, resisted by replacing secularized images with crucifixes blessed by clergy (*Kreuzaktion*).<sup>310</sup> His clashes with Nazism continued to grow. As early as 1938, he had gained a reputation as a potential subversive, and the Gestapo began monitoring his homilies for rhetoric deemed dangerous to the state. Rita Haub contends that the Gestapo began monitoring Delp’s sermons because he started attracting large crowds from outside Bogenhausen. His sermons were even transcribed

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<sup>308</sup> Coady, *With Bound Hands*, 37.

<sup>309</sup> Bleistein, *Alfred Delp*, 198.

<sup>310</sup> Coady, *With Bound Hands*, 38.

and circulated throughout Munich.<sup>311</sup> She writes that Delp “addressed the various questions of the people and endeavored to motivate his listeners to social engagement.”<sup>312</sup> By encouraging his parishioners to engage actively in society, Delp further positioned himself as a threat to the Nazis’ attempt to construct a totalitarian state.

Despite this surveillance, Delp continued to critique the regime through philosophical and theological arguments, cloaking his opposition in a way that allowed him to uphold Catholic teaching, while minimizing immediate personal risk. In the fall of 1941, he delivered a series of talks on the seven sacraments to his parishioners. These lectures were intended to encourage those who were anxious and terrified by the realities of the Nazi regime. Their central theme was to present a faithful way of being human, rooted in the practice of the sacraments. In his presentation on Confirmation, for example, Delp reiterated the anxiety and fear taking hold of people. He said, “the fundamental reason” why [Nazi] “terror brings us to our knees is that we cannot endure loneliness.”<sup>313</sup> Similarly, in his talk on the Eucharist, he maintained that

Man does not live alone and is not an island for himself. No, he is bound; he needs the other person. He is a human being among human beings, inserted in communities, connected by friendship and fellowship, inserted in the significant orders of people and state, and inserted in the great spheres of decisions of history.<sup>314</sup>

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<sup>311</sup> Haub, “Alfred Delp-Sein Weg in die Verantwortung,” 42.

<sup>312</sup> Haub, “Alfred Delp-Sein Weg in die Verantwortung,” 42.

<sup>313</sup> Delp, *Gesammelte Schriften III*, 330.

<sup>314</sup> Delp, *Gesammelte Schriften III*, 363.

This insight is central to Delp's thought: the human person is meant to live within a community, forming meaningful social bonds. Yet in a totalitarian society, such bonds are systematically severed, producing anxiety, isolation, and a distortion of human freedom. Delp's resistance, however, was not merely indirect or cautious. He was also aware that Gestapo informants attended Mass at his Munich parish, and his sermons at times employed sharp, indirect critiques that could be read as addressing them. In doing so, Delp showed that theology could operate as a tool of opposition, transforming moral conviction into a direct challenge to totalitarian power.

Through Rösch, Delp also began to form connections with other resistance groups and leaders. In Munich, he became peripherally connected to the student-led resistance group the White Rose movement, though historians are not exactly clear on the details of his involvement.<sup>315</sup> According to Delp's friend, Michael Brink, Delp was to meet with one of the group's leaders, Professor Kurt Huber, shortly before the group released its last pamphlet. However, the meeting, apparently, never took place.<sup>316</sup> Corina Petrescu, who has conducted extensive research on Huber's papers, never uncovered any mention of the two men meeting.<sup>317</sup> Nevertheless, this absence does not definitively rule out the possibility that it took place. Resistance members deliberately left minimal paper trails, and Huber, aware of Delp's connections to other anti-Nazi activities, may simply have

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<sup>315</sup> Ederer, "Propaganda Wars," 457-458. Also, see chapter one for a brief analysis of the White Rose Movement.

<sup>316</sup> Bleistein, *Alfred Delp*, 278-79.

<sup>317</sup> Corina L. Petrescu, "'Allen Gewalten zum Trutz sich Erhalten.' Models of Subversive Spaces in National Socialist Germany" (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2006), 88.

chosen not to document it. If Delp had any connection to the White Rose movement, it would be understandable, given that their pamphlets were rooted in Christian ethics, humanism, and classical literature. As an expert in Catholic social theory and a proponent of Christian-humanistic thought, Delp would have been a natural person for Huber to consult for guidance on the content of their pamphlets.

Delp also joined the resistance group Una-Sancta-Kreis, an interconfessional group that sought to bring Catholics and Protestants together to try and overcome confessional disputes. On the surface, members met to discuss various religious issues.<sup>318</sup> In reality, they met to criticize and question Hitler's totalitarian power and to reiterate that only God is above all.<sup>319</sup> According to Elke Endraß, Rösch made contact with Count James von Moltke, leader of the Kreisau Circle, through the Una-Sancta-Kreis; thus, it can be argued that, tangentially, with his involvement in the Una-Sancta-Kreis, Delp became involved in the Kreisau Circle.<sup>320</sup>

Delp also became part of the Munich-based Jewish aid network. Delp helped both resistance member Gertrud Lückner, (who would later be named righteous among the nations by Yad Vashem), and Delp's secretary Luise Oestreicher to help shelter Jews.<sup>321</sup>

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<sup>318</sup> Endraß, *Gemeinsam gegen Hitler*, 111.

<sup>319</sup> Endraß, *Gemeinsam gegen Hitler*, 111.

<sup>320</sup> Endraß, *Gemeinsam gegen Hitler*, 111. See chapter 4, which explains in greater detail Delp's involvement in the Kreisau Circle as well as the Munich Jesuits' resistance network.

<sup>321</sup> Gertrud Lückner, a native of Freiburg, was a social worker who recognized quite early on (actually after the Nazis passed the Nuremberg Laws in 1935) the Nazis' ultimate goal of destruction of the Jews. As an employee of Caritas, the national Catholic charitable organization, Lückner had hoped to create a Catholic national network to rescue Jews. Even though she was unsuccessful in enacting this form of a network for saving Jews, she was able to hide and smuggle many Jews out of Germany to Switzerland. In March 1943, she was arrested and sent to the Ravensbrück concentration camp. On several occasions she narrowly escaped being sent to the gas chamber. These experiences greatly damaged her health, but later-with the help of female communist inmates-she was able to escape. See Michael Phayer, "Questions about

The three of them formed an operation in which they moved Jews to a house for Catholic youth and gave Jewish refugees money and coupons for food to help them escape to, usually, Switzerland.<sup>322</sup> Delp had Oestreicher scout out new potential routes by jumping on passing freight trains. According to Bleistein, Delp and these women helped protect around ten or twelve Jews. One of the members of this network, Dr. Annemarie Cohen-Buch, described Delp's involvement in this resistance group,

. . .the help had to continue from those who had not yet been arrested, who, as resistance fighters, had to remain as unknown as possible. Thus, we only ever knew our neighboring helpers, for example, regarding escape routes abroad. Fr. Delp was also one of these neighbors for us: Do you know of an escape route for this persecuted person? If he knew one, he passed the persecuted person on to the next station on that escape route, but we never knew this next station, so that if one of us were arrested, the entire escape route and all the associated helpers would not be discovered immediately.<sup>323</sup>

Delp's efforts to aid persecuted Jews were grounded in his deep conviction that every person possesses innate dignity, since each is created in the image of God. This conviction is further reflected in his later observation: "The frightening aspect of this time of war is that not only have the relations of peoples among themselves been thrown into confusion, but chaos has seized the inner disposition of the individual and, to a greater extent, the specific communities of peoples."<sup>324</sup>

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Catholic Resistance." *Church History* 70, no. 2 (2001), 335-337. Also see Michael Phayer and Eva Fleischner, *Cries in the Night: Women Who Challenged the Holocaust* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed & Ward, 1997).

<sup>322</sup> Endraß, *Gemeinsam gegen Hitler*, 105-106.

<sup>323</sup> Bleistein, *Alfred Delp*, 203.

<sup>324</sup> Delp, *Gesammelte Schriften IV*, 394.



Delp's desire to help the Jews also stemmed from a very different theological outlook than many in the German episcopacy. As discussed in chapter one, antisemitism within the German episcopacy prevented Church leaders from either directly helping the Jews or outright condemning the evil committed against them.<sup>325</sup> Doris Bergen, one of the leading historians on the Holocaust, explains:

Even those elements of both churches who opposed the Nazi ideology of race expressed antisemitism in their public utterances. Many Catholic clergy . . . established racial policies with endorsement of some of these same ideas. In November 1941, Catholic bishops protested proposed legislation that would force Jews to divorce Aryan spouses. But they tempered their opposition with the assurance that their words did not reflect any 'lack of love for the German nationality' or an 'underestimation of the harmful Jewish influences upon German culture and national culture.'<sup>326</sup>

Delp, on the other hand, believed that God is for all people and not just a select few.<sup>327</sup> This allowed him to see the Jews not as existential threats to Germany and Christianity as a whole but rather as individuals whom God loved and died to save. Ultimately, however, when Delp became involved in the Kreisau Circle in 1942, he ended his program to rescue the Jews, most likely because the Gestapo had become suspicious of his activity. If Delp had continued the operation, he would be endangering the lives of those he was trying to save.<sup>328</sup>

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<sup>325</sup> See chapter one for a brief analysis of the antisemitism of the German episcopacy.

<sup>326</sup> Bergen, "Catholics, Protestants, and Christian Antisemitism in Nazi Germany," 335.

<sup>327</sup> Lück, *Bewahrung als Thema des Leben*, 3.

<sup>328</sup> Endrass, *Gemeinsam gegen Hitler*, 105-106.

For Delp, resistance to Nazism was fundamentally a defense of truth. Any regime that suppressed truth or advanced falsehood and injustice placed itself in contradiction to Christianity and therefore demanded opposition. While Delp stressed that God needed to be the foundation of German society, he also believed that Germans needed a spiritual renewal as well. According to Hans Mommsen, “It was necessary for man to rediscover himself in a real sense that embraced all aspects of life—to overcome his self-alienation—before he could be reintegrated into 'community' and 'nation' and become responsive to a religious message.”<sup>329</sup> In this way, Delp posited that the horrors that had taken place would, hopefully, never happen again if man could be transformed internally; in other words, if man could be recentered on God, it would be possible to create a more just society built on respect for all human life. Even in these dark times, Delp’s hopefulness never left him, for he believed that God was using this difficult time as a period of spiritual renewal. Delp articulated:

It is time to awaken from sleep. It is time for waking up to begin somewhere. It is time to put things back where God the Lord put them. It is time for each of us to go to work, with the same unshakable sureness that the Lord will come, to set our life in God's order wherever we can. Where God's word is heard, he will not cheat our life of the message; where our life rebels before our own eyes he will reprimand it.<sup>330</sup>

Delp’s hopefulness is further evidenced by his view that every generation was faced with varying forces, circumstances, and worldviews, but these threats to Christianity must be

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<sup>329</sup> Hans Mommsen, *Alternatives to Hitler: German Resistance Under the Third Reich*, trans. Angus McGoeht (London: B. Tauris, 2003), 55.

<sup>330</sup> Alfred Delp, “The Shaking Reality of Advent,” accessed September 21, 2025, <https://jknirparchive.com/delp.htm>.

confronted and overcome so that the divine law triumphs on earth.<sup>331</sup> Thus, Delp's opposition was based on a desire to fully understand the truth, but it also stemmed from a desire to recenter German society. He argued that if Germans only experienced an inner renewal, it would be possible for German society to return to God and create an environment in which there would be respect for all life. This is what Delp called a "God-conscious humanism."<sup>332</sup>

Delp's motivation to oppose Nazism differed profoundly from that of his superior Augustin Rösch, who was the Provincial Superior of the Upper German Province. Rösch's resistance efforts stemmed primarily from the Nazis' attack on the Catholic Church, particularly the Nazis' attempt to confiscate ecclesiastical property. This led Rösch to help found the Committee for the Affairs of Religious Orders of the Bishops Conference in 1941, whose primary objective was to challenge the German episcopacy's weak stance in facing the Nazi regime.<sup>333</sup> In fact, in light of the continued attacks on the Church's autonomy, Rösch helped to create a proposed declaration by the bishops on human rights in November 1941 that sought to uphold the teachings of the Church, condemn the Nazi regime, and, more particularly, identify the rights that were under assault by the Nazis.<sup>334</sup>

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<sup>331</sup> Pope, *Alfred Delp S.J.*, 4-7.

<sup>332</sup> Delp SJ, *The Prison Meditations of Father Alfred Delp*, 103-104.

<sup>333</sup> James Bernauer S.J., "Rebellion of the Righteous: Jesuit Partisanship for Jews," *Journal of Jesuit Studies* 5 (2018): 246.

<sup>334</sup> Bernauer S.J., "Rebellion of the Righteous: Jesuit Partisanship for Jews," 246.

While Cardinal Bertram immediately crushed the proposed declaration as soon as he heard of it, the statement does provide insight into much of Rösch's reasoning for resisting Nazism. He believed quite strongly, like Delp, that a spiritual battle continued to be waged over men's souls. For this reason, Rösch developed four points that he proclaimed, "must remain the pillars of Christian and indeed of all human culture."<sup>335</sup> First, man has the right to private property, and the state had continually violated this maxim by forcibly confiscating ecclesiastical property.<sup>336</sup> Second, man possesses the "natural right to the protection of truth and honor," a right that had been continually abused and violated when Christians were deemed enemies of the state.<sup>337</sup> Third, man possesses the "natural right of personal freedom," which had been abused since many innocent people suffered tremendously in prisons and concentration camps.<sup>338</sup> Fourth, and most importantly, every person has a "natural right to life," which directly attacked the Nazis' euthanasia program. Rösch declared, "God alone is the master of life and death. No one's life is safe if the commandment is not regarded as inviolable: 'Thou shalt not kill.'"<sup>339</sup>

While Rösch's opposition to Nazism primarily stemmed from the Nazi party's attack on the Catholic Church, he also rejected the manner in which Soviet prisoners of

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<sup>335</sup> Augustin Rösch, "Entwurf eines gemeinsamen Hirtenworts" (November 15, 1941), in *Kampf gegen den Nationalsozialismus*, by Augustin Rösch (Frankfurt am Main: Knecht, 1985), 127

<sup>336</sup> Rösch, "Entwurf eines gemeinsamen Hirtenworts," 127.

<sup>337</sup> Rösch, "Entwurf eines gemeinsamen Hirtenworts," 128.

<sup>338</sup> Rösch, "Entwurf eines gemeinsamen Hirtenworts," 129.

<sup>339</sup> Rösch, "Entwurf eines gemeinsamen Hirtenworts," 130.

war were being treated as well as how the Jews were being herded into ghettos.<sup>340</sup> Yet he viewed the persecution of the Jews very much through the lens of one who feared that the persecution of the Jews would shortly lead to the persecution of the Jesuit order. This anxiety that Rösch harbored throughout the war is quite interesting in the fact that, in his reports to Rome, Rösch often acknowledged the terrible suffering of the Jews, but he framed their persecution in terms of the idea that the Jesuits would be the obvious next targets of the Nazis.<sup>341</sup> Thus, the two Jesuits, Rösch and Delp, held different reasons for and exercised different approaches to resisting the Nazis. Delp, as a social philosopher, saw Nazism as a threat to Europe due to the party's disregard for social justice and its ultimate rejection of God, whom he believed should be the foundation upon which society should be built. Conversely, Rösch was a pragmatic realist, and because of his role as a superior of the Jesuits, tried to ensure that the Jesuit order would survive.

### **3.3 Conclusion**

As this chapter has shown, the interim period before Delp ultimately joined the Kreisau Circle in 1942 marked a decisive point in his resistance to Nazism. Delp's transition from providing a primarily philosophical and theological critique to direct, tangible involvement in anti-Nazi activity marked a crucial turning point in his life. At the same time, his work as editor of *Stimmen der Zeit* allowed him to further expand and solidify his ideas on social theory. The continued attack on the Church and the dignity of the human person led Delp to return to his original plan of articulating an alternative to Nazism. He argued that Christianity must be the foundation of society. With Christian

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<sup>340</sup> Bernauer S.J., "Rebellion of the Righteous: Jesuit Partisanship for Jews," 247-248.

<sup>341</sup> Bernauer S.J., "Rebellion of the Righteous: Jesuit Partisanship for Jews," 248.

values as the basis for society combined with a spiritual renewal of its members, Delp believed that an evil regime would never again assume power.

One of the key points Delp reiterated throughout his writings was that the dignity of the human person is a gift from God, and those that disregard this basic truth essentially blaspheme against God because every being is made in the image and likeness of God. With the increasing attacks on human dignity through the Nazis' euthanasia program as well as their ultimate plan of destroying the Jews, Delp increasingly intensified his involvement with the resistance network in Munich. Delp formed connections with groups such as the Una Sancta Kreis as well as the Munich Jewish aid network with Gertrud Lückner, even working to help rescue Jews. These connections placed Delp in the center of the resistance network in Munich and, at the same time, provided him with important contacts that would be crucial with his later work in the Kreisau Circle. Ultimately, this period marked a decisive change in the priest from being an individual who in the past simply critiqued the regime in abstract terms to being an active opponent of the Nazi regime. This development as a resistance member was the logical outgrowth of his theological and philosophical outlook, Jesuit formation, and his strong moral faith. In the end, the growth of his own ideas on social theory was foundational to his later work in the Kreisau Circle to create a post-Nazi society based on Christian principles.

## Chapter 4:

### **Alfred Delp and the Kreisau Circle (1942-1944): Delp's Role in Shaping the Kreisau Circle's Vision for a Christian Democratic State**

The years 1937 to 1941 proved decisive, as Delp's theological convictions increasingly took concrete form in opposition to the regime. Coupled with his growth as a social philosopher as well as the increasing power and destructive impact of the Nazis, Delp took the important step of moving from abstract, theological criticism to physical, on-the-ground resistance. By 1942, Delp had progressed from his informal collaboration and involvement with the Munich Jewish Aid Network and his early connections with groups such as the Una Sancta Kreis to becoming a member of the resistance group the Kreisau Circle. Led by Count James von Moltke, the Kreisau Circle endeavored to create a new society based on Christian principles after the fall of the Nazi regime. Because of its desire to form a new society without Nazism, many of its members also became indirectly or directly involved in *Operation Valkyrie*.<sup>342</sup> Delp, although not directly involved with the plot, was arrested in 1944 not merely because of his ideological alignment and associations but more so because of his fateful meeting with Count

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<sup>342</sup> *Operation Valkyrie*, the unsuccessful assassination plot against Hitler, was arguably the assassination plot that held the greatest chance of success. It was organized largely by some disillusioned members of the German army, but aristocrats, disaffected politicians, and even religious members were involved as well. For more information on *Operation Valkyrie*, Hoffman, *History of the German Resistance, 1933-1945*. See also Hamerow's *On the Road to the Wolf's Lair*. This work examines why many of the resisters, who actually began as Nazis members or supporters, ended up rejecting Nazism, even going so far as attempting to assassinate Hitler himself. See also Michael Balfour, *Withstanding Hitler in Germany 1933-45* (New York: Routledge, 1988); Anton Gill, *An Honorable Defeat: A History of German Resistance to Hitler, 1933-1945* (New York: Henry Holt, 1994); David Clay Large, ed., *Contending with Hitler: Varieties of Resistance in the Third Reich*; and John J. Michalczyk, ed., *Confront!*.

