

# MORMONS IN THE THIRD REICH: 1933-1945

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*The experience of the Church in non-American countries has not always been easy. In Germany in the 1930's, for example, the Hitler regime viewed the Mormon Church as an American institution and therefore open to some suspicion. The problem for the Church was compounded by differing views among local members concerning the Third Reich. Here Professor Joseph Dixon discusses the experiences of the Church in Germany in the 1930's.*

In a totalitarian society, religious groups, by virtue of their committed support of spiritual and moral values, often suffer frustration, persecution, repression and, in some instances, extinction. In Hitler's Third Reich, quite possibly the Twentieth Century's best example of totalitarianism, the Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-Day Adventists, Christian Scientists, and Mormons struggled even to maintain their existence. The following discussion centers on the Mormon experience in Nazi Germany and tries to suggest some implications of that experience for contemporary Mormons.

Over 15,000 Mormons living in Hitler's highly nationalistic Germany gave their allegiance to the Church with its strong American image, and most maintained that allegiance even during the difficult war years. How did they manage to remain both German and Mormon in such an environment? What happened to them because of their religious convictions? Did they go to concentration camps, as did the Jehovah's Witnesses? Did they have to modify their traditional Mormon beliefs to survive?

There are a number of myths about Mormons in Nazi Germany, and while some are grounded in truth, others border on the ridiculous. Rumors abound about Mormons serving as officers in the Party and holding high military rank. Allegedly, Adolf Hitler so admired the Mormon hierarchical structure that he patterned his party after it. Thus the Young Men's and Young Women's Mutual Improvement Associations supposedly corresponded to the Nazi *Jugend* and *Bund der deutschen Mädel*, and the Relief Society to the *Frauensschaft*. Some believe the Nazi practice of eating a single course meal on particular days (*Eintopftag*) originated in the Mormon fast day.<sup>1</sup> Contrary to, but coexistent with these myths, are tales of Nazi-Mormon incompatibility, including severe persecution. What are we to believe?

Coming to terms with these myths requires an examination of existing records. Although virtually all Church property in Germany was destroyed in bombing raids, most written records were preserved because they were sent



regularly to Salt Lake City. These records are only of limited value, however, since the record keepers of necessity avoided allusion to political events. Written communications between mission authorities and missionaries are difficult to find. Practically all such material was destroyed lest it fall into the hands of the police.<sup>2</sup> It was therefore necessary to supplement these records with information gleaned from questionnaires sent to Mormons currently living in Germany and from interviews with mission presidents, missionaries, and members who lived in Hitler's Reich. Many of the German converts who immigrated to this country after the War provided valuable information, although some were reluctant or even hostile to questions about their experience.

The history of the Mormon Church in Germany begins in 1840 when James Howard, an English convert, took a job in a Hamburg foundry and attempted, unsuccessfully, to preach the gospel to his fellow workers.<sup>3</sup> Later in that same decade several missionaries were called to serve in Germany and the Church began slowly to grow there. Although the trend in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was to emigrate to Zion, by 1933 there were 14,305 Mormons in Germany, Austria and Switzerland; by 1939 there were 15,677 in Germany alone.<sup>4</sup> Thus over 15,000 Mormons had the difficult task of surviving in Nazi Germany. They met this challenge in a variety of ways.

Was it possible to be both a good Mormon and a good Nazi? Roy A. Welker, president of the German-Austrian mission from 1934 to 1937, remembered one member who was a party official and also a great help to the Church.<sup>5</sup> But other than that single reference, I found nothing which indicates that any Mormon held a leadership position within the Nazi party, rumor to the contrary. Exact statistics do not exist, but the records mention no Mormons who were prominent in either the district (*Gau*) or national party circles. Usually those Mormons who joined the Nazi party became inactive in the Church or severed their relationship with it entirely. In Hamburg, Frankfurt, Berlin, and other

cities, several Mormons, including a few Church leaders, openly sympathized with the Nazi cause and on occasion used the Church as a vehicle to promote party and personal interests.<sup>6</sup> Most sermons, tracts and communications, however, dealt with gospel, not political, topics.

Before the war, some Church members tried to win Nazi sympathy by professing admiration for the Party's accomplishments. The official Nazi newspaper, *Völkischer Beobachter*, of 14 April 1939, published an article written by Alfred C. Rees, president of the East German Mission from 1937 to 1939, which contained some rather self-conscious comparisons between Mormon and German history:

The Mormon people know what persecution and suppression mean. And the German people who have gone through the shadow of the valley since the World War; and who have been forced to rely upon their own strength and determination, and upon their undying belief in their own ability to restore their self-respect and their merited place among the mighty sisterhood of nations, reveal that same progressive character, which does not shun obstacles. For that reason, to a student of Mormonism, recent developments in Germany present a most impressive comparison.<sup>7</sup>

Rees discussed the Church's welfare plan and its solution to relief problems among the faithful. He elaborated on the Word of Wisdom with more enthusiasm than perspective:

The Mormon people, perhaps more than any other people in all the world, pay high tribute to the German government for its bold declaration of war against the use of alcohol and tobacco by the youth of Germany.<sup>8</sup>

Knowing today what we do about Nazi Germany's atrocities, such a statement by a high Church official in Germany is both appalling and embarrassing. Rees's article also discussed tithing and Church finances and concluded on another startling note: "Here is the application of the German ideal: Community welfare before personal welfare. Mormons are practical exponents of that wholesome doctrine."<sup>9</sup>

Soon after the article's publication, a missionary tract containing a condensed version of the text appeared, complete with the swastika prominently displayed on the cover. Mormon anti-Nazis did not have time to complain, since the party itself ordered the tracts withdrawn, resenting the implication that the party sanctioned any American religious sect.