Colonel Klaus von Stauffenberg, the man who would plant the bomb, shortly before the assassination attempt took place.

Additionally, as has been shown, Delp's formation as a Jesuit, his theological and philosophical outlook, and his strong moral faith led logically to his engagement in resistance activity. For this reason, this chapter will demonstrate how Delp's background as a social philosopher led him to become an integral part of the Kreisau Circle's plan for a post-Nazi society. Particularly, Delp provided the theological and philosophical framework for the group's aim of creating a democratic society based on a Christian-humanistic outlook.<sup>343</sup> Furthermore, utilizing Catholic social theory, Delp also contributed to the Kreisau Circle's plans for a decentralized political structure based on subsidiarity and the protection of individual rights to ensure that a regime like Nazism would never again achieve power. In doing so, Delp demonstrated a commitment to moral action over personal safety, distinguishing himself from much of the German Catholic episcopacy and thus demonstrating that not all Catholics in Germany were complicit in Nazi rule.

#### **4.1 The Kreisau Circle and the Network of the Munich Jesuits**

For members of the resistance, the year 1940 looked especially bleak as Nazi expansionism appeared virtually unstoppable; country after European country had continued to fall to German military power, culminating with the fall of France in June 1940. Against this backdrop, the initial meeting between Augustin Rösch and Helmuth James von Moltke marked the convergence of Rösch's extensive network with Moltke's

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<sup>343</sup> Michael Pope's work is arguably the central account of Delp's philosophical and anthropological contributions to the Kreisau discussions. See Pope, *Alfred Delp S.J. Im Kreisauer Kreis*.



developing resistance circle. As a member of the Abwehr, a German military intelligence agency, and legal adviser within the Wehrmacht High Command, Moltke possessed secret knowledge of Germany's military and political situation. Convinced that Hitler's regime was both morally corrupt and strategically catastrophic, he concluded that resistance required organized preparation for a post-Nazi order. As Moltke told Rösch, "We must fight, do everything to save what can be saved."<sup>344</sup>

What later became known as the Kreisau Circle under Moltke's leadership brought together Protestant and Catholic thinkers (except communists) committed to envisioning a Christian renewal of political life after Hitler.<sup>345</sup> Rejecting both nationalism and capitalism,<sup>346</sup> the Circle interpreted National Socialism as the culmination of a longer Western crisis marked by secularization, mass society, and the erosion of natural law.<sup>347</sup> The Kreisau Circle members sought "to overcome nationalism and racial consciousness as absolutes, [believing] that the end of the war and the fall of National Socialism would

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<sup>344</sup> Bleistein, *Alfred Delp*, 258.

<sup>345</sup> For additional information on the Kreisau Circle, see Michael Balfour and Julian Frisby, *Helmuth von Moltke: A Leader against Hitler* (Lexington, MA: Plunkett Lake Press, 2021); Thomas Childers, "The Kreisau Circle and the Twentieth of July," in *Contending with Hitler*, David Clay Large ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Rachel Freudenburg, Andreas Thomas, Jenny Gesualdo, and Priscilla Loh, "'You See It Too Simply,' Freya von Moltke Looks Back on the Kreisau Circle," in *Confront! Resistance in Nazi Germany*; Hoffman, *History of the German Resistance*; Ger van Roon, *German Resistance to Hitler: Count Von Moltke and the Kreisau Circle*, trans. Peter Ludlow (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1971); Balfour, *Withstanding Hitler In Germany 1933-45*; and Mommsen, *Alternatives to Hitler*.

<sup>346</sup> The Kreisau Circle's understanding of Christianity can be viewed as a communal mentality, wherein citizens would be instructed on how to empathize with and look after others without forfeiting their own individuality. See Rachel Freudenburg, with Andreas Thomas, Jenny Gesualdo, and Priscilla Loh, "'You See It Too Simply,' Freya von Moltke Looks Back on the Kreisau Circle," in *Confront! Resistance in Nazi Germany*, 134.

<sup>347</sup> Roon, *German Resistance to Hitler*, vi.

help bring about ‘the end of the racial idea.’”<sup>348</sup> Their aim was not merely regime change but moral reconstruction: a decentralized, Christian-informed democracy capable of overcoming what they regarded as the spiritual roots of totalitarianism.<sup>349</sup>

Within this framework, Catholic participation was strategically indispensable. Through an expanding web of ecclesiastical, political, and military contacts, the Munich Jesuits occupied a strategic position within the broader resistance. Already connected to Cardinal Faulhaber and Jesuit leadership in Rome—thus maintaining indirect ties to the Vatican—Rösch further sharpened these relationships, while Delp cultivated links to Bishop Johannes Dietz of Fulda. As the bishop of Fulda, Dietz was an important figure with whom to maintain a connection, since Fulda had long served as the meeting place of the German bishops’ conference, giving its bishop a certain prominence within the episcopacy. Rösch’s secretary, Lothar König, served as a crucial intermediary, coordinating communication among bishops and resistance figures.<sup>350</sup> Relieved of most other duties, König functioned as a courier, traveling—often in disguise—to Berlin to deliver sensitive information.<sup>351</sup> Through these channels, König circulated reports about

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<sup>348</sup> Peter Hoffman, “The Persecution of the Jews as a Motive for Resistance,” in *The Moral Imperative: New Essays on the Ethics of Resistance in Nationalist Socialist Germany, 1933–1945*, ed. Andrew Chandler (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), 79.

<sup>349</sup> Hans Mommsen, “The German Resistance Against Hitler and the Restoration of Politics,” *The Journal of Modern History* 64 (1992): S122.

<sup>350</sup> Bleistein, *Alfred Delp*, 273.

<sup>351</sup> Released from all duties, except acting as a courier for their contacts, König and another Jesuit Braun frequently met in Berlin to deliver messages to other contacts. König disguised himself in civilian clothes and even pretended to be a couple with Braun’s secretary by walking arm in arm throughout Berlin. König and Braun also used a secret room to hide documents, complete with a secret escape room. See Leugers, *Gegen eine Mauer bischöflichen Schweigens*, 182.

atrocities at Dachau and maintained contact with Catholic resistance circles,<sup>352</sup> including the group surrounding Franz Sperr and members of the Catholic workers' movement in Cologne.<sup>353</sup>

Their reach extended beyond ecclesiastical networks. The Munich Jesuits developed connections with military and administrative figures, including General Franz Halder and officials within the Munich Higher Finance Directorate (Oberfinanzdirektion München), who provided internal governmental information.<sup>354</sup> Meetings with Moltke further integrated them into the Kreisau Circle's deliberations, particularly regarding Carl Goerdeler, an old conservative opponent of Hitler who, despite his nationalist leanings, was envisioned as head of a post-Nazi government. That they were privy to this information demonstrated the trust placed in the Munich Jesuits and confirmed that they were considered reliable.<sup>355</sup> This network demonstrated that the Munich Jesuits were active intermediaries linking episcopal authorities, political conservatives, military

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<sup>352</sup> Apparently, König kept very detailed records of the death totals in Dachau, maintaining charts and even categorizing how many priests and religious were kept or killed there. In his charts, he reported that there were 169 deaths in 1939, 1789 in 1940, 2622 in 1941, 5136 in 1942, and 827 in 1943. (He did not record any totals after 1943 probably because he went into hiding shortly after *Operation Valkyrie*.) These numbers apparently were given to a Jesuit returning to the front to distribute to German troops, to Rösch to give to his Jesuit superior in Rome in order to notify the Pope, and to the 1943 Fulda bishops' conference as evidence that the bishops needed to declare a public condemnation of Nazism itself. See Roman Bleistein, "P. Lothar König, der dritte Man im Widerstand," 10-11 at Arch. Prov. ECE SJ. Abt.47-324, Nr. 4. Also see "Untitled Manuscript," at Arch. Prov. ECE SJ. Abt. 47-324, Nr. 4.

<sup>353</sup> The Sperr Circle was founded by Franz Sperr, who gathered a group of people in Bavaria who sought not only to overthrow the Nazis but also to replace the regime with a new democratic government. In the winter of 1942, Sperr encountered the Kreisau Circle through Delp and Rösch; this is where Sperr subsequently met Moltke. See "Franz Sperr," *Gedenkstätte Deutscher Widerstand*, [https://www.gdw-berlin.de/en/recess/biographies/index-of-persons/biographie/view-bio/franz-sperr/?no\\_cache=1](https://www.gdw-berlin.de/en/recess/biographies/index-of-persons/biographie/view-bio/franz-sperr/?no_cache=1) (accessed February 7, 2026).

<sup>354</sup> Leugers, *Gegen eine Mauer bischöflichen Schweigens*, 184.

<sup>355</sup> Leugers, *Gegen eine Mauer bischöflichen Schweigens*, 226.

officers, and Catholic resistance groups, facilitating communication across otherwise fragmented, isolated opposition groups, providing important information to these various resistance groups across Germany.

Given Rösch's extensive network, it is unsurprising that Moltke was eager to establish contact with him, particularly after learning of his position within the Jesuit order. After their first meeting, Moltke described Rösch as "a peasant's son with an outstanding head, skillful, educated, sound. I liked him very much. As far as I can make out, he has only the top Jesuit in Rome above him."<sup>356</sup> This assessment reveals not only personal admiration but also Moltke's recognition of Rösch's institutional influence. Moltke's interest in cultivating Catholic support was strategic. Unlike the more decentralized Protestant hierarchy, the Catholic Church possessed a hierarchical structure capable of coordinated public influence. Having witnessed Catholic priests deliver bold sermons to packed congregations, Moltke believed that the Church could play a decisive role in reshaping Germany's political future, even suggesting that it might help "pave the way to a decentralized Germany."<sup>357</sup>

Accordingly, in 1941 Moltke attempted to persuade Bishop Konrad von Preysing of Berlin to join the Kreisau Circle. Preysing's vocal opposition to Nazism and his background in law made him an attractive partner for discussions concerning the drafting of a new constitution.<sup>358</sup> Moltke also reached out to Bishop Clemens von Galen—known

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<sup>356</sup> Helmuth James von Moltke, *Letters to Freya, 1939-1945* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), 173.

<sup>357</sup> Beate Ruhm von Oppen, "Laity and Churches in the Third Reich," in *The Moral Imperative*, 36.

<sup>358</sup> Coady, *With Bound Hands*, 45.

as the “Lion of Münster” for his outspoken 1941 sermon condemning euthanasia<sup>359</sup>—as well as Cardinal Michael Faulhaber of Munich. Despite these efforts, none of these church leaders ultimately committed themselves to the Kreisau Circle. The reluctance of these bishops to commit themselves to the Kreisau Circle underscores the significance of figures like Delp.

When in October 1942 Moltke, learned from a government administrator in Poland that the Jews were being deported to the death camps in Poland, the news “brought a sense of particular urgency to the work of the group and the Christian consciences of its members,” as Coady has emphasized.<sup>360</sup> For this reason, Rösch, Delp, and König increased their efforts to encourage the bishops to release a collective, public statement particularly stressing the plight of the Jews.<sup>361</sup> Yet despite their efforts, the

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<sup>359</sup> Galen’s sermon on euthanasia was incredibly forceful; he condemned the Nazis’ program because they judged who was “worthy” to live. As Galen stressed:

According to the information I have received it is planned in the course of this week (the date has been mentioned as 31st July) to move a large number of inmates of the provincial hospital at Marienthal, classified as ‘unproductive members of the national community,’ to the mental hospital at Eichberg, where, as is generally believed to have happened in the case of patients removed from other establishments, they are to be killed with intent. Since such action is not only contrary to the divine and the natural moral law but under article 211 of the German Penal Code ranks as murder and attracts the death penalty, I hereby report the matter in accordance with my obligation under article 139 of the Penal Code and request that steps should at once be taken to protect the patients concerned by proceedings against the authorities planning their removal and murder, and that I may be informed of the action taken.

Of course, the sermon infuriated the Nazis. There were talks to arrest and kill Galen, but Josef Goebbels, Hitler’s propaganda minister, decided against this as he worried that repercussions against the popular bishop could make him a martyr figure and thus cause unrest in the Catholic region of Munster. But Hitler vowed to deal with Galen once and for all at a later time. See Bishop Clemens von Galen, “Predigt vom Sonntag,” (March 8, 1941), Arch. Prov. ECE SJ. Abt. 47-324, NR. 4.

<sup>360</sup> Coady, *With Bound Hands*, 53.

<sup>361</sup> Bleistein, *Alfred Delp*, 267-68.

Jesuits were unable to convince the hierarchy to release a statement opposing Nazism, especially regarding the Jews. The bishops, instead, decided to speak out publicly against Nazism only if Catholic rights were in danger of being violated; otherwise, they would remain silent.

Unlike many of the other bishops, however, Preysing wished to make a public condemnation of the treatment of the Jews. Encouraged by this, Moltke asked Preysing to write a letter without the support of the other bishops. Preysing agreed as he was very much haunted by what he perceived to be the bishops' failure to fulfill their roles. For this reason, Preysing believed, they would be judged harshly by those in the future.<sup>362</sup> In December 1942, Preysing released his letter to the German public, which, though not as forceful or strong as the members of the Kreisau Circle would have liked, did emphasize that "all primeval rights enjoyed by mankind, namely the right to live, to exist unharmed, to be free, to have preferences, to contract marriage, the existence of which does not depend upon the arbitrary dictum of governments, may not be taken from anyone who is not of our blood or who does not speak our language."<sup>363</sup> Even so, the reality was that the statement neither articulated the message Moltke had hoped for nor elicited the response he desired.<sup>364</sup> Moltke asserted, "[It was] good, but not very good and not very empathetic.

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<sup>362</sup> Coady, *With Bound Hands*, 54.

<sup>363</sup> Konrad von Preysing, "1942 Address," reprinted in the *New York Times* article, "Berlin Bishop Hits Nazi Racial Creed; Catholic Count von Preysing Denies Exclusive Rights and Defends Alien Privileges," January 22, 1943, <https://www.nytimes.com/1943/01/22/archives/berlin-bishop-hits-nazi-racial-creed-catholic-count-von-preysing.html#:~:text=Every%20human%20being%20enjoys%20privileges,copies%20of%20the%20letter%20public.>

<sup>364</sup> Moltke, *Letters to Freya*, 264.

It is aimed at those who can hear, not at the deaf.”<sup>365</sup> Ultimately, while the Nazis certainly understood what Preysing was driving at, the ones who needed to hear it the most, individual Germans, were deaf to its message.

Since the Munich Jesuits were unsuccessful in gaining the support of the bishops, they redirected their efforts to helping the Kreisau Circle create a post-Nazi society.<sup>366</sup> In May 1942, Rösch was invited to Moltke’s estate in Silesia, along with other members, to discuss the topic of education as well as the relationship between the church and the state.<sup>367</sup> Rösch was asked to come particularly to provide a Catholic approach to these proceedings.<sup>368</sup> Following the meeting, Moltke inquired as to whether Rösch knew of anyone who was an expert on the encyclicals *Rerum Novarum* and *Quadragesimo Anno* so as to provide a Catholic approach to the group’s discussions on social questions as well as their efforts for the re-Christianization of the German working world.<sup>369</sup> Since Rösch knew that Delp despised Nazism and was involved in some resistance work, Rösch introduced Moltke to the young scholar, Delp.<sup>370</sup> In this respect, the Munich Jesuits

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<sup>365</sup> Moltke, *Letters to Freya*, 264.

<sup>366</sup> Coady notes that Rösch possessed “a sharp mind and considerable negotiating skills [that] made him excel at the job. He even seemed to relish it at times, trying out various disguises in his effort to get around the country. In the later war years, when it became difficult for civilians to use trains, he managed to get space for himself by pretending to be a railway worker.” See Coady, *With Bound Hands*, 42.

<sup>367</sup> Besides bringing in Alfred Delp and Lothar König, both of whom were deeply involved with the Kreisau Circle, Rösch also included another Jesuit, Hans von Galli, in the Kreisau’s discussions. Galli acted as an advisor on the question of agriculture. See Bleistein, *Alfred Delp*, 289.

<sup>368</sup> Coady, *With Bound Hands*, 47.

<sup>369</sup> Augustin Rösch, *Kampf gegen den Nationalsozialismus*, ed. Roman Bleistein (Frankfurt am Main: Josef Knecht, 1985), 281.

<sup>370</sup> Though Delp was neither a sociologist nor an economist, he sought out experts in Munich—most notably the respected economist Adolf Weber—to further his understanding in these fields. Delp maintained a correspondence with Weber, even referring to himself as Weber’s “most secret student.”

provided valuable connections to the Kreisau Circle, and made the important move to translate Christian theology to political resistance, which was in contrast to the position of the German episcopacy who hesitated to commit to overt opposition.

#### **4.2 The Third Way and Delp's Contribution to the Kreisau Circle**

As the previous chapters have demonstrated, Alfred Delp's opposition to National Socialism was unequivocal. "Whoever does not have the courage to make history is doomed to become its objects," he declared. "We have to take action."<sup>371</sup> For Delp, Nazism was not merely a political error but a moral catastrophe that produced bloodshed, chaos, and spiritual nihilism.<sup>372</sup> It represented a direct assault on human dignity and freedom. Yet Delp's significance within the Kreisau Circle lay not simply in his opposition to the regime. Rather, he supplied the Circle with a systematic Catholic framework for reconstructing Germany after Hitler. When Moltke invited Delp to participate in the October 1942 Kreisau meeting on the future structure of the German state and economy, Delp had been studying this topic for some time, as can be seen with his work *Der Aufbau*.

As an expert on Catholic social teaching, he attempted to convey papal social teachings to the members of the Kreisau Circle so as to provide a Christian basis for the group's new social order. This initially caused surprise among the members of the

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Having already been denied the opportunity to study at the University of Munich due to being viewed as potentially subversive, it is unsurprising that Delp had to meet and correspond with Weber in secret. See Endraß, *Gemeinsam gegen Hitler*, 128. Also see Delp, *Gesammelte Schriften V*, 131.

<sup>371</sup> Bleistein, *Alfred Delp*, 289.

<sup>372</sup> Roman Bleistein, "Die Möglichkeiten von Delp," Arch. Prov. ECE SJ, Abt. 47-32, Nr. 4.



Kreisau Circle since popes in the past had claimed that Christianity and Marxist socialism were self-contradictory, due to the largely anti-Christian attitude of the socialists themselves.<sup>373</sup> This is probably why Delp used the term “personal socialism” when describing his alternative to Nazism as, by avoiding the word “Christian,” he had found a better basis for the conversation with the socialist representatives of the group.<sup>374</sup> At the same time, the personal element was added to socialism as this made it clear that all social activities were bound by the principle of subsidiarity. He saw subsidiarity—the principle that social and political responsibilities should be handled by the smallest or most local authority capable of doing so—as key to the restructuring of German society. Delp writes, “The principle of “subsidiarity” must not be disregarded. There must remain a space free of the state in which the individual’s independent, joyful self-reliance and daring enterprise can develop, even if it remains the state’s task to watch over the necessary cooperation of the free forces for the common good.”<sup>375</sup> In other words, he envisioned a personal democracy.<sup>376</sup> But at the same time, he saw “personal socialism” as the answer to the social question and indeed the enactment of divine law.<sup>377</sup>

Through his participation in Kreisau discussions, he refined what he called the “Third Way” or “Third Idea”<sup>378</sup>—an alternative to both National Socialism and liberal

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<sup>373</sup> Endraß, *Gemeinsam gegen Hitler*, 143.

<sup>374</sup> Endraß, *Gemeinsam gegen Hitler*, 143.

<sup>375</sup> Delp, *Gesammelte Schriften IV*, 391.

<sup>376</sup> Bleistein, *Alfred Delp*, 248.

<sup>377</sup> Pope, *Der Kreisauer Kreis*, 134 and 137.

<sup>378</sup> Delp’s “Third Way” was not unique. He belonged to a broader tradition of Catholic and Protestant thinkers who envisioned an alternative to both capitalism and communism. See Michelle

capitalism.<sup>379</sup> His contribution was conceptual: he sought to ground political reconstruction in his theological anthropology. Central to Delp's thought was that he believed that "there is for each historical epoch one appropriate form of representation of the imago Dei, which must be tailored to the current historical and appropriate to the subject matter."<sup>380</sup> Nazism, in his view, represented the collapse of such an order. His alternative social order, "The Third Way or Idea," sought to restore the awareness of absolute law: the restoration of a concrete legal certainty, the restoration of the real state, the restoration of the family, and the creation of a genuine social order.<sup>381</sup>

According to Delp, the unresolved social question was the main reason for the rise of the Nazis.<sup>382</sup> In Delp's view, Germans had become socially ill through the atomization and massification of society. The atomization of society had isolated individuals and had made them anxious and hateful towards their neighbor, thus severing social ties and

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Cupples, *The Making of an Ideology of the Third Way: The Evolution of Christian Democracy in Germany (with Special Reference to 1945–49)* (PhD diss., Aston University, 1999). Paul Misner, "Christian Democratic Social Policy: Precedents for Third-Way Thinking," in *European Christian Democracy*, ed. Thomas Kselman and Joseph Buttigieg (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003). Also see for social democratic visions of the "Third Way," see Anthony Giddens, *The Third Way: The Renewal of Social Democracy* (London: Polity Press, 1998).

<sup>379</sup> The Third Way or Idea is based largely on Delp's collections of letters. His original essay on the Third Way, which specifically spelled out his new social program, unfortunately no longer exists. So, while it is impossible to obtain a perfect idea of what Delp envisioned, it is still possible to see at least aspects of what Delp hoped would come to fruition after the fall of the Nazi regime.

<sup>380</sup> Pope, *Der Kreisauer Kreis*, 133.

<sup>381</sup> Bleistein, *Alfred Delp*, 271-72.

<sup>382</sup> Delp believed that the Church should seek to find a solution to the social question because a good and just society enabled man to live according to his vocation. At the same time, he believed that since the Church acted as mediators for man's salvation, they needed to be active in the political sphere to protect natural and divine laws. See Pope, *Der Kreisauer Kreis*, 88.

communal responsibility towards other citizens. This had diminished or even, in some cases, eliminated social responsibility.<sup>383</sup>

In his view, this represented the collapse of such an order. The deeper cause of that collapse though was the unresolved social question. German society had been “atomized” and “massified,” isolating individuals and eroding communal responsibility.<sup>384</sup> As Delp wrote, “The frightening aspect of this time of war is that not only have the relations of peoples among themselves been thrown into confusion, but chaos has seized the inner disposition of the individual and, to a greater extent, the specific communities of peoples.”<sup>385</sup> Thus, according to Delp totalitarianism emerged more so as a result of social fragmentation and spiritual disintegration, rather than political exploitation, disillusionment, and propaganda.

This is why Delp argued that regime change alone would be insufficient. Germany required what he termed a “renewal of life,”<sup>386</sup> grounded in the restoration of absolute law and natural rights. Drawing upon *Rerum Novarum* and *Quadragesimo Anno*, he insisted that human dignity and freedom of conscience derive from divine law and therefore precede the state.

From this immutable divine order of law arise the inalienable human rights, which are given with the God-created nature of man and are therefore independent of every state and political order, and the curtailment and violation of which have the most pernicious consequences

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<sup>383</sup> Endraß, *Gemeinsam gegen Hitler*, 144.

<sup>384</sup> Endraß, *Gemeinsam gegen Hitler*, 144.

<sup>385</sup> Delp, *Gesammelte Schriften IV*, 393.

<sup>386</sup> Delp, *Gesammelte Schriften IV*, 388.

for the life of the individual person and the community. This includes, above all, freedom of the spirit, conscience, and faith.<sup>387</sup>

Since Delp defined human dignity as essentially a gift from God, it needed to be protected and safeguarded by the state.<sup>388</sup> Indeed it is the role of the state to ensure the common good.<sup>389</sup> It is only when the social order is determined by the common good that class conflict will end, and society will be balanced and interconnected.<sup>390</sup> In other words, the state's legitimacy depended upon its protection of the common good as rooted in transcendent norms.

One of the elements he desired to implement was that society needed to have a minimum standard of living, which would enable people to live with dignity and respect.<sup>391</sup> But at the same time, just and humane conditions were needed for man to live according to his true vocation.<sup>392</sup> As Delp explained, this would entail:

Reawakening the awareness of divine rights, which are beyond any interpretation or subjugation by creatures, and whose threat means innermost shaking of all social structures [and the] restoration of the awareness of natural human rights independent of any state or political order, whose curtailment or violation destroys humanity and deprives all communal life of meaning and justification.<sup>393</sup>

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<sup>387</sup> Delp, *Gesammelte Schriften IV*, 389.

<sup>388</sup> Delp, *Gesammelte Schriften IV*, 391.

<sup>389</sup> Delp, *Gesammelte Schriften IV*, 391.

<sup>390</sup> Pope, *Der Kreisauer Kreis*, 150.

<sup>391</sup> Bleistein, *Alfred Delp*, 245.

<sup>392</sup> Pope, *Der Kreisauer Kreis*, 87.

<sup>393</sup> Delp, *Gesammelte Schriften IV*, 380.

In this way, he called for a spiritual transformation of Germany as none of his ideas could be implemented if people were not transformed internally to seek the good of the other. Delp's biographer, Roman Bleistein explicates, "The third way, which seeks to balance the two poles, here the free play of forces and there collectivism, on a higher level and to free socialism from its Marxist grip, this personal socialism can become the supporting bridge to a reconciliation that is long overdue: the reconciliation between the socialist workers' movement and Christianity."<sup>394</sup>

Delp rejected both Bolshevik collectivism and unrestrained capitalism because both distorted the dignity of the human person. In Delp's interpretation of the Christian vision of humanity, Marxism was profoundly alien to humanity as it subordinated the individual to ideology and enforced labor through coercion.<sup>395</sup> Capitalism, as he saw it in the Weimar period, concentrated power and reduced workers to virtual slaves.<sup>396</sup> The worker, he insisted, must be brought into the community as a human being—endowed with intrinsic dignity—rather than as a mere function of the state or capitalist owner. Delp writes, "The fate of every future reorganization [of society]," he argued, "depends on whether it finally succeeds in integrating the worker into the community as a worker."

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<sup>394</sup> Bleistein, *Alfred Delp*, 413.

<sup>395</sup> Endraß, *Gemeinsam gegen Hitler*, 144.

<sup>396</sup> Pope, *Der Kreisauer Kreis*, 156 and Endraß, *Gemeinsam gegen Hitler*, 144.

<sup>397</sup> Bleistein, *Alfred Delp*, 270.

Because of his rejection of capitalism, Delp desired that the Marxist definition of industrial workers (proletariat) be dismantled as he believed this would be key to ensuring humanity's dignity. In Delp's view, the division of labor in large companies was depersonalizing. His solution was that through income and wage reform, workers could be provided with at least a share in the profits of the company, possibly even making employees co-owners. In this way, Delp posited that allowing employees to have a say in the company would, in turn, potentially prevent forms of abuse to workers themselves.<sup>398</sup> He also advocated for continuing education measures to increase employees' career opportunities. Interestingly, as a further dismantling of the proletariat, Delp desired society to be shaped by professional associations or groups, rather than social classes.<sup>399</sup>

Delp's alternative to capitalism, then, was a form of cooperative socialism, which led, in his view, to a greater participation in society overall with members seeking the common good of everyone. Delp believed that by participating in society, man bears responsibility "for the proper order of the social whole" as well as the good of the other.<sup>400</sup> Economic power, though, needed to be defederalized with society being shaped by the economic principle of solidarity,<sup>401</sup> which to Delp was the most important aspect of the formation of his ideal society.<sup>402</sup> It is important to note that Delp did not desire to

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<sup>398</sup> Bleistein, *Alfred Delp*, 247.

<sup>399</sup> Bleistein, *Alfred Delp*, 247.

<sup>400</sup> Pope, *Der Kreisauer Kreis*, 94.

<sup>401</sup> Delp defined solidarity as "the cultivation of a genuine sense of community." See Delp, *Gesammelte Schriften IV*, 394.

<sup>402</sup> Bleistein, *Alfred Delp*, 247-48.

replace the market economy; rather, he believed his new system would enhance this form of economy overall.<sup>403</sup> This aligns with the vision of Ludwig Erhard, the German economist and former Chancellor, who articulated the concept of the social market economy (*soziale Marktwirtschaft*). Erhard envisioned an economy that combined free-market principles with social responsibility, in which markets operate freely while the state and society ensure social justice and uphold ethical norms.<sup>404</sup>

Ultimately, to achieve economic stability and employment for all German citizens, Delp stressed that individual Germans needed to experience a renewal of their social consciousness, which meant that Germans needed to be aware of and concerned for all German citizens.<sup>405</sup> This can be seen particularly in the fact that Delp believed that while all legally acquired property should be considered private property, he also advocated that private property could be taken away from a person if the common good required it. He remarked, the “well-being of the individual must not be ruthlessly sacrificed to society.”<sup>406</sup> This is an important point as Delp believed that in the past the individual or societal needs had taken precedence over the other. Delp, on the other hand, stipulated that these entities could not be separated as they constituted the entire being of the person.<sup>407</sup> This is why Delp wrote,

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<sup>403</sup> Bleistein, *Alfred Delp*, 247.

<sup>404</sup> For further discussion of this point see Harold James, *Germany and the Social Market Economy: Origins and Evolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 2006.

<sup>405</sup> Endraß, *Gemeinsam gegen Hitler*, 144.

<sup>406</sup> Endraß, *Gemeinsam gegen Hitler*, 144.

<sup>407</sup> Pope, *Der Kreisauer Kreis*, 94.

In the spirit of love, the distinctive character and intrinsic value of the individual professions must be recognized, and individual talents must be systematically integrated but always within the view not merely from the individual and his advantage, but from the perspective of the common good.<sup>408</sup>

At the same time, this new social order would be built on true religious freedom without discrimination against what he called “ethnic religious groups,” most likely in reference to the Jews.<sup>409</sup> It is also evident that Delp sought to avoid another *Kulturkampf*, as he believed that Germans needed to move away from hostilities to other religions since it was more important to have a united country. In other words, Delp was arguing that petty religious grievances were preventing Germans from forming a true united nation. Interestingly, he called for the separation of church and state, which is a hallmark of a democratic society. But for him, this separation would only be temporary until the nation’s view of religion changed as he believed that the Church needed to be the foundation of society and, thus, should be closely tied to the state itself.<sup>410</sup> The reason for this was that he believed religion and morality posed limitations on the state. This is why he articulated that when the state forgets the source of its rights, it falls “into a destructive positivistic and utilitarian legalism that perniciously proclaims the law is what benefits the state.”<sup>411</sup>

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<sup>408</sup> Delp, *Gesammelte Schriften IV*, 395.

<sup>409</sup> Roman Bleistein, “Die Möglichkeiten von Delp,” Arch. Prov. ECE SJ, Abt. 47-32, Nr. 4.

<sup>410</sup> Bleistein, “Die Möglichkeiten von Delp,” Arch. Prov. ECE SJ, Abt. 47-32, Nr. 4.

<sup>411</sup> Delp, *Gesammelte Schriften IV*, 383.



Delp believed that this new democracy must have the necessary spiritual and moral foundations.<sup>412</sup> As Delp writes, “As long as people have to live in a way that is undignified and inhuman, the average person will succumb to circumstances and neither pray nor think. A thorough change in the conditions of life is needed.”<sup>413</sup> By restoring man’s awareness of God’s sovereignty, man needs to rediscover their relationship with God because with the right social order is “the path to the living God.”<sup>414</sup> For Delp, this new system was impossible to implement if man did not have a change of heart.<sup>415</sup> Thus, without a renewed moral consciousness, Delp believed, no constitutional design could endure.

In this respect, Delp expanded the scope of the Kreisau Circle’s vision. While other members focused primarily on administrative or constitutional arrangements, Delp insisted that the social question and the moral condition of the German people were foundational. His thought integrated theology, economics, and political theory into a coherent alternative to National Socialism. While it is evident that Delp’s vision for a post-Nazi society was a utopic form of socialism, some historians question whether there was even a point to the discussions themselves. Indeed, some historians go so far as to claim that the deliberations were essentially too little, too late. Michael Balfour, however, alleges that, while their planning for a post-Hitler society was perhaps futile, the Kreisau

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<sup>412</sup> Pope, *Der Kreisauer Kreis*, 156.

<sup>413</sup> Delp, *Gesammelte Schriften IV*, 313.

<sup>414</sup> Pope, *Der Kreisauer Kreis*, 88.

<sup>415</sup> Pope, *Der Kreisauer Kreis*, 154.

Circle's efforts were an essential exercise in maintaining morale.<sup>416</sup> Since most of the planning took place between 1942 and 1943, at the height of Hitler's power, when many opponents lived in an almost total state of despair, participation in resistance itself became "an assertion that, in spite of appearances, truth and humanity would prevail."<sup>417</sup>

In the same way, some historians also question whether the Kreisau Circle could potentially have accomplished anything concrete because of the great political, religious, and economic differences among the members themselves.<sup>418</sup> Ger van Roon maintained that although their ideas on a new social order neither influenced German society after the fall of Hitler nor removed Hitler from power, these individuals were able to form a sphere of ethical opposition to Hitler and the Nazis. However, in creating this sphere of ethical opposition, many members of the resistance ultimately lost their lives, whether through direct or indirect involvement in the 1944 plot against Hitler (*Operation Valkyrie*).<sup>419</sup>

Even though Delp's work was utopic and perhaps unrealistic, it not only provided intellectual inspiration for the group but also placed the Kreisau Circle's discussions in a larger socio-political context than likely would have been possible without his efforts. In the view of Theodor Steltzer, who was also a member of the Kreisau Circle, "[Delp was] the most intellectually significant member of the circle."<sup>420</sup> Indeed, it is evident that the

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<sup>416</sup> Balfour, *Withstanding Hitler in Germany 1933-45*, 70.

<sup>417</sup> Balfour, *Withstanding Hitler*, 70.

<sup>418</sup> Freudenberg, with Thomas, Gesualdo, and Loh, "'You See it Too Simply,' in *Confront!*, 134.

<sup>419</sup> Thomas Childers, "The Kreisau Circle and the Twentieth of July," in *Contending with Hitler*, 109.

<sup>420</sup> Bleistein, *Alfred Delp*, 259.

social question was always an area of interest for Delp, but the social question took on a new level of importance for Delp with his work within the Kreisau Circle. By the 1940s, his work highlighted social ethics and, more particularly, socio-political change in order to create a society that enabled people to live with dignity and respect. Influenced by *Quadragesimo Anno*, Delp was able to further develop this encyclical in concrete ways, particularly by deepening its personalist dimensions and integrating a Christian-humanist framework compatible with democratic governance. In many ways, in Roman Bleistein's view, the Third Way is the reformulation of Catholic solidarity.<sup>421</sup> As Roman Bleistein maintains:

It was precisely this social orientation that ultimately drove him into conflict with the National Socialists: a personal socialism stood against National Socialism. Even though Delp may have felt like David fighting Goliath, during the trial before the People's Court on January 9, 1945, when Freisler [president of the Volk Court (People's Court)] asked him whether his statements also called for the "state of affairs," i.e., whether this specific state, needed to be changed, he said a resounding "yes"—a deadly yes.<sup>422</sup>

In the end, he affirmed that personal socialism stood in direct opposition to National Socialism. As a philosophical architect, he transformed Catholic social teaching into a program of moral and political reconstruction.

#### **4.3 *Operation Valkyrie* and Delp's Meeting with Claus von Stauffenberg**

Following the two previous meetings, the Kreisau Circle had one final meeting in June 1943; the gathering centered on post-war punishment of Nazi war crimes and

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<sup>421</sup> Bleistein, *Alfred Delp*, 251.

<sup>422</sup> Bleistein, *Alfred Delp*, 251.

atrocities.<sup>423</sup> At the end of their discussion, the members declared in the *Principles of Reorganization* that Christianity is essential as the basis of society.<sup>424</sup> As they articulated:

The government of the German Reich sees in Christianity the foundation for the moral and religious renewal of our nation, for overcoming hatred and deception, and for the reconstruction of the European community of nations. The starting point lies in the committed reflection of the human being about the divine order, which supports man's inward and outward existence. Only when one succeeds in making this order the standard for relations among individuals and nations can the disruption in our time be overcome and a genuine state of peace be created.<sup>425</sup>

While many of the members of the Kreisau Circle and the broader resistance were Christians themselves, it can be argued that the idea of making Christianity foundational to the creation of this post-Nazi society was in part due to Delp's theological and philosophical influence,<sup>426</sup> particularly one of his central arguments that divine law—not state power—was the ultimate source of human dignity. This was foundational to the Circle's political vision. Ger van Roon reiterates that this document indeed shows the

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<sup>423</sup> It is important to note that in an effort to create a broader and more unified resistance network, the Kreisau Circle formed connections with older conservatives like Carl Goerdeler. While on the surface this appeared to be a wise decision, the reality was that this caused significant disagreements between the older and younger generations of the German resistance. Many of the older members of the conservative faction of the German resistance had opposed the establishment of the Weimar republic and even welcomed Hitler's ascent to power. In this way, the older members, as can be seen with Goerdeler, desired some form of authoritarianism modeled after Bismarck's government; their ideas, then, were not too divergent from Hitler's aims and ideals for Germany. This differed from the younger generation, which not only was more willing to take action but also aspired to move away from nationalism and capitalism; this was in an effort to form a society based on socialism in order to create a federated European union. See Klemens von Klemperer, "Reflections and Reconsiderations on the German Resistance," *Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte* 1, no.1 (1988): 22 and Hans Mommsen, "The German Resistance Against Hitler and the Restoration of Politics," S119.

<sup>424</sup> Bartley, *Catholics Confronting Hitler*, 221.

<sup>425</sup> Peter Hoffman, *Behind Valkyrie: German Resistance to Hitler, Documents* (London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2011), 76-77.

<sup>426</sup> See chapter 6 for further discussion of this point.

influence of *Quadragesimo Anno* as well as other Catholic ideas.<sup>427</sup> While Delp was not part of the final meeting, he believed that the complete defeat of Germany was critical in order to rescue the German people from Nazism itself.<sup>428</sup>

By 1944, his theological convictions were pushing him toward a far more radical solution: that resistance to Nazism could no longer remain purely in abstract terms. This was further emphasized once members of the Kreisau Circle learned—through Moltke’s Abwehr connections and König’s reports—of the death camps in Poland and the mass killings at Dachau.<sup>429</sup> König even created a table detailing the death totals at Dachau from 1939 to 1942, which was sent to the Vatican, resistance contacts across Germany, and the front lines. Confronted with this knowledge, Delp felt it was his moral duty to eliminate Hitler himself; in fact, at one point, Delp attempted to join Organization Todt, the group that maintained Hitler’s personal quarters. To this end, Delp tried to utilize his contacts in

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<sup>427</sup> Roon, *German Resistance to Hitler*, 241.

<sup>428</sup> Bleistein, “Die Möglichkeiten von Delp,” Arch. Prov. ECE SJ, Abt. 47-32, Nr. 4.

<sup>429</sup> König created a table discussed above, detailing the death totals in Dachau to Rome. On the final page of the letter that was attached to this table, he asked whether the Pope would make some statement against the Nazi regime. König urged, “Hopefully, the bishop has written to you as there is a constant expectation at speeches and receptions to address fundamental questions. . . . People are starving for this. They don’t demand frontal attacks. . . .but our principles must be reiterated again and again. Not only are the complacent, the stagnant, listening, but also our own, for whom everything is gradually becoming uncertain due to the counter-propaganda.” Interestingly, the letter was sent on December 12, 1942; a few days later on December 25, 1942, Pope Pius XII delivered his Christmas address, which is considered to be his most outspoken denunciation of Nazism and its treatment of the Jews (even though Pius did not mention the Jews explicitly). This makes it clear, then, that Pius knew far more of what was going on than perhaps was previously thought. At the same time, it indicates that possibly König’s letter was instrumental in pushing Pius to make some form of protest against the Nazis themselves. See Arch. Apostolico Vaticano. Carte Pio XII, Segreteria Privata 9, fasc. 6, ff. 10r-11v and Pope Pius XII, “1942 Christmas Address: The Internal Order of States and People,” December 25, 1942, Papal Encyclicals Online, <https://www.papalencyclicals.net/pius12/p12ch42.htm>.

the military to procure him a position in the group in order to plant a bomb in Hitler's quarters.<sup>430</sup>

This was a departure from Catholic tradition since there is not a defined Church teaching on tyrannicide. The medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas, however, left space for resistance under extreme circumstances. He argued that capital punishment or tyrannicide was permissible under grave circumstances, such as in self-defense or when there was no other way in which to prevent a ruler's grievous actions.<sup>431</sup> In this way, it can be argued Delp theologically broke from Catholic tradition and as such was willing to risk this in order to remain faithful to his conscience.

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<sup>430</sup> Riebling, *Church of Spies*, 157.

<sup>431</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, II, q. 64, a. 2 and 3.

| Todesfälle. (im Konzentrationslager Dachau) |      |                                    |
|---------------------------------------------|------|------------------------------------|
| September 1939                              | 12   |                                    |
| Oktober                                     | 11   |                                    |
| November                                    | 13   |                                    |
| Dezember                                    | 15   |                                    |
| Im ganzen Jahr 1939:                        |      | 169                                |
| <u>1940.</u>                                |      |                                    |
| Januar                                      | 16   |                                    |
| Februar                                     | 10   |                                    |
| März                                        | 83   |                                    |
| April                                       | 129  |                                    |
| Mai                                         | 102  |                                    |
| Juni                                        | 62   |                                    |
| Juli                                        | 47   |                                    |
| August                                      | 122  |                                    |
| September                                   | 173  |                                    |
| Oktober                                     | 195  |                                    |
| November                                    | 256  |                                    |
| Dezember                                    | 535  |                                    |
| Im ganzen Jahr 1940:                        |      | 1781 (1782?)                       |
| <u>1941.</u>                                |      |                                    |
| Januar                                      | 368  |                                    |
| Februar                                     | 477  |                                    |
| März                                        | 351  |                                    |
| April                                       | 239  |                                    |
| Mai                                         | 310  |                                    |
| Juni                                        | 239  |                                    |
| Juli                                        | 136  |                                    |
| August                                      | 102  |                                    |
| September                                   | 71   |                                    |
| Oktober                                     | 91   |                                    |
| November                                    | 122  |                                    |
| Dezember                                    | 116  |                                    |
| Im ganzen Jahr 1941:                        |      | 2622                               |
| <u>1942:</u>                                |      |                                    |
| Januar                                      | 212  |                                    |
| Februar                                     | 405  |                                    |
| März                                        | 412  |                                    |
| April                                       | 420  |                                    |
| Mai                                         | 454  | darunter 34 poln. Priester         |
|                                             |      | 1 Priester aus dem Protektorat     |
|                                             |      | 1 " " (protestantisch) aus Holland |
|                                             |      | 35 Priester                        |
| Juni                                        | 472  | darunter 110 Priester aus Polen    |
|                                             |      | 2 Priester aus Holland             |
|                                             |      | 2 Belgien                          |
|                                             |      | 1 Tschechoslow.                    |
|                                             |      | 5 Deutschland                      |
|                                             |      | 120 Priester, ausserdem            |
|                                             |      | 2 Ordensbrüder aus Polen           |
|                                             |      | 1 deutscher Kirchenbeamter         |
| Juli                                        | 434  | darunter 160 Priester aus Polen    |
|                                             |      | 3 Priester aus Holland             |
|                                             |      | 2 Priester aus Luxemburg           |
|                                             |      | 8 Priester                         |
| Jan.-Juli 42:                               | 2808 | 176 Priester + 1 stud. teol. poln  |
|                                             |      | + 2 stud. teol. poln               |

This table was created by König detailing the death totals at Dachau from 1939 to 1942. The table was subsequently sent to his contacts across Germany, to the front lines, and even to the Vatican itself to encourage people to resist the Nazi regime. Photo courtesy of Archivio Apostolico Vaticano.

Delp's uniqueness becomes even more apparent in light of Aquinas's position that, even if tyrannicide might be justified under extreme circumstances, the execution of punishment properly belongs to temporal rulers, not to priests. Aquinas maintained that clerics, by virtue of their spiritual vocation, should not take part in tyrannicide, even in response to grave evil.<sup>432</sup> Although no definitive magisterial prohibition of tyrannicide

<sup>432</sup> ST II, q. 64, a. 4.

exists, ecclesiastical tradition has generally emphasized that priests have a special role within the Church and should not be involved in executing punishment since in Catholic tradition that is the role of the state. Delp's willingness to contemplate assassinating Hitler is therefore all the more striking: as a priest, he was prepared to literally defy Church tradition to confront what he perceived as radical and systematic evil.

At the same time, the Church's largely passive stance against the Nazis made even contemplating the assassination of Hitler a virtual impossibility. This makes Delp's decision to support assassinating Hitler a divergence from the German episcopacy. Furthermore, this was also a departure from Rösch, who opposed tyrannicide, which probably further created tensions in the relationship between the two. Apparently, in fact, the only reason Rösch agreed to join the Kreisau Circle was because Moltke had assured him that the Kreisau Circle would not engage in plans to assassinate Hitler.<sup>433</sup>

Although Delp had previously rejected assassination, he ultimately concluded that allowing Hitler to live—given the continued atrocities he perpetrated—would itself be a grave evil.<sup>434</sup> Moltke, though, was annoyed with Delp's desire for action, dejectedly writing his wife in early 1943, "Why can't people have patience? Even König and Delp, who really should have learnt, from their discipline, to wait, are incapable of it, and when an action is followed by an inevitable setback, they become restless and don't see that

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<sup>433</sup> Moltke himself, though, opposed tyrannicide. He believed that if Germans used violent means to overthrow Hitler, this could result in the "stab in the back" myth. See Helmuth James von Moltke and Freya von Moltke, *Last Letters, The Prison Correspondence, 1944-1945*, trans. Shelley Frisch (NYRB Classics, 2019), xix.

<sup>434</sup> Phayer, "Questions about Catholic Resistance," 342.



beyond the valley is another height.”<sup>435</sup> Ultimately for Delp, though, the state must reflect Christian values in its relationship with its citizens, and if a state abused its authority and its citizens, then the situation must then become a religious concern.<sup>436</sup>

The situation within the Kreisau Circle changed significantly in January 1944 when Moltke was arrested and sent to a prison attached to the Ravensbrück concentration camp.<sup>437</sup> Moltke’s arrest marked a decisive turning point: the Kreisau Circle could no longer confine itself to theoretical reconstruction but was drawn ever more closely into the operational realities of conspiracy itself. At the same time, Count Claus von Stauffenberg had close ties with Kreisau Circle members Peter Yorck von Wartenburg and Adam von Trott zu Solz; with these associations, Moltke’s group was becoming increasingly tied to the conspiracy against Hitler, particularly since many in the Kreisau Circle believed that it would be possible to overthrow Hitler only by means of the military.<sup>438</sup> This would be difficult, obviously, especially because starting in 1934, German soldiers had made an oath of loyalty to Hitler rather than Germany. Nevertheless, several officers, including Stauffenberg, had grown disillusioned with the regime.<sup>439</sup>

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<sup>435</sup> Moltke, *Letters to Freya*, 277.

<sup>436</sup> Coady, *With Bound Hands*, 34.

<sup>437</sup> The Gestapo had not arrested Moltke due to his resistance activity, however, but rather because he had warned a friend, another resistance member, that he was being watched. Unaware that his friend’s phone had already been tapped, Moltke subsequently faced arrest and imprisonment. See Coady, *With Bound Hands*, 61.

<sup>438</sup> See Childers, “The Kreisau Circle and the Twentieth of July,” 109.

<sup>439</sup> Stauffenberg increasingly was angered with the German high command, who refused to relate to Hitler the collapsing state of the German army and that military defeat appeared virtually inevitable. He also became further convinced of the evil of Nazism after witnessing a group of Jews in Ukraine who had been forced to dig their own graves and then were brutally shot. Besides this, Stauffenberg was horrified by how the Germans treated the Russian soldiers and other ethnic groups in Eastern Europe. See Peter

Severely wounded in 1943, Stauffenberg entered the resistance and sought closer engagement with the Kreisau Circle in order to clarify Germany's political future after Hitler's removal. He feared that without a coherent post-Nazi framework, Germany might descend into chaos and risk the emergence of another dictatorship. With the completion of the *Basic Principles of Reconstruction*, Stauffenberg believed that the conditions were finally in place for the assassination plot to proceed.

While Delp was largely unaware of these proceedings, he felt progressively isolated following the arrest of Moltke, which only intensified his restlessness and anticipation for some form of action, particularly from the military. On June 6, 1944, following a lecture he delivered in the city of Bamberg, Delp knocked on Stauffenberg's door and asked for an audience with Stauffenberg, the military officer who would plant a bomb to kill Hitler only a few weeks later. According to Roman Bleistein, Delp approached Stauffenberg to inquire into whether the colonel would assist Delp in becoming a chaplain for the Wehrmacht since in 1940 Hitler had banned all Jesuits from serving in the Wehrmacht in any capacity.<sup>440</sup> Even more importantly, however, Delp was curious if Stauffenberg knew whether the Jesuits would face a similar fate as had the so-called "half-Aryans."<sup>441</sup> This concern was not unfounded, given Hitler's systematic attacks on the Catholic Church. According to Michael Phayer, it also helps explain why the Munich Jesuits—particularly Delp, Rösch, and König—were motivated to resist the

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Hoffman, *Stauffenberg: A Family History, 1905-1944* (London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003), 150-151.

<sup>440</sup> Bleistein, *Alfred Delp*, 285-6.

<sup>441</sup> Bleistein, *Alfred Delp*, 285-6.

Nazis and support Moltke: not only had they witnessed the persecution and murder of the Jews, but they also believed that it was only a matter of time before Hitler would kill them as well. This was evidenced by the knowledge they possessed of the number of priests executed by the Nazis, particularly at Dachau.<sup>442</sup>

During the conversation, the two discussed Delp's view of history; after a time, Delp changed the subject as he desired to know the military situation in Germany. Stauffenberg declined to answer, and, apparently, Delp irritated Stauffenberg by asking him questions that the colonel either could not or would not answer.<sup>443</sup> On Stauffenberg's end, he was curious to know the stance of the bishops. Delp recalled, "The question about the bishops also reinforced my view, since according to Count Moltke's concept, the churches were supposed to provide moral defense and reconstruction in occupied territories. In answering the question about the church affairs in the aforementioned cities, I provided only very general and practically meaningless information."<sup>444</sup> This is quite interesting in that even though both men were resistance members, each of them refused to answer questions that the other was eager to have answered. This most likely was a result of the fact that as much as one desired to know the other's information, it was simply too dangerous for either of them to divulge the information that each possessed, which, again, points to the isolation of resistance members themselves.

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<sup>442</sup> Phayer, "Questions about Catholic Resistance," 340. Also see Jean Bernard's account of his experiences in Dachau. Jean Bernard was a Catholic priest from Luxembourg who was imprisoned from May 1941 to August 1942 for denouncing the Nazi regime. This work gives the reader a greater understanding of the experiences of priests in concentration camps. See Jean Bernard, *Priestblock 25487: A Memoir of Dachau* (Bethesda, MD: Zaccheus Press, 2007).

<sup>443</sup> Bleistein, *Alfred Delp*, 285.

<sup>444</sup> Bleistein, *Alfred Delp*, 285-6.

While Delp was received graciously into Stauffenberg's home, Stauffenberg was anything but pleased with Delp's appearance.<sup>445</sup> Since Stauffenberg knew not only that Delp was involved in the Kreisau Circle but also that *Operation Valkyrie* itself would be happening in a few weeks, Stauffenberg believed that Delp had unnecessarily placed Stauffenberg's family in danger.<sup>446</sup> At the same time, this visit was both what ultimately connected Delp to the plot to assassinate Hitler and what would lead to Delp's subsequent arrest following the failure of the plot. While in prison, Delp stated that "Stauffenberg did not tell me anything about these plans. He later complained to Yorck about me, but König knows about that."<sup>447</sup> This demonstrates that while Delp may not have known about *Operation Valkyrie*—or, at least, that he was unaware of the plot when he spoke to Stauffenberg—it is evident that König possessed a greater knowledge of *Operation Valkyrie* than did his fellow Munich Jesuits.<sup>448</sup> Therefore, according to Roman Bleistein, as a precaution, Stauffenberg never brought up the plot during his conversation with Delp. Bleistein stresses, however, that:

It cannot be ruled out that they nevertheless discussed problems that both of them, albeit with different weightings, could have considered crucial background information for an assassination attempt whether in the sense

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<sup>445</sup> According to Tattenbach, Delp was known amongst his fellow Jesuits to be reckless when it came to his safety and that of others. Apparently, he carried the program and names of the new government after the fall of the Nazi regime. He also actively sought out new contacts to join the plot. See Tattenbach, "P. Alfred Delp SJ," 220.

<sup>446</sup> Bleistein, *Alfred Delp*, 285.

<sup>447</sup> Bleistein, *Alfred Delp*, 285.

<sup>448</sup> According to Roman Bleistein, it is very possible that König knew about *Operation Valkyrie* before July 1944. The reason for this was that in a letter to his sister after the war, König made it sound as if he had had knowledge of the plot long before it ever took place. This would have made sense considering that König acted as a courier for the greater resistance network in Germany. More particularly, though, König also acted as the liaison between Stauffenberg and the Kreisau Circle. See Roman Bleistein, "P. Lothar König, der dritte Man im Widerstand," 13, Arch. Prov. ECE SJ. Abt. 47-324, Nr. 4.

of encouragement to act, or as a view of the overall situation that confirmed an already existing decision, not least among the churches.<sup>449</sup>

Even though it is unclear what was discussed when Delp visited Stauffenberg shortly before the assassination attempt, it is clear that this encounter would tie Delp to the plot itself, despite the fact that Delp probably knew very little or virtually nothing at all about it. In fact, Rösch himself was completely unaware of *Operation Valkyrie*. Yet because of Delp's decision to visit Stauffenberg, Delp was marked by the Nazis as a fellow-conspirator and a traitor to the state.

A few weeks later, on July 20, 1944, while Stauffenberg was attending a meeting at Hitler's hideaway, the Wolf's Lair, he planted a bomb near the Führer. After it detonated and believing the bomb had killed the dictator, Stauffenberg rushed to Berlin to execute the coup to destroy Nazi power. Announcing on the radio that Hitler was dead, he informed the reserve army that the SS planned to take control of Germany; for this reason, he ordered the army to arrest all SS members and officers. However, due to miscalculations and errors, especially since General Olbricht, one of the key plotters who had originally recruited Stauffenberg, failed to act quickly and implement *Operation Valkyrie* in Berlin, the coup failed. Most importantly, though, the explosion failed to kill Hitler.<sup>450</sup>

Delp's response to the aftermath of the July 20, 1944, assassination attempt illustrates the extraordinary moral courage that defined his resistance. While busy helping

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<sup>449</sup> Bleistein, *Alfred Delp*, 286-87.

<sup>450</sup> See Peter Hoffman's work *The History of the German Resistance, 1933-1945*, which is considered by many historians to be the most comprehensive work on *Operation Valkyrie*. See Hoffman, *History of the German Resistance*.

friends repair their home after the daily bombings in Munich, Delp, unaware of the plot, heard on the radio the announcement that individuals had attempted to assassinate the Führer.<sup>451</sup> A little after midnight Hitler broadcast over the radio that he had survived the threat and promised to deal swiftly with those who had participated in this failed attempt to destroy Germany. This was indeed true as those closely connected to the plot, like Stauffenberg, were executed immediately by firing squad. When news spread that Stauffenberg had attempted the assassination, König, who knew that Delp had visited Stauffenberg, quickly notified fellow Jesuit Franz von Tattenbach to warn Delp of the impending danger and urge Delp to go into hiding. Delp refused, however, emphasizing that “he wanted to stay with the people in Bogenhausen [Delp’s parish in Munich] with whom he had suffered through the many bombings and that he did not want to give the impression that he knew more than in fact he did.”<sup>452</sup>

Inevitably, after saying mass on July 28, a little over a week after the failed plot, Delp was approached by the Gestapo. After speaking with the secret police for some time, Delp emerged from the rectory pale and clearly shaken. “I’m under arrest, God be with you. Goodbye,”<sup>453</sup> Delp pronounced while he was being led away. The final six months of his life would be filled with suffering, fear, and loneliness, yet it would be his great faith and reliance on God that would enable him to face the terrible trials and hardships of the upcoming months. This moment also reveals Delp’s character: his

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<sup>451</sup> Coady, *With Bound Hands*, 67.

<sup>452</sup> Coady, *With Bound Hands*, 68.

<sup>453</sup> Bleistein, *Alfred Delp*, 297.

stubborn independence and moral courage, evident throughout his life, now manifested in a willingness to risk his own safety for the well-being of his parishioners.

#### **4.4 Conclusion**

As this chapter has shown, Alfred Delp's involvement in the Kreisau Circle represented the logical culmination of his intellectual and moral evolution—from abstract theological critique to direct participation in the resistance group the Kreisau Circle. While Delp had been contemplating a new social order as early as 1935, as seen in his work *Der Aufbau*, his continued theological formation and apostolic ministry enabled him to articulate a coherent and mature vision for a new social order, which was ultimately expressed in the Third Way. This alternative order sought to transcend both capitalism and socialism through a distinctly Christian-humanist framework. In doing so, Delp provided the Kreisau Circle with an ethical foundation that placed both the dignity of the human person and moral law as the foundations for a new democratic order.

Ultimately, Delp sought to reaffirm the primacy of the moral person over the totalizing claims of the state. His Catholic faith not only revealed to him the profound incompatibility between Christianity and Nazism but also provided him with the theological and moral foundation from which he drew the deeply held convictions that enabled him to respond to the evils of Nazism. Whereas many within the German episcopacy and the Catholic laity either failed to perceive or chose to ignore this incompatibility, Delp recognized that true faith demanded active opposition to a regime that celebrated violence and bloodshed. In the end, Delp's life and witness demonstrated that the Catholic faith, when lived to its fullest, compelled both moral and political engagement even in the most challenging circumstances. In another way, Delp's life

ensured that conviction and integrity were still present in Germany even in the midst of one of the darkest periods in history.



## **Chapter 5:**

### **Alfred Delp: Jesuit Identity and Theological Resistance under National Socialism**

As the preceding chapter has demonstrated, Delp's intellectual and moral formation reached its point of culmination in his participation in the Kreisau Circle, where he contributed to the development of a Christian-humanist alternative to both capitalism and Marxism. Rooted in Catholic social thought and the principles of natural law, this vision emphasized solidarity, subsidiarity, and the dignity of the human person, placing it in fundamental opposition to the totalizing *Weltanschauung* of the National Socialist regime. Delp's position was further intensified by his identity as a Jesuit priest, a vocation that, within the ideological framework of National Socialism, was regarded with particular suspicion due to its transnational character and moral independence from the state.

As seen throughout the previous chapters, Delp often struggled to obey the orders of his superiors, at times making him something of a rogue Jesuit. Ironically, as will be shown, Delp was ultimately executed precisely because of his identity as a Jesuit priest. In this sense, the Nazis were indifferent to the degree of his personal adherence to Jesuit discipline; what mattered was that his identity and worldview stood in direct opposition to Nazism. Delp's death therefore functioned, in many ways, as a symbolic act aimed at eliminating what the regime perceived as an inherent ideological threat.

#### **5.1 Delp's Arrest and Trial**

Delp's arrest sent shockwaves through the circles of his Jesuit associates, especially Rösch, who had ordered Delp to go into hiding in the country, where he would

be allowed to return when summoned by a secret password.<sup>454</sup> In September 1943, Rösch had met with Delp and König; Rösch told them that they would cease their work in the Kreisau Circle and focus their work instead on the Church. He remarked:

....[T]he work for the planned reconstruction of the state after the collapse of the Nazis system is discontinued because the only people capable of bringing about change without an assassination—the military—are failing. Any complicity—even the slightest—is out of the question for us, let alone participation in planning or involvement in a violent solution.<sup>455</sup>

This episode highlights the difference between Rösch and Delp in interpreting resistance. Rösch believed that resistance should be strictly limited to protecting the Church. For Delp, however, in line with his theological outlook, if society failed to reflect Christian principles—particularly the dignity of the human person—one had a moral obligation to take all possible measures to bring about change.

Directly disobeying Rösch's order, Delp remained in contact with Peter Yorck, a member of the Kreisau Circle, and also one of the leaders of *Operation Valkyrie*, where Delp even visited Stauffenberg without Rösch's or König's knowledge. It is also clear that König did not obey these commands either as he maintained his contacts with resistance members, which enabled him to have a much clearer vision than Delp of *Operation Valkyrie* itself, primarily since König acted as the liaison for the military plotters to the Kreisau Circle. In this way, Delp and König's resistance was unique: in confronting Nazism, their actions involved not only personal risk but also the possibility of censure from the Jesuit hierarchy for their disobedience.

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<sup>454</sup> Rösch, "Bemerkungen zu einem Buch über P. Delp," 311.

<sup>455</sup> Rösch, "Bemerkungen zu einem Buch über P. Delp," 310.

When Rösch discovered from Tattenbach that Delp had disobeyed him, he was certainly angry. Even so, it is clear that he still cared for Delp. Immediately, he went to the Gestapo headquarters in Munich to ascertain why he was arrested. All he was able to find out was that Delp was being held in Gestapo headquarters in Wittelsbach Palace in Munich and was planning to be moved to Berlin. As Rösch recounted:

Of my own free will, I went to the Gestapo headquarters: I wanted to see him, speak to him, find out why he had been arrested, and bring him food and laundry. We were aware that the Gestapo might be very pleased by this visit and keep me there. They didn't. I was treated very coldly, everything was refused; the food, etc. . . . Nothing was accepted there. Delp was already on his way to Berlin.<sup>456</sup>

This was certainly a bold action and placed both him and the Jesuits under his care in considerable danger. Rösch acknowledged as much when he recollected Delp's life in a short essay in 1956: "Yes, how could anyone do such a thing, going like a sheep to the butcher and endangering the entire province! I felt obligated to do it out of concern for P. Delp and was always inwardly glad to have done it."<sup>457</sup>

Rösch's actions demonstrate the ethical and moral tensions faced by Jesuit leaders under National Socialism: he balanced institutional caution with personal responsibility, taking significant risks to protect his priests. Not long afterward, the Gestapo issued warrants for both Rösch and König. Rösch ordered König into hiding; while König was never discovered, Rösch himself was arrested on January 11, 1945. He was interrogated and imprisoned but never tried, in part because the presiding judge of the People's Court, Roland Freisler, was killed in a bombing in early 1945. In this way, while Delp certainly

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<sup>456</sup> Bleistein, *Alfred Delp*, 298.

<sup>457</sup> Rösch, "Bemerkungen zu einem Buch über P. Delp," 313.

caused difficulties for Rösch throughout his life, it is clear that, as a superior of Jesuits, Rösch was willing to put himself at risk—perhaps out of a sense of guilt, since he had indirectly placed Delp in harm’s way.

Originally the palace of the Wittelsbach monarchy, the building was repurposed by the Nazis as the Bavarian Gestapo to conduct interrogations and even tortures if necessary. It was notorious for holding political prisoners. Hans and Sophie Scholl of the White Rose movement were held and questioned there before their trial as well.

Immediately, upon his arrival, Delp faced intensive interrogations by SS Hauptsturmmann, Leo Lange, a member of the special commission of the July 20<sup>th</sup> plot.<sup>458</sup> Interrogations were particularly severe for those not immediately executed following the failed plot, as Hitler, furious over the attempt on his life, had ordered intensified questioning.<sup>459</sup>

The extent of Delp’s torture is unknown,<sup>460</sup> but Eugen Gerstenmaier, a friend of Delp and later leading member of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), noticed that Delp had deep scars on his back, which he happened to see while showering.<sup>461</sup> As Roman

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<sup>458</sup> Bleistein, *Alfred Delp*, 304.

<sup>459</sup> Bleistein, *Alfred Delp*, 304.

<sup>460</sup> Eugen Gerstenmaier later recounted during an interrogation, which Delp likely experienced in a similar manner. He wrote, “I was handed over to a man who occasionally called himself Rissmann on the phone. He was a gaunt, presumably stomach-diseased, middle-aged man with a bird-of-prey-like face. He led me down a back staircase to the cellar of the house on Minekestrasse. There, an SS Untersturmführer named Steffen or Steffens received me, a man around thirty with a rigid, impassive expression, cold eyes, and few words. He pulled out his pistol, cocked it, and Bando shoved me face down over a long, low table. Then the beating began. The stick was studded with nail heads. I don’t know how long he hit me. But it seems I didn’t lose consciousness. However, I could only manage the stairs afterward with great difficulty.” See Bleistein, *Alfred Delp*, 305-306.

<sup>461</sup> Bleistein, *Alfred Delp*, 305.

Bleistein writes, “It was in those days after August 15, 1944, that Delp was severely beaten and, during the nighttime bombing raid, longed for nothing more than the bombs that would either kill him or allow him to escape. . . [H]e cried out loudly and imploringly, ‘Nearer, nearer!’ into the night of the bombing.”<sup>462</sup> Delp’s longing for the bombs suggests that even physical destruction offered a form of consolation, as death would reunite him with God. This spiritual framework implies a limit to Nazi power: while the regime could inflict extreme physical and psychological suffering, it could not fully destroy Delp’s inner or spiritual autonomy.

Interestingly, having heard much about him, SS-Sturmbannführer and government councilor Dr. Karl Neuhaus sought to meet Delp. The initial encounter between Delp, SS-Sturmbannführer and government councilor Neuhaus is revealing precisely because it momentarily disrupted the rigid ideological boundaries that ordinarily governed relations between the regime and its ecclesial opponents. Neuhaus, himself a former Protestant theologian, was in charge of interrogating Catholic priests connected with the July 20<sup>th</sup> plot.<sup>463</sup> It is unclear how he became an interrogator in the Gestapo, but his academic and theological background suggests he may have been recruited for his intellectual aptitude and ideological alignment with Nazi objectives.

Rather than immediately subjecting Delp to interrogation, Neuhaus engaged him in theological discussion, focusing in particular on Karl Adam’s *The Essence of Catholicism*, and concurring with Delp’s assessment that Alfred Rosenberg’s *Myth of the*

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<sup>462</sup> Bleistein, *Alfred Delp*, 305.

<sup>463</sup> Riebling, *Church of Spies*, 216.

*Twentieth Century* lacked scientific proof. It is remarkable that such a conversation could take place at all, considering the regime's deep hostility toward the Jesuits, whom it saw as both politically unreliable and ideologically subversive. Delp's death was ultimately the result of his Christian vision for a post-Nazi society and, most significantly, his role as a Jesuit. One of the Gestapo's primary concerns, however, was discovering Delp's contacts in Rome, reflecting their obsessive fear of "just how closely Delp and his Catholic confederates had conspired with [Pius XII]." <sup>464</sup>

While Delp remained silent during his interrogations with Neuhaus, he did maintain to Neuhaus that the political and military situation in Europe offered little promise for Germany. Like others in the Kreisau Circle, Delp envisioned a unified Europe that transcended nationalism and rooted in Christian social teaching, which sought to attain a democratic, internationalist order. He believed, however, that the construction of this new Europe was significantly hampered and slowed by Germany's treatment of individual nations, and he saw the country itself heading toward certain destruction. He believed that the only way to save Germany was through conversion. As he noted in his prison writings,

Every temptation to live according to other conditions is a deception. Our participation in this existential lie is really the sin for which we today-as individuals, as a generation, and as a continent-are so horribly doing penance. The way to salvation will be found only in an existential conversion and return to the truth. . . . The lie is dangerously destructive. It has corroded our souls, destroyed our people, demolished our cities and countries, and already has let yet another generation bleed to death. <sup>465</sup>

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<sup>464</sup> Riebling, *Church of Spies*, 216.

<sup>465</sup> Delp, *Priest and Martyr*, 52.

Interestingly, Delp did not consider these statements incriminating. Nevertheless, he likely was facing trial because of his meeting with Stauffenberg in June 1944, which apparently Peter Yorck revealed during one of his interrogations before he was executed.<sup>466</sup> Ultimately, these reflections underscore that Delp's resistance was not political or militaristically motivated; rather, he sought to oppose tyranny on moral and spiritual grounds, emphasizing moral and ethical responsibility as the true means of resisting Nazism.

After he was moved to Berlin to await trial, the Gestapo gave him the opportunity to leave the Jesuit order and thereby save his life, which Delp refused.<sup>467</sup> Of course, this offer was probably not going to be upheld by the Nazis, but it does point to the fact that the Jesuits were seen as a substantial threat to the Nazi regime. Delp was very sensitive about being a Jesuit since he had not taken his final vows yet. As such, aware that the trial would be a sham, Delp deeply desired taking his final vows, which had originally been scheduled for August 15, 1944. Roman Bleistein maintains in regard to the postponement of Delp's vows that,

My fellow Jesuits suggested that Delp's sometimes extravagant lifestyle, his sharp criticism of others, and perhaps also a certain everyday stubbornness may have caused this decision. In addition, Delp not only suffered from a blood and metabolic disease (*forunculosis*) in 1942, but also went through an inner crisis. He struggled to find his place in the Society of Jesus in his new life situation after April 18, 1941—far removed from the task of a writer and from the domestic community of the religious order. It is certain that Delp's participation in the Kreisau Circle played no role in the postponement of his vows, since it was Röscher himself who had brought him into the Kreisau Circle.”<sup>468</sup>

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<sup>466</sup> Bleistein, *Alfred Delp*, 323.

<sup>467</sup> Bleistein, *Alfred Delp*, 328.

<sup>468</sup> Bleistein, *Alfred Delp*, 331.

This episode demonstrates that, outside of academia, Delp often struggled to reconcile his personal shortcomings with the dictates of the order. Aware of his deep distress over the matter, Rösch ultimately allowed him to take his final vows, while still in prison. Ultimately, while conditions might have been easier had he left the Jesuit order, Delp chose to remain a Jesuit—a decision that had grave consequences, resulting in a harsher trial than perhaps faced by other resistance members.

Because Rosch had to hide from the Gestapo from the end of August, his official duties had passed to Father Franz Xaver Müller, who likely granted permission for Delp to take his final vows in Berlin-Tegel prison. Acting as a messenger, Tattenbach was elected to act in the place of Rösch and Müller. Tattenbach prepared a document with the Latin text of the oath formula on the left and the German translation on the right. This was merely a precaution in case the sergeant in question wanted to know exactly what was happening in his presence. Tattenbach later recounted Delp's final vows,

Delp took the sheet, read it, and sank back. And now I was greatly worried about what this meant. Did it perhaps mean that he considered this situation unworthy and that he would rather wait until he could take his vows in freedom. What was behind it? I then told him that if he truly wanted to take this step, he had to sign it. Thereupon, he took the pen and very quickly and forcefully signed his short name. It occurred to me just in time that for it to be valid, he now had to read the text, and so I almost had to force him to agree to speak the text again, not just read it. He managed this with a tremulous and broken voice, and now I realized how shaken he was by the whole thing. Naturally, I had to try to cover it up as best I could. So, I could only deal with him very harshly, very formally, and sternly.<sup>469</sup>

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<sup>469</sup> Bleistein, *Alfred Delp*, 333.



Clearly shaken, Delp realized the magnitude of his actions in that this was a clear rejection of the Nazis' attempt to make him leave the Jesuit order. Reflecting on his experience, "That's why I live now. The Lord has given me a fixed point in his universe, one I've long awaited. Everything else is secondary."<sup>470</sup> He saw that regardless of what happened to him, pain and suffering were of little importance because his life served a greater purpose of commitment to God.

It was also during his time in prison that Delp's vulnerability was fully apparent. He wrote,

We often use the word imprisonment, but you need to have endured it yourself in order to know what it says about the inner being. You need to have sat in a small room with your hands in irons and have seen the shredded flag of freedom standing in the corners, in a thousand images of melancholy. The heart flees from these images again and again, and the mind strives to lift itself free, only to awaken even more sharply to reality at the next guard's footsteps sounding in the hall and the next clanking of keys. Then you know that you are powerless. You have no key, and your door has no inner keyhole, your window is barred and set so high that you cannot even look out. If no one comes and releases you, you will remain bound and poor in misery. All the mental struggles do not help at all.<sup>471</sup>

This indicates that Delp in many ways was becoming disheartened, but it demonstrates that his experiences sharpened his understanding of freedom and the dignity of the human person. Delp articulated that he understood freedom in a much fuller and more profound sense having experienced the loss of freedom itself. In early 1945, Delp argued that freedom was a gift from God; those that abuse man's freedom have reduced individuals to mere objects.<sup>472</sup> Yet he argued that inner freedom was

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<sup>470</sup> Delp, *Gesammelte Schriften IV*, 73.

<sup>471</sup> Delp, *Priest and Martyr, Advent of the Heart*, 113.

<sup>472</sup> Delp, SJ, *Prison Writings*, 79.

a choice. Even if one's physical freedom was lost, this did not mean that one had lost the ability to find this true inner freedom. For Delp posited that this true inner freedom was "born in the moment of contact with God."<sup>473</sup> Without this, Delp stated that man was spiritually dead inside.

During his imprisonment, Delp further sharpened the humanistic anthropology that had informed his earlier work in the Kreisau Circle. For Delp, individuals needed to think beyond themselves and seek the help of others, as turning inward alone was, in his view, an act of self-destruction.<sup>474</sup> Harkening to his work in the Kreisau Circle, Delp emphasized that, "Left entirely to themselves humans are unhappy and intrinsically insincere. We need other people to give us a sense of completeness. . ."<sup>475</sup> He further argued that to prevent another regime like Nazism from taking power, society must guarantee an "existence minimum," which included adequate living space, food, and the protection of law. Beyond these basic necessities, Delp emphasized moral and social standards: "A minimum of honesty in every field was equally necessary," as well as "a minimum of personal standards and human solidarity." He also insists that "a minimum of worldwide dedication and sense of service" is essential, noting that even a sliver of absolute truth is preferable to mass-minded thoughtlessness, as it preserves humankind's awareness and sensitivity to spiritual values, without which people cease to recognize the truth itself. Moreover, he argued that humanity requires "a minimum of transcendence,"

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<sup>473</sup> Delp, SJ, *Prison Writings*, 79.

<sup>474</sup> Delp, SJ, *Prison Writings*, 87.

<sup>475</sup> Delp, SJ, *Prison Writings*, 87.

maintaining that to be truly human one must aspire to something beyond oneself. Finally, society and culture must provide moral ideals or standards that inspire people, enabling them to develop morally, spiritually, and socially. Without this, people risk moral stagnation or despair.

For the “existence minimum” to be fully realized, all of these elements must operate in unison, and for Delp, their integration represented genuine human fulfillment.<sup>476</sup> What is striking is that, despite the suffering he endured in prison, Delp did not descend into despair or retreat into self-pity. Instead, his humanistic views were further sharpened, and even in the terrible circumstances he again offered a concrete moral response to a regime that sought to negate the very conditions he identified as essential to genuine human fulfillment.

Yet while Delp sustained himself by continuing to refine his humanistic thought, he was deeply anxious about his impending trial. He wrote to his friend and secretary Luise Oestreicher, “The decisive hour is inevitably creeping up. The possibility of a settlement beforehand has been cut off short. . . . This week has in many ways been really turbulent. Three of our number have gone the way that remains a bitter possibility for all of us and from which only a miracle of God can separate and protect us.”<sup>477</sup> Even though he was deeply afraid, he still held out hope by continually writing to his friends for any source of help or support. Perhaps as a sign of desperation, he inquired whether anyone might intercede on his behalf through indirect connections—whether through Father

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<sup>476</sup> Delp, SJ, *Prison Writings*, 89.

<sup>477</sup> Alfred Delp, Letter to Luise Oestreicher (17 November 1944), in Coady, *With Bound Hands*, 92.

Körbling, who was distantly related to Hitler's mother, or even Heinrich Himmler, who had attended school in Munich with Father George Strassenberger. Both of these Jesuit priests were involved in the broader network of the Munich Jesuits. Delp thus sought out every possible contact and connection within the Jesuit order.<sup>478</sup>

Delp recognized that his meeting with Stauffenberg had rendered his chances of survival slim at best, a reality made even more dangerous by the testimony of Franz Sperr, who, under torture, informed the Gestapo that Delp had prior knowledge of the plot.<sup>479</sup> Another resistance member, Nikolaus Groß—who was executed by the Nazis in early 1945—also stated under torture that Delp had known about Goerdeler's planned coup.<sup>480</sup> In his correspondence with Tattenbach, he maintained that while he participated in the Kreisau discussions, he believed that they created a "distorted depiction,"<sup>481</sup> which led these discussions to be labeled as high treason by the Nazi authorities.<sup>482</sup> While he claimed that their discussions did not digress into anti-state measures or subversive plans, he articulated their discussions were rather a question of what should happen in the event of a hostile invasion or occupation of German territory by enemy troops.<sup>483</sup> He

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<sup>478</sup> Bleistein, *Alfred Delp*, 336.

<sup>479</sup> Delp, "Letter to Franz von Tattenbach S.J.," (18 December 1944), in Coady, *With Bound Hands*, 124-125.

<sup>480</sup> Bleistein, *Alfred Delp*, 335.

<sup>481</sup> Bleistein, *Alfred Delp*, 366.

<sup>482</sup> He also emphasized other points that could potentially further incriminate him. Delp was angered by statements that were supposedly made by him, particularly that he participated in a meeting discussing a coup, that Goerdler and Moltke planned to stage a coup, and lastly that he and Moltke secretly discussed plans for the coup itself. Delp saw these charges as unbelievable and unsustainable, but he was deeply worried about his connection with the July 20<sup>th</sup> plot. See Alfred Delp, "Letter to Franz von Tattenbach S.J." (18, December 1944), in Coady, *With Bound Hands*, 123-124.

<sup>483</sup> Bleistein, *Alfred Delp*, 336.

maintained that his participation had been limited to presenting the principles of Catholic social doctrine; a similar purpose, he argued, was served by arranging a meeting between Moltke and Karl Mierendorff, a resistance figure and former Social Democratic politician, and the Bishop of Fulda. Delp believed that his role had effectively concluded by the end of 1942—a claim that is difficult to reconcile with his continued activities prior to his arrest.<sup>484</sup>

Within this context, Delp's tone reflects a man seeking to preserve his life. His anxiety only heightened following the disappearance of Rösch and König, whom he feared would further implicate him.<sup>485</sup> In many ways, he was right. His review of his defense is interesting in that someone of his intellectual ability was unable to see that his work in the Kreisau Circle would be considered high treason by the Nazi state. From the standpoint of the Nazi state, however, the very act of imagining an alternative government without National Socialism was inherently subversive.

Delp's inability to recognize the Nazi state's perception of his actions persisted throughout his trial. Seated between Moltke, Eugen Gerstenmaier, Theodor Steltzer—a former Prussian officer—and Theodor Haubach—a former Social Democratic politician—Delp and his associates were accused of “hav[ing] jointly undertaken to forcibly change the constitution of the empire and to deprive the leader of his constitutional power, thereby at the same time. . . promot[ing] hostile power domestically

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<sup>484</sup> Bleistein, *Alfred Delp*, 336.

<sup>485</sup> Alfred Delp, “Letter to Franz von Tattenbach, S.J.” (18 December 1944), in Coady, *With Bound Hands*, 127.

during a war against the empire.”<sup>486</sup> Delp countered that he had never actively opposed National Socialism, stipulating that he had never been warned or arrested during his lectures or sermons. Though viewed with suspicion, which led to the rejection of his application to the University of Munich, Delp believed that his publications, having remained above suspicion, showed that he had never truly been in trouble with the Nazi regime.<sup>487</sup> In the context of his defense, Delp maintained that his understanding of true resistance differed from the members of the July 20<sup>th</sup> plot. Whereas their actions involved direct political opposition, Delp believed his own activity was defined primarily by moral and spiritual critique rather than overt political resistance. Although he recognized that political change was necessary because the regime failed to respect human dignity, he did not view himself as a political dissident. This again highlights the paradox of his statements given that the intent of the Kreisau Circle was to create an alternative government and society to Nazism. At the same time, because he had not received any disciplinary action or warnings in regard to his sermons and writings, to him this signified that he was not an opponent to Nazism. Most importantly though, Delp maintained that due to the increase of paranoia as a result of the July 20<sup>th</sup> plot, the Nazis had distorted his writings and his work within the Kreisau Circle to justify his arrest and trial.

Even though Delp believed that the Nazis distorted his views, writings, and associations, the reality was that he was not going to have a fair trial. The People’s Court,

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<sup>486</sup> Ger van Roon, *Neordnung im Widerstand* (R. Oldenbourg Verlag: München, 1967), 594.

<sup>487</sup> Bleistein, *Alfred Delp*, 369.

with self-appointed members and no legal oversight, replaced the Supreme Court for treason cases. Its structure allowed it to enforce Nazi ideology, with judges, especially Roland Freisler, prioritizing Hitler's will and the Nazi Party program over legal principles, creating a tool for judicial terror.<sup>488</sup> Seen in this way, Delp's fate was already decided before the start of the trial itself. The head judge Roland Freisler was an ardent anti-cleric and even more so, anti-Jesuit.<sup>489</sup> Since the Gestapo had been unable to locate König and Rösch, Delp was targeted more vehemently than he otherwise would have been had his associates also been on trial. According to Bleistein, this was a form of revenge for Rösch's absence.<sup>490</sup> Freisler had hoped to have all three of them on trial, so he could attack the Church directly. As Elke Endraß emphasizes, "That Delp was the first to have to answer for these accusations is no coincidence. Freisler is thereby signaling the direction in which he intends to steer the proceedings. The emphasis is on religion, Christianity, the Church, but especially on the Jesuits."<sup>491</sup>

Freisler made his hatred very clear in his rants against Delp during the trial: "He's a rabble-rouser, he's a priestly sausage—and such a thing dares to want to harm our beloved Führer's life . . . a rat—someone should kick and crush such a thing!"<sup>492</sup> Freisler

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<sup>488</sup> Bleistein, *Alfred Delp*, 373. For additional information on the Volksgerichtshof see H. W. Koch, *In the Name of the Volk: Political Justice in Hitler's Germany* (New York: I.B.Tauris, 1997), Nikolaus Wachsmann, *Hitler's Prisons: Legal Terror in Nazi Germany* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015), and Alan E. Steinweis and Robert D. Rachlin, eds., *The Law in Nazi Germany: Ideology, Opportunism, and the Perversion of Justice* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2015).

<sup>489</sup> For additional information on Freisler's life see Helmut Ortner, *Hitler's Executioner: Roland Freisler, President of the Nazi People's Court* (Chicago: Frontline Books, 2018). Thomas Clausen, *Roland Freisler (1893–1945): An Intellectual Biography* (PhD diss., University of Cambridge, 2021).

<sup>490</sup> Bleistein, *Alfred Delp*, 393.

<sup>491</sup> Endraß, *Gemeinsam gegen Hitler*, 175.

<sup>492</sup> Bleistein, *Alfred Delp*, 377.

described the Jesuit order “as the embodiment of evil itself, from which an icy wall must separate us.”<sup>493</sup> He also filled the trial with anti-Jesuit stereotypes and insults against the Catholic Church, reenforcing the idea that Delp was guilty simply for being a Jesuit. As Delp realized, “Objectively, I could say whatever I wanted: no one believes a Jesuit, as he is fundamentally an enemy of the Reich and, above all, an enemy of the Nazi Party.”<sup>494</sup> He reiterated this point later in a letter to a friend after he was already condemned to death, “It is a common belief that a Jesuit commits a crime every time he draws breath. He can say and do and prove whatever he likes—no one ever believes him. . . .”<sup>495</sup>

Delp endured the attacks against him and the Jesuit order with great external calmness, but with little success since Freisler did not allow Delp to respond or answer. He later wrote to a friend that he had to control himself, as inwardly he wanted to explode; otherwise, he feared he might jeopardize his own and others’ chances of survival during the trial.<sup>496</sup> The charges that were brought against Delp, particularly that he planned a coup with Stauffenberg could not be proven. In addition to his Jesuit background, Delp was found guilty because of his Catholic vision for Germany society after the fall of the Nazi regime. Delp reiterated his commitment to his views during the trial as he insisted that a fundamental change needed to occur in German society. Freisler asked, “Do you mean that the state has to be changed so that you can begin to change

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<sup>493</sup> Bleistein, *Alfred Delp*, 385.

<sup>494</sup> Bleistein, *Alfred Delp*, 394.

<sup>495</sup> Alfred Delp, “Letter to M.” (11 January 1945), in Coady, *With Bound Hands*, 179-180.

<sup>496</sup> Delp, “Letter to M.” (11 January 1945), 180.



conditions that keep people away from the Church?” Delp responded, “Yes, that’s what I mean . . . .”<sup>497</sup> According to Gerstenmaier and Rösch, in addition to Delp being a Jesuit, his “defeatist” views and attempt to Christianize society were also key to Delp’s death sentence.<sup>498</sup>

Delp later acknowledged this in a letter to a friend: “My offense is that I believed in Germany and her eventual emergence from this dark hour of error and distress, that I refused to accept that accumulation of arrogance, pride, and force that is the Nazis’ way of life, and that I did this as a Christian and a Jesuit.”<sup>499</sup> This episode demonstrates that Delp was condemned not for provable acts of treason, but because the regime treated any independent moral or spiritual authority as inherently subversive to the state.

Gerstenmaier later echoed this point, arguing that Delp’s suffering stemmed from his role as a servant of God, as Nazi violence toward him functioned as an expression of hostility toward a divine authority far more powerful than the Third Reich itself.<sup>500</sup> This is why Gerstenmaier believed that the trial of Delp and the other Kreisau Circle members was not about establishing facts—substantiated or unsubstantiated—but rather about eliminating a position the Third Reich could not tolerate, viewing it as an obstacle to Nazi

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<sup>497</sup> Bleistein, *Alfred Delp*, 377-378.

<sup>498</sup> Augustin Rösch, “Rösch: Zum Gedächtnis von P. Alfred Delp SJ” (January 26, 1946), in *Augustinus Rösch: Leben im Widerstand*, ed. Roman Bleistein, 253; and Eugen Gerstenmaier, *Streit und Friede hat seine Zeit: Ein Lebensbericht* (Berlin: Verlag Ullstein, 1981), 217.

<sup>499</sup> Delp, “Letter to M.” (11 January 1945), 184.

<sup>500</sup> Eugen Gerstenmaier, “Aufstand des Gewissens,” in *Alfred Delp – Ein Leben für die kommende Welt, Zum 80. Todestag*, Alfred-Delp-Jahrbuch, vol. 14, ed. Peter Kern, 168.

domination.<sup>501</sup> Freisler made this very clear during the trial, “They do not belong to us. Their Christianity and ours have one thing in common: we demand the whole person!”<sup>502</sup>

Unable to stage a Jesuit show trial without Rösch and König, Freisler singled out Delp as the primary target for his wrath. Delp, according to Elke Endraß, “was to suffer as a representative of all Catholics.”<sup>503</sup> Even Moltke, who was a Protestant, was primarily condemned because of his association with the Jesuits. Infuriated, Freisler demanded to know how a German like Moltke could even be connected to a Jesuit.

A Jesuit Father, and with him of all people you discuss questions of civil disobedience! And you know the Jesuit Provincial [Rösch] too! . . . A Jesuit Provincial, one of the highest officials of Germany’s most dangerous enemies. . . And you’re not ashamed of it! No German would touch a Jesuit with a barge-pole! . . . If I know there is a Jesuit Provincial in a town, it is almost a reason for me not to go to that town! . . . And you visit bishops! What is your business with a bishop, with any bishop?<sup>504</sup>

In this way, Moltke’s loyalty to Germany was in question simply because of his association with the Jesuits.<sup>505</sup> After Moltke was condemned to death, he wrote to his wife Freya in January 1945 essentially stating that he was dying as a martyr for Ignatius of Loyola.<sup>506</sup> Moltke reiterated this in a series of letters to Delp, while they were in prison:

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<sup>501</sup> Gerstenmaier, “Aufstand des Gewissens,” 168.

<sup>502</sup> Gerstenmaier, *Streit und Friede*, 219.

<sup>503</sup> Endraß, *Gemeinsam gegen Hitler*, 176.

<sup>504</sup> Moltke, *Letters to Freya*, 402-403.

<sup>505</sup> Moltke later wrote to his wife, Freya, with a touch of humor that he shuddered to imagine what his anti-Catholic father would have thought of him dying for the Jesuits. See Moltke, *Letters to Freya*, 404.

<sup>506</sup> Moltke, *Letters to Freya*, 405.

Since relations with Catholics were the subject of the most severe attacks, the National Socialist Freisler could only act against me as against Christians in general. This forced him to make those extreme, clear pronouncements about the ultimate incompatibility of Christianity and National Socialism, which, even if we fall, will spread as fertile seed throughout the land. This antagonist to Freisler, or this sacrifice, could only be made by me, and only in this peculiar constellation. Therefore, there is nothing to gloss over, nothing to forgive.<sup>507</sup>

Delp acknowledged the same thing that Moltke's plight might not have been so bad if he had not been associated with Jesuits and bishops.<sup>508</sup> Above all, this demonstrates that it was not just Delp who was affected by his Jesuit background, but rather everyone connected with him. Freisler made it clear that Germans did not associate with Jesuits, and those that did would be seen as enemies and traitors to the state.

Since Freisler virtually solely controlled the outcome of the trial, it was unsurprising that Delp and all the defendants, except Gerstenmaier and Steltzer, were condemned to death. Following the outcome of the trial, Delp wrote his friend Franz von Tattenbach articulating that the trial was essentially a sham with its sole purpose being to attack the Church and the Jesuits. He believed that the attacks on the Church and the Jesuits had intensified because the Gestapo could not locate Rösch and König, and because he had refused to renounce his final vows during his interrogations.<sup>509</sup> While Delp claimed he could objectively defend himself, the reality was that the word of a Jesuit meant nothing.<sup>510</sup> He reiterated this point again in a letter to the Jesuits in Munich

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<sup>507</sup> Delp, *Gesammelte Schriften IV*, 437.

<sup>508</sup> Delp, "Letter to M." (11 January 1945), 180.

<sup>509</sup> Alfred Delp, "Letter to Franz von Tattenbach, S.J.," (10 January 1945), in Coady, *With Bound Hands*, 166.

<sup>510</sup> Rösch mentions a similar level of bigotry towards the Jesuits during his interrogations by the Gestapo. He wrote to his friend P. Odilo Braun O.P. that, "Father, here one hates the Catholics—one hates

“The actual reason for my condemnation was that I happened to be, and chose to remain, a Jesuit. . . There was one underlying theme—a Jesuit is a priori an enemy and betrayer of the Reich.”<sup>511</sup>

This coincides with Gerstenmaier’s later testimony regarding Delp’s trial and death. Gerstenmaier, a Protestant, stated that the Church and the religious orders were particularly hated, and the only reason Delp was executed was because he was a Jesuit priest. In Gerstenmaier’s view, he was able to survive because he was a Protestant.<sup>512</sup> Of course, this differs from Moltke’s sentence, who was likewise a Protestant. Perhaps since Moltke wanted Catholic priests to offer a Catholic perspective during the Kreisau meetings, and he also hoped to try and encourage specific bishops to speak out against crimes committed by Nazis, Moltke was seen as a much greater threat than Gerstenmaier, who only participated in one meeting. From the Nazis’ perspective, Moltke was a traitor to Germany because he befriended and solicited the advice and support of Jesuit priests.

It is interesting that Delp was attacked with more vehemence than other priests as the Nazis were conscious of not creating martyr figures. Perhaps the vicious attack against Delp was due to the nature of his resistance activity. Freisler realized that Delp was his intellectual equal, if not his superior.<sup>513</sup> Delp’s ability to engage in reasoned argument and maintain composure under interrogation likely impressed Freisler. In

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even more the priests and religious, but against the Jesuits there is a horrific hatred, a gruesome hatred. I have experienced it myself more than once . . . [the Gestapo told him] ‘We look forward soon [] to see you hanging on the gallows.’” See Rösch, “Zum Gedächtnis von P. Alfred Delp SJ,” 257.

<sup>511</sup> Alfred Delp, “Letter to his fellow Jesuits,” (11 January 1945), in Coady, *With Bound Hands*, 171.

<sup>512</sup> Gerstenmaier, *Streit und Friede*, 200 and 217.

<sup>513</sup> Endraß, *Gemeinsam gegen Hitler*, 175.

Freisler's view, it was inconceivable that someone of Delp's intelligence and academic background was not fulfilling his patriotic duties.<sup>514</sup> This dynamic was further highlighted by Delp's misjudgment in sending Freisler one of his books, "Humanity and History," to prove his innocence. In fact, as Delp later realized, that was a grave mistake, as "it only gave him the impression I was clever and therefore more dangerous."<sup>515</sup> As such, it would be far more dangerous to allow a Jesuit of his abilities and intelligence to continue his activities. Rupert Mayer, Delp's friend, was an outspoken opponent of Nazism and subsequently arrested and moved to house arrest in 1940, but he was also known to be a poor student and not very intellectually gifted.<sup>516</sup> Seen in this light, Delp's intelligence and capacity to envision a world without Nazism made him particularly dangerous in the eyes of the Nazis.

After the pronouncement of the verdict, Delp believed that he had fulfilled his role as a priest and a Jesuit since he saw the trial as a direct attack against God. Delp wrote to his sister Greta remarking, "It was purely a matter against the Lord God—and I defend[ed] Him."<sup>517</sup> Clearly, in light of the nature of Freisler's attacks against Delp, the Church, and the Jesuits, this was a reasonable claim to make, since Freisler made it very clear that Nazism and Christianity were completely incompatible worldviews and, as such, it was treasonous to even practice Christianity. Gerstenmaier echoed this; he argued

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<sup>514</sup> Endraß, *Gemeinsam gegen Hitler*, 175.

<sup>515</sup> Delp, "Letter to M." (11 January 1945), 182.

<sup>516</sup> AEMF, Rupert Mayer SJ (Informativprozess 1937-1951), 5975.

<sup>517</sup> Bleistein, *Alfred Delp*, 396.

that Delp's actions were a revolt of his conscience.<sup>518</sup> Since Germany no longer upheld the dignity of the human person, Germany itself was desecrated; it was no longer possible to live in a way ordained by God. In Gerstenmaier's view, Delp truly maintained his commitment to Christian teaching.<sup>519</sup>

Even though Delp was faced with certain death, he developed an inner peace. In his view, he had discovered true freedom as earlier in prison he had interpreted freedom in a physical sense,<sup>520</sup> but now he realized that real freedom came from within—a life lived fully for God.<sup>521</sup> This is why he said later in a letter to a friend that, “I was sacrificed, not conquered.”<sup>522</sup> He was, however, visibly shaken by the death of Moltke, who died a couple weeks before Delp's execution. In desperation, he wrote to the Chief Reich Prosecutor and Himmler.<sup>523</sup> Though convicted of high treason, he cited that his verdict confirmed that he had nothing to do with the plot. He also stated that though he had been asked to speak about Catholic social theory, he had not intended to be politically active. Above all, he saw himself as a scholar, not a political subversive.<sup>524</sup> His parents also tried to obtain clemency for him.<sup>525</sup> Throughout his life, Delp remained

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<sup>518</sup> Gerstenmaier, “Aufstand des Gewissens,” 169.

<sup>519</sup> Gerstenmaier, “Aufstand des Gewissens,” 170.

<sup>520</sup> Delp, *Alfred Delp, Priest and Martyr, Advent of the Heart*, 114.

<sup>521</sup> Bleistein, *Alfred Delp*, 402.

<sup>522</sup> Delp, “Letter to M.” (11 January 1945), 183.

<sup>523</sup> He wrote in a letter that his brothers were prisoners of war, one brother-in-law was killed in action, another brother-in-law was missing in action, and the brother-in-law was serving on the Western front. Coady, *With Bound Hands*, 176.

<sup>524</sup> Bleistein, *Alfred Delp*, 406.

<sup>525</sup> Bleistein, *Alfred Delp*, 404-406.

continually hopeful, though he was deeply hurt when, just a few days later, three of his friends were executed.<sup>526</sup> In response, he shifted his understanding of hope from the preservation of physical life to the promise of eternal life.

As the day of his execution approached, Delp grew noticeably calmer and less anxious, increasingly embodying the theological convictions he had articulated, analyzed, and preached for years, believing that faith entailed a radical dependence upon and trust in God. As he wrote to his infant godchild Alfred Sebastian Kessler,

. . .the purpose to which I have placed my life—or better, to which it has been placed: to increase the praise and adoration of God; to help prove that people can live according to God’s order and in the freedom of God, and that this is how to be human. I wanted to help, and want to help, find a way out of the great misery which we humans have gotten into and in which we have lost the right to be human. Only in adoration, in love, in living according to God’s order, is a person free and capable of life. So here I’ve told you something of the insight and work and mission I desire for you.<sup>527</sup>

On February 2, 1945, Delp was executed by hanging. Shortly beforehand, the prison chaplain, Peter Buchholz, spoke with him and was struck by his composure, particularly given his pale, emaciated, and physically weakened condition.<sup>528</sup> Delp remarked to him with quiet irony, “In half an hour I’ll know more than you do.”<sup>529</sup> He was even able to leave his friends with a trace of humor, urging them not to burden his mother with “pious

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<sup>526</sup> Bleistein, *Alfred Delp*, 406.

<sup>527</sup> Alfred Delp, “Letter to Alfred Sebastian Kessler,” (23 January 1945), in Coady, *With Bound Hands*, 201.

<sup>528</sup> Bleistein, *Alfred Delp*, 408.

<sup>529</sup> Bleistein, *Alfred Delp*, 408.

legends,” adding simply, “I was a brat.”<sup>530</sup> These actions show that Delp’s resistance was also deeply spiritual: his inner freedom, rooted in God, enabled him to face tyranny with hope and to uphold his moral integrity until the end.

Following his execution, Delp’s body was cremated, and his ashes were dispersed in sewage waste, a final act of degradation reserved for those deemed traitors to the state. This measure was not merely punitive but symbolic, constituting a deliberate affront to Delp’s Catholic faith, for which proper burial held profound theological significance. Cremation was, prior to the Second Vatican Council, explicitly forbidden. Even in death, the regime sought to deny Delp the dignity he had consistently defended.

## **5.2 Conclusion**

Thus, as this chapter has shown, Delp’s Catholic faith and Jesuit background acted as a form of a sustained theological and moral challenge to the regime’s claim to total authority. Rooted in Catholic social thought and sharpened through his participation in the Kreisau Circle, Delp articulated a Christian-humanist vision, which emphasized dignity, freedom, and responsibility of the human person. It was precisely this vision—rather than any provable act of treason—that rendered him intolerable to the Nazi state and ultimately led to his execution.

In addition to his Christian-humanist vision, Delp was also targeted as a subversive because of his Jesuit identity. Although, as this thesis has shown, he at times struggled to conform fully to the maxims of the Jesuit order, the regime’s deep-seated suspicion and paranoia surrounding the Jesuits outweighed such distinctions. While Delp

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<sup>530</sup> Alfred Delp, “Letter to Luise Oestreicher,” (11 January 1945), in Coady, *With Bound Hands*, 186.



himself recognized that his trial was largely a show trial, his prosecution also reflected the regime's broader hostility toward the Jesuits and the Catholic Church. In this sense, Delp's death illustrates how alternative worldviews or ideas were deemed a threat to Nazism itself.

## **Conclusion:**

### **A Christian-Humanist Vision for the Reconstruction of Germany: Delp's Legacy in Post-War Germany**

Delp's arrest, trial, and execution in February 1945 form not merely the conclusion of his resistance activity but the context in which its broader significance must be assessed. At the same time, Delp's death did not mark the end of his historical influence. In the years that followed, his writings and example continued to resonate among surviving members of the Kreisau Circle and among those engaged in reflecting on Germany's moral and political reconstruction. Elements of Delp's thought—particularly his reflections on social responsibility, Christian humanism, and the search for a “Third Way” beyond both liberal individualism and totalitarian collectivism—echoed in postwar debates, including within emerging Christian Democratic circles. While these developments cannot be attributed to Delp alone, his ideas formed part of the wider intellectual and moral milieu that helped shape discussions about democracy and social order in the early Federal Republic. Viewed in this light, Delp's significance extends beyond his role as a resistor to encompass his contribution to the moral and political reorientation of postwar Germany.

Following the war, Delp became known as a martyr and a hero in Munich, in particular, due to the efforts of the Jesuit priest Paul Bolkovac. Bolkovac originally collected Delp's prison letters and writings (*Im Angesicht des Todes*) and published them posthumously, and the collection became a bestseller. In the preface, he discussed Delp's work in the Kreisau Circle, but failed to mention Rösch's involvement, or that he was the

one that originally brought Delp into the Kreisau Circle.<sup>531</sup> Because of this, Rösch attempted for the rest of his life to proverbially set the record straight.

Rösch regarded Delp as highly intelligent and gifted in philosophy, but he was willful, stubborn, and judgmental.<sup>532</sup> This led Delp to come into conflict with Rösch and his other Jesuit superiors. This tension is illustrated by Delp's earlier time at Stella Matutina, where, without the knowledge of his superiors, he led students in flag-waving and marching that, in Rösch's view, brought them dangerously close to Nazism.<sup>533</sup> Although there was a tone of bitterness in aspects of Rösch's recollections of Delp, it is more likely that he experienced a sense of survivor's guilt. Rösch avoided trial largely because Roland Freisler was killed before proceedings could begin, whereas Delp, a priest under his care, was executed. It is clear in his recollections that he cared for Delp, but was frustrated by Delp's lack of obedience and that Rösch's efforts had not been remembered. Ultimately, it remains unclear whether Rösch's motivations were self-interested or driven by a desire to present Delp honestly—as a deeply complex figure, admirable but far from a flawless or saintly ideal.

## **6.1 Delp's Legacy**

Delp's execution did not mark the end of his historical significance; in many ways, it marked the beginning of his broader historical legacy. Within months, Germany was defeated, and although most members of the Kreisau Circle were dead, figures such as Eugen Gerstenmaier survived to shape the political culture of the postwar Federal

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<sup>531</sup> Bleistein, *Augustinus Rösch: Leben im Widerstand*, 148.

<sup>532</sup> Rösch, "P. Alfred Delp, 2. 2. 1945 Berlin-Plötzensee," 299.

<sup>533</sup> Rösch, "Bemerkungen zu einem Buch über P. Delp," 310.

Republic. Through Gerstenmaier's later role in the Christian Democratic Union, both the memory of the Kreisau Circle and key elements of its Christian-humanist vision—particularly its emphasis on human dignity, moral limits on state power, and responsibility before God—found institutional expression in postwar Germany.<sup>534</sup> In this sense, Delp's death stands as a testament to the enduring political and moral challenge posed by his thought.

By May 1945, the Nazis were defeated, and Germany was subsequently occupied by British, French, American, and Soviet troops. Divided into four zones, the United States, French, and British occupied Western Germany, while the USSR controlled Eastern Germany. Tensions though increased between the USSR and other Western powers over war reparations and ideologically opposed views of how to reconstruct Germany. These growing tensions contributed to the outbreak of the Cold War in 1947. By 1949, the Western powers joined their zones to form West Germany (the Federal Republic of Germany). The Soviet zone became known as East Germany (the German Democratic Republic). In 1961, East Germany, a satellite state of the Soviet Union, built the Berlin Wall to prevent citizens from fleeing to West Germany. The wall stood until 1989.<sup>535</sup>

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<sup>534</sup> For additional information on Gerstenmaier's life, see Daniela Gniss, *Der Politiker Eugen Gerstenmaier 1906–1986: Eine Biographie* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 2005). Karl Brauer, *Für die Freiheit und Unabhängigkeit der Kirche: Eugen Gerstenmaiers religiöse und theologische Entwicklung im Spannungsfeld von Kirche und Staat bis 1945* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2020).

<sup>535</sup> For additional information on the division within Germany see A. James McAdams, *Germany Divided: From the Wall to Reunification* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), Henry Ashby Turner, Jr., *Germany from Partition to Reunification* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992).

Amid these tensions, West Germany began the process of reconstruction. The survivors of the Kreisau Circle, particularly Gerstenmaier, attempted to reconstruct West Germany based on some of the ideas put forward in the Kreisau discussions. This can be particularly seen in the creation of the Christian Democratic Union. Founded in 1945, this political party was grounded in the principles of Catholic social theory, a social market economy, and most importantly interconfessionalism.<sup>536</sup> More particularly, the goal of the CDU was to integrate Christian social ethics into democratic governance. In one of their earlier documents, they posited that, “the Christian Democratic Union strives for a community of life for the entire German people, grounded in Christianity.”<sup>537</sup>

This echoes one of Delp’s key ideas that there should be interconfessional unity within Germany. He believed that even though the Christian denominations disagreed on theological principles, they still shared common sets of morals and ethics, based on natural law.<sup>538</sup> For similar reasons, the CDU was established as an interconfessional

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<sup>536</sup> The members of the CDU identified a social market system as, “we freed the productive forces of the people from the paralysis of the planned economy and fostered their development through competition based on performance.” See Christliche demokratische Union, “Hamburger Programm” (April 1953), [https://www.kas.de/documents/252038/253252/1953\\_Hamburger-Programm.pdf/f72d77e5-7581-4e80-80cd-652518392fdb](https://www.kas.de/documents/252038/253252/1953_Hamburger-Programm.pdf/f72d77e5-7581-4e80-80cd-652518392fdb), (accessed February 4, 2026).

<sup>537</sup> Christliche demokratische Union, “Hamburger Programm” (April 1953), [https://www.kas.de/documents/252038/253252/1953\\_Hamburger-Programm.pdf/f72d77e5-7581-4e80-80cd-652518392fdb](https://www.kas.de/documents/252038/253252/1953_Hamburger-Programm.pdf/f72d77e5-7581-4e80-80cd-652518392fdb), (accessed February 4, 2026).

<sup>538</sup> As Maria Mitchell contends, the balance of Protestants and Catholics in the three Western zones helped eliminate confessional barriers, and thus paved the way for the success of Christian democracy. After the war, Germany’s confessional map changed by Protestants and Catholic migrating to places that were considered previously “Catholic” or “Protestant” strongholds. While this did not end confessional problems completely, their integration with one another helped dissolve tensions and rivalries. At the same time, members of the CDU recognized a broader Christian struggle against Nazism, which contributed to a breakthrough in confessional relations between Catholics and Protestants. See Maria Mitchell, *The Origins of Christian Democracy: Politics and Confession in Modern Germany* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 2012), 33-34 and 84.

political party. While the CDU was mainly composed of Catholics, Gerstenmaier, a Protestant, contributed centrally to the interconfessional component of the party itself.<sup>539</sup> Gerstenmaier later said, “I thought of my friend, the Jesuit priest Delp, and could not imagine [at the time] profound religious agreement with my Catholic friends in joint political work.”<sup>540</sup> It can be argued that much of his outlook, however, changed during his time with Delp in prison as the two shared many conversations and also prayed together since the two had cells next to one another. More importantly, Delp’s *Im Angesicht des Todes* passed through his hands. Most likely, he read some of his writings before they were smuggled out of prison.

Over the following decade, these formative experiences continued to shape Gerstenmaier’s outlook, guiding his engagement with broader Christian unity in Germany. During the Second Vatican Council, Pope John XXIII asked Gerstenmaier’s opinion of the council, even though he was a Lutheran.<sup>541</sup> While this was probably more intended as a courtesy to Gerstenmaier, for Gerstenmaier this demonstrated the transformation of the relationship between the religious confessions in Germany. He thought of Delp and his work to build these relationships as well as the religious commonalities that he shared with Catholics. For Gerstenmaier, Delp’s example demonstrated that Christians had a duty to cooperate politically.<sup>542</sup> This celebration of

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<sup>539</sup> See Johannes Hermanns, *Eugen Gerstenmaier* (Wiesbaden: Eurobuch-Verlag Lutzeyer, 1966).

<sup>540</sup> Gerstenmaier, *Streit und Friede*, 472.

<sup>541</sup> See Bruno Heck, ed. *Widerstand – Kirche – Staat: Eugen Gerstenmaier zum 70. Geburtstag* (Stuttgart: Propyläen, 1976).

<sup>542</sup> Gerstenmaier, *Streit und Friede*, 472.

interconfessionalism for which he advocated is even more telling in that he believed the future of Christianity demanded the leadership of the Pope, because of the work undertaken by Rome during Vatican II.<sup>543</sup> Indeed, this shows that not only were relations healing between Protestants and Catholics, but that it was possible to politically engage with different religious confessions. The Hamburger Programm echoed Gerstenmaier's message strongly asserting that the CDU, "unanimously and resolutely rejects all attempts to reignite . . . confessional strife."<sup>544</sup>

Delp's ideas about a "Third Way" also exerted a strong influence, leaving a lasting mark on the discussions of the Kreisau Circle. This can particularly be seen in a 1943 proposal on foreign policy. As the policy stipulates, "[one] must perceive the . . . middle ground between the two [capitalism and Marxism]. Ultimately, this is about the unification of the Christian and socialist demands of our time, the fulfillment of which, besides the responsible individuals who strive for it, should be found primarily in the churches and workers' circles."<sup>545</sup> In line with this view, the CDU argued that society should find a balance between capitalism and Marxism by grounding itself in Christian principles and social justice, a goal to be promoted both by individuals and by institutions. This echoes some of Delp's ideas, emphasizing the union of Christian ethics

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<sup>543</sup> Gerstenmaier, *Streit und Friede*, 472.

<sup>544</sup> Christliche demokratische Union, "Hamburger Programm" (April 1953), [https://www.kas.de/documents/252038/253252/1953\\_Hamburger-Programm.pdf/f72d77e5-7581-4e80-80cd-652518392fdb](https://www.kas.de/documents/252038/253252/1953_Hamburger-Programm.pdf/f72d77e5-7581-4e80-80cd-652518392fdb), (accessed February 4, 2026).

<sup>545</sup> "Aussen- und Innenpolitik" (1943), in *Dossier: Kreisauer Kreis, Dokumente aus dem Widerstand gegen den Nationalsozialismus*, ed. Roman Bleistein (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Josef Knecht, 1987), 245.

with social responsibility and the active role of both religious and labor organizations in shaping society.

Though the work of the Kreisau Circle never came to fruition, Delp's ideas regarding Catholic social theory contributed to the broader intellectual environment that shaped the Christian democratic vision of the Christian Democratic Union of Germany. While Delp did not directly influence the CDU's economic or social policies, there are clear thematic overlaps that suggest he belonged to a wider tradition of Christian thinkers contemplating these ideas, beginning in the aftermath of World War I, which sought to build a democracy grounded in Christian principles. After the collapse of Nazism, this became a more pressing issue, since some Catholics and Protestants, more particularly Konrad Adenauer, a CDU party member and the first Chancellor of West Germany, saw that unrestrained capitalism and Marxism led to the outgrowth of Nazism itself.<sup>546</sup> For this reason, members of the CDU believed that Germany's "path to salvation" was through Christianity.<sup>547</sup> This can be seen in the 1945 "Appeal to the German People," which stated "The deification of a criminal adventurer has plunged us into a morass of guilt and shame, and a free democratic order can only emerge if we remember the culturally formative moral and spiritual forces of Christianity and increasingly draw upon this source of strength for our people."<sup>548</sup> In other words, political

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<sup>546</sup> Mitchell, *The Origins of Christian Democracy*, 90.

<sup>547</sup> Mitchell, *The Origins of Christian Democracy*, 86.

<sup>548</sup> Christliche demokratische Union, "Appeal to the German People by the Christian Democratic Union," (26 June 1945), accessed February 4, 2026, <https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/occupation-and-the-emergence-of-two-states-1945-1961/appeal-to-the-german-people-by-the-christian-democratic-union-june-26-1945#:~:text=Abstract,mineral%20resources%20and%20key%20industries.>



and economic life needed to be structured and centered around Christian ethical principles.

These principles were later articulated in early CDU programmatic documents such as the Ahlener Programm of 1947, which openly rejected capitalism and argued for an alternative economic system that met the needs of all people, not just a select few.<sup>549</sup> This document also opposed Marxism with its support of social harmony and rejection of class conflict. It also supported the right of private property with some limitations. Most importantly, the document emphasized that the economy must serve the human person and protect man's dignity and rights, which is incompatible with the Marxist materialist worldview.<sup>550</sup> In this respect, many of these ideas parallel Delp's conception of a Christian "Third Way," which likewise sought a social order rooted in human dignity, social justice, and Christian ethics.

Emphasizing Catholic understanding of democracy, particularly in terms of a society responsible to God and community,<sup>551</sup> the early vision of the CDU reflected the principles of solidarity and subsidiarity. These principles are expressed in several foundational CDU documents, including the Ahlener Programm, the Düsseldorfer Leitsätze (1949), a document that examined the social market economy, as well as the Hamburger Programm (1953), which was the first full federal party program of the CDU. As has been already shown, the principles of solidarity and subsidiarity were closely tied

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<sup>549</sup> Christliche demokratische Union, "The Ahlener Programm of 1947," (February 1947), <https://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/pdf/eng/Parties%20WZ%205%20Eng.pdf>, (accessed February 5, 2026).

<sup>550</sup> Christliche demokratische Union, "The Ahlener Programm of 1947," (February 1947), <https://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/pdf/eng/Parties%20WZ%205%20Eng.pdf>, (accessed February 5, 2026).

<sup>551</sup> Mitchell, *The Origins of Christian Democracy*, 93.

to Delp's Christian-social thought. Delp argued that the economy must be subordinate to moral responsibility and serve the human person rather than individual material gain. This idea is echoed in the Leitsätze' insistence that "the economy is not an end in itself, but must serve the people,"<sup>552</sup> and in their commitment to social security as "an indispensable task of the social order,"<sup>553</sup> both of which embodied Delp's philosophy that society should be ordered toward the common good, where members of society are co-responsible for the well-being of other citizens.<sup>554</sup> This can be seen in the Hamburger document, which articulates that, "The individual, as a free citizen, should bear responsibility for the whole."<sup>555</sup> The Ahelener document similarly argued that society should be organized to reflect the dignity of the human person and the common good. For this reason, it advocated just wages and the protection of workers' rights.<sup>556</sup>

At the same time, all of these documents demonstrate the principle of subsidiarity as well. Delp rejected both collectivist state control and liberal individualism, emphasizing the importance of communities and intermediary institutions. This principle is mirrored in the Düsseldorf Leitsätze' conception of the state as a framework-setter

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<sup>552</sup> Christliche demokratische Union, "Düsseldorfer Leitsätze," [https://www.kas.de/documents/291599/20906855/07-001-9001\\_Duesseldorfer\\_Leitsaetze.pdf/ab19f58f-49ae-18e3-ccbd-4fb5cc6567c2?version=1.1&t=1719299424942](https://www.kas.de/documents/291599/20906855/07-001-9001_Duesseldorfer_Leitsaetze.pdf/ab19f58f-49ae-18e3-ccbd-4fb5cc6567c2?version=1.1&t=1719299424942), (accessed February 4, 2026).

<sup>553</sup> Christliche demokratische Union, "Düsseldorfer Leitsätze," [https://www.kas.de/documents/291599/20906855/07-001-9001\\_Duesseldorfer\\_Leitsaetze.pdf/ab19f58f-49ae-18e3-ccbd-4fb5cc6567c2?version=1.1&t=1719299424942](https://www.kas.de/documents/291599/20906855/07-001-9001_Duesseldorfer_Leitsaetze.pdf/ab19f58f-49ae-18e3-ccbd-4fb5cc6567c2?version=1.1&t=1719299424942), (accessed February 4, 2026).

<sup>554</sup> Pope, *Alfred Delp S.J. im Kreisauer Kreis*, 130.

<sup>555</sup> Christliche demokratische Union, "Hamburger Programm" (April 1953), [https://www.kas.de/documents/252038/253252/1953\\_Hamburger-Programm.pdf/f72d77e5-7581-4e80-80cd-652518392fdb](https://www.kas.de/documents/252038/253252/1953_Hamburger-Programm.pdf/f72d77e5-7581-4e80-80cd-652518392fdb), (accessed February 4, 2026).

<sup>556</sup> Christliche demokratische Union, "The Ahlener Programm of 1947," (February 1947), <https://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/pdf/eng/Parties%20WZ%205%20Eng.pdf>, (accessed February 5, 2026).

that enabled “free and responsible economic activity.”<sup>557</sup> It emphasized that state interference should be limited, particularly in light of the recent experience under Nazism, so that individuals can live with dignity and respect. Although both documents recognized the necessity of governing authority, they stressed that such authority should be balanced, functioning primarily to support and empower individuals rather than exert undue control. This can be seen in the Hamburger document as it articulated that, “Public tasks are primarily to be fulfilled by local self-government. State power only has the authority to perform those tasks that cannot be resolved within the sphere of self-government.”<sup>558</sup> The Ahlener Programm echoed this point as it stipulated that individuals and smaller economic units retained responsibility, and that governing authorities should intervene only to prevent abuse or injustice.<sup>559</sup> These documents illustrated a vision of economic and social order in which authority is balanced with individual and community responsibility—a vision that closely mirrors Delp’s thought, demonstrating that his ideas found resonance in the CDU’s early conception of a socially grounded, Christian democracy.

Arguably, Delp’s thought was most clearly reflected in the CDU’s commitment to social justice, which sought to create a society in which economic freedom was preserved

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<sup>557</sup> Christliche demokratische Union, “Düsseldorfer Leitsätze,” [https://www.kas.de/documents/291599/20906855/07-001-9001\\_Duesseldorfer\\_Leitsaetze.pdf/ab19f58f-49ae-18e3-ccb4-4fb5cc6567c2?version=1.1&t=1719299424942](https://www.kas.de/documents/291599/20906855/07-001-9001_Duesseldorfer_Leitsaetze.pdf/ab19f58f-49ae-18e3-ccb4-4fb5cc6567c2?version=1.1&t=1719299424942) , (accessed February 4, 2026).

<sup>558</sup> Christliche demokratische Union, “Hamburger Programm”(April 1953), [https://www.kas.de/documents/252038/253252/1953\\_Hamburger-Programm.pdf/f72d77e5-7581-4e80-80cd-652518392fdb](https://www.kas.de/documents/252038/253252/1953_Hamburger-Programm.pdf/f72d77e5-7581-4e80-80cd-652518392fdb), (accessed February 4, 2026).

<sup>559</sup> Christliche demokratische Union, “The Ahlener Programm of 1947,” (February 1947), <https://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/pdf/eng/Parties%20WZ%205%20Eng.pdf>, (accessed February 5, 2026).

while ensuring equity, protecting the vulnerable, and upholding human dignity. Following the conclusion of the war and the Nuremberg trials, members of the CDU, particularly survivors of the Kreisau Circle, made a moral commitment to eradicate the evil of Nazism from German society. In their 1945 appeal they remarked, “And we promise to expunge every last trace of the system that is to blame for this terrible sacrifice of blood and this unspeakable misery – and to do everything within our power to protect humankind from such a catastrophe in the future.”<sup>560</sup> Rooted in Catholic social thought, particularly the encyclicals *Rerum Novarum* and *Quadragesimo Anno*, the CDU sought to uphold the dignity of the human person, which was central to their understanding of social justice and informed constitutional, economic, and social reform. As discussed in the previous section, social justice was already embedded in the party’s economic and social principles, and the CDU aimed to codify it legally in the new German state.

It is clear through the previous section that social justice was inherent in the CDU’s economic and social structure. At the same time, the CDU sought to instill social justice as a legal component of German society. In 1948–1949, the Parliamentary Council, chaired by CDU leader and future Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, drafted the constitution for the new Federal Republic of Germany, with representatives from all political parties participating in its composition. Playing a central role in its composition, the CDU helped write the Basic Law. In the first article of the constitution, it highlights

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<sup>560</sup> Christliche demokratische Union, “Appeal to the German People by the Christian Democratic Union,” (26 June 1945), accessed February 4, 2026, <https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/occupation-and-the-emergence-of-two-states-1945-1961/appeal-to-the-german-people-by-the-christian-democratic-union-june-26-1945#:~:text=Abstract,mineral%20resources%20and%20key%20industries>.

that human dignity is a state protected right. Delp's Christian-social thought resonated particularly in Article I, which states: "The German people therefore acknowledge inviolable and inalienable human rights as the basis of every community, of peace and of justice in the world."<sup>561</sup> While this formulation reflects a broader tradition of Christian social thought, it nevertheless echoes ideas articulated by Delp and parallels the moral principles embedded in the Basic Law. Ultimately, Delp's vision that society should be ordered toward the common good, ensuring a minimum standard of subsistence that allows individuals to live with dignity and fulfill their vocation—aligns closely with these foundational principles.<sup>562</sup>

Human dignity was of particular importance for the CDU at this time, as they believed it was under threat from the Soviet Union—especially for East Germans, who were denied freedom and the ability to live with dignity. Indeed, this was why the CDU stipulated, "The Federal Republic of Germany acts on behalf of all Germans in East and West who are denied the opportunity to live in a free, social state governed by the rule of law. Our core task remains to peacefully provide all Germans with a common homeland."<sup>563</sup> In this way, the CDU's commitment to protecting human dignity and freedom reflects the principles emphasized by Delp, demonstrating how his vision of a just, moral society resonated in the party's approach to social and political reconstruction.

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<sup>561</sup> "Basic Law for the Federal Republic of Germany," [https://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/englisch\\_gg/englisch\\_gg.html](https://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/englisch_gg/englisch_gg.html), (accessed February 4, 2026).

<sup>562</sup> Pope, *Alfred Delp S.J. im Kreisauer Kreis*, 115.

<sup>563</sup> Hamburger Programm (April 1953), [https://www.kas.de/documents/252038/253252/1953\\_Hamburger-Programm.pdf/f72d77e5-7581-4e80-80cd-652518392fdb](https://www.kas.de/documents/252038/253252/1953_Hamburger-Programm.pdf/f72d77e5-7581-4e80-80cd-652518392fdb), (accessed February 4, 2026).

Delp believed that Christian ethics must shape historical reality, not by creating a perfect political order, but by orienting society toward justice, responsibility, and the common good. This helps explain why the CDU and surviving members of the Kreisau Circle, such as Gerstenmaier, were influenced by Delp's outlook. In the aftermath of the war and moral collapse, many Germans sought a political and social order that rejected both unrestrained capitalism and Marxist collectivism, and instead grounded public life in Christian moral principles. In this sense, the writings of Delp help illuminate the broader Christian intellectual tradition from which the early vision of the Christian Democratic Union of Germany emerged. Although Delp and the CDU's vision was aspirational rather than fully attainable, it nonetheless provided a powerful moral framework. It sustained the memory of the Kreisau Circle and affirmed the possibility of political life ordered toward the protection of human dignity and the common good.

The question then becomes why Alfred Delp has received far less attention than other religious resistance figures—most notably the Protestant pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who is widely regarded as one of the most prominent Christian resisters and has received extensive attention in the post-war period.<sup>564</sup> Indeed, it cannot be explained by the extent or seriousness of their resistance. If anything, Bonhoeffer's postwar prominence reflects not a greater degree of resistance but a set of structural and cultural advantages that shaped how his legacy was received in the English-speaking world. Language, prewar reputation, international networks, and postwar publication efforts

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<sup>564</sup> For additional information on Dietrich Bonhoeffer, see Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, Victoria J. Barnett ed. (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 2000). Ferdinand Schlingensiepen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer 1906-1945: Martyr, Thinker, Man of Resistance* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2010).

played a far greater role in establishing Bonhoeffer as the preeminent symbol of Christian resistance than the substance of his opposition to Nazism alone.

Bonhoeffer is often remembered as a central figure in the German resistance, yet his opposition initially took theological rather than conspiratorial form. As a member of the Confessing Church, he publicly challenged Nazi attempts to control the Church and articulated early critiques of Nazism's legitimacy,<sup>565</sup> most notably in his 1933 address "The Church and the Jewish Question." While this speech demonstrated moral courage, it also reflected the limits of his early thinking, as Bonhoeffer shared certain antisemitic assumptions common among German Christians, including the belief that the "Jewish question" would ultimately be resolved through conversion.<sup>566</sup> His resistance later became more concrete. In 1941, he circulated information about Jewish deportations to foreign contacts, and he was tangentially involved in Operation Seven, which helped Jews escape Germany through falsified documents.<sup>567</sup> These actions place Bonhoeffer within the resistance, but they do not distinguish him as uniquely active when compared with figures such as Delp.

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<sup>565</sup> Raymond Mengus, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Decision to Resist," *The Journal of Modern History* 64 (1992), S141-142.

<sup>566</sup> Ruth Zerner, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Jews: Thoughts and Actions, 1933-1945," *Jewish Social Studies* 37, no. 3/4 (1975): 242.

<sup>567</sup> Operation Seven was a clandestine group that was organized by German Abwehr officers Hans von Dohnanyi, who was Bonhoeffer's brother-in-law, and Wilhelm Canaris during 1942-1943. The purpose of the operation was to rescue German Jews by smuggling them into Switzerland using forged papers that disguised them as Abwehr agents or informants. Originally, the group planned to rescue seven Jews—hence the name Operation Seven—but they ultimately succeeded in rescuing fourteen. Bonhoeffer played an indirect role in the operation by coordinating contacts with other resistance members and helping arrange the escape of the Jews. In 1943, the Gestapo noticed suspicious financial transactions related to the operation, which led to the arrest of several participants, including Bonhoeffer. See Schlingensiefen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer 1906-1945*, 272.

The disproportionate attention Bonhoeffer has received is better explained by his international visibility. His year at Union Theological Seminary in New York in 1930 allowed him to form lasting relationships with American theologians and Church leaders and to become fluent in English. These connections ensured that his name and ideas circulated in the United States well before his arrest. Delp, on the other hand, never gained proficiency in English (it was known that he studied English shortly before his death, but never became proficient) and never developed comparable international networks, a limitation that significantly constrained the postwar transmission of his work beyond Germany.

Bonhoeffer's preexisting reputation further amplified his posthumous fame. By the late 1930s he was already a celebrated theologian, having published several works, most notably following the publication of *The Cost of Discipleship* (1937), which reached a wide audience of students and lay Christians in addition to academics. Delp's writings, while intellectually rigorous, were more narrowly focused on philosophical and theological renewal within Germany and never achieved comparable circulation during his lifetime. Indeed, Delp's only published work was a philosophical treatise on Heidegger. As a result, Bonhoeffer entered the postwar period not as an obscure martyr but as a well-known thinker whose execution appeared to confirm his status as a Christian witness.

Finally, Bonhoeffer's legacy benefited from sustained postwar advocacy. His family, especially his brother-in-law Gerhard Leibholz—who became a professor at Oxford—actively worked to publish and disseminate Bonhoeffer's prison letters and theological writings. These publications helped shape an image of Bonhoeffer as both



martyr and moral exemplar for a global Christian audience. Delp's writings, in contrast, remained largely private within his family for years and only became known through the efforts of Jesuit intermediaries, as discussed above. Consequently, Delp was remembered primarily within Catholic and German contexts, while Bonhoeffer emerged as a universal symbol of Christian resistance. In this way, the difference in their prominence reflects how historical memory is shaped by language, networks, publication, and audience.

## **6.2 Conclusion**

It is clear then that Delp's significance did not end with his death. The political and ethical foundations of the Federal Republic of Germany and the CDU echoed many of the ideals Delp defended: the primacy of human dignity, the moral limits of state power, interconfessional cooperation, and a social order oriented toward the common good. Delp's historical memory, which is relatively unknown in the English-speaking world, reveals, in contrast to Bonhoeffer, that different historical circumstances play an important role in how memory is preserved and remembered. Although he has not received the same attention as other members of the religious resistance, Delp exemplified the role of a priest who remained steadfast to ethical and social justice principles—and his vision continued to influence a Germany emerging from years of cruelty and oppression.

More than eighty years after Delp's execution, Cardinal Reinhard Marx opened Delp's beatification process in February 2026 in Munich, initiating formal discussions about recognizing him as a saint in the Catholic Church.<sup>568</sup> With the opening of this

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<sup>568</sup> "Seligsprechungsprozess für Pater Alfred Delp beginnt nach 81 Jahren" (2026), accessed February 8, 2026, <https://www.domradio.de/artikel/seligsprechungsprozess-fuer-pater-alfred-delp-beginnt-nach-81-jahren>.

process, Delp's contribution extends beyond his role within the broader resistance network, as he is now also considered a witness to the Catholic faith. Executed in part for being a Jesuit—yet often struggling to follow the strict expectations of the Jesuits—Delp's life was marked by contradictions. Nevertheless, he stood in stark contrast to the actions of Faulhaber and other figures within the German Catholic hierarchy.

Though Delp could in some ways be described as a “rogue” Jesuit, he ultimately embodied the principles of the Catholic faith that compelled him to resist Nazism and envision a society beyond it. For Delp, faith was inseparable from social policy and politics, inspiring him to take a firm moral stance that ultimately led him to die for his beliefs and principles. Shortly before his death, Delp wrote, “If through a person a little more love and kindness, a little more light and truth has been in the world, then his life has had meaning.”<sup>569</sup> In the end, although Delp never lived to see a German society grounded in dignity and respect, the world he envisioned would in many ways come to fruition after the war. Though imperfect, the postwar order in Germany rested upon many of the principles for which Delp ultimately gave his life.

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<sup>569</sup> Delp, *Gesammelte Schriften IV*, 111.

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