Perhaps the basic explanation of the Church's ability to survive during the Nazi years lay in the Mormon teaching of the fundamental separation of church and state. Mormons have always considered the support of civil law and authority a basic tenet of their faith. If civil laws conflict with religious beliefs most Mormons take the attitude that they are to "render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's." James E. Talmage, in his explanation of this particular Mormon principle, states:

Pending the overruling by Providence in favor of religious liberty, it is the duty of the saints to submit themselves to the laws of their country. Nevertheless, they should use every proper method, as citizens or subjects of their several governments, to secure for themselves and for all men the boon of freedom in religious service. It is not required of them to suffer without protest imposition by lawless persecutors, or through the operation of unjust laws; but their

protests should be offered in legal and proper order. The saints have practically demonstrated their acceptance of the doctrine that it is better to suffer evil than to do wrong by purely human opposition to unjust authority. And if by thus submitting themselves to the laws of the land, in the event of such laws being unjust and subversive of human freedom, the people be prevented from doing the work appointed them of God, they are not to be held accountable for the failure to act under the higher law.<sup>10</sup>

Many Mormons in Nazi Germany undoubtedly used this rationale to avoid facing the issue of opposing an immoral regime and to extricate themselves from the collective shame and guilt placed upon the German population by the Nazi government.

This is not to imply that Mormons were untouched by political developments. Problems did not arise if local party officials were favorably disposed toward the Church, but members lived in constant fear of somehow incurring the wrath of even minor party functionaries. M. Douglas Wood, the last prewar president of the West German Mission, stated that members of the Church were "petrified" with fear and reported to him that Gestapo agents had been spying on Church services.<sup>11</sup> Local members particularly feared that politically naive American missionaries would cause problems. When one young missionary from the United States discussed the causes of World War I during a speech in district conference, the mission president stopped him; he then extolled the German government in order to calm the members' fears.<sup>12</sup> Two other indiscreet missionaries had their pictures taken draped in a Nazi flag and gave the film to one of their friends for processing. Delighted with the photographs, they had extra copies made. This time, unfortunately, they sent the film to another processor who immediately turned them over to the Gestapo. The mission president transferred the two out of Germany before they were arrested, but their friend who first processed their film was sent to a concentration camp.<sup>13</sup>

As the Nazis consolidated their power, the Mormons suffered increasing pressures. One frustrating regulation followed another. One by one, freedoms were removed, activities hampered or forbidden. Scouting, a major part of the Church's youth activity, had to be eliminated in favor of the Hitler Youth Movement.<sup>14</sup> Missionaries found their funds cut off when the government refused to allow the Church to send money through the German postal system, although this right was restored after an appeal to the courts. Even Mormon hymns were censored.<sup>15</sup>

By early 1939, missionaries were not allowed to distribute certain tracts, and various books could no longer be sold or even read.<sup>16</sup> Talmage's *Articles of Faith* was forbidden because its many references to Zion and Israel were unpalatable to the Nazis.<sup>17</sup> Local party officials sometimes prohibited street meetings and outlawed tracting.

Small branches continued to operate even under the growing list of prohibitions, but by August, 1939, Church leaders, fearing for the safety of American missionaries, ordered their evacuation.<sup>18</sup> In a matter of days all the missionaries from Germany and Czechoslovakia crossed into Denmark and Holland.

With this move the truly difficult years began. The German Saints would maintain direct contact with Salt Lake City until December, 1941. After that time instructions from Church headquarters came via Switzerland, and for long periods German Mormons received no communication from the outside world.<sup>19</sup>

In spite of the draft and forced labor, local members took over all church positions and still attempted to proselyte until the stress of the war made that impossible.<sup>20</sup> Convert baptisms declined from 418 in 1933 to an estimated 100 per year during the war.<sup>21</sup> The members who were left at home, the very young, the old, and the women, met in individual homes, often at great risk. Husbands and fathers were nearly all away, and the few men left attended several branches on a single Sunday to conduct meetings for the women and children, doing whatever they could to comfort bereaved or hungry families.<sup>22</sup>

Did the Germans change any of the Church doctrines during their isolation from the outside? Otto Berndt, named acting mission president of the West German Mission after the war, traveled through that mission and reported that little extraneous ritual or doctrine had crept into the services.<sup>23</sup> Some local Church authorities had instructed the members to rise whenever Church officers came into the services, a practice generally reserved to show respect for the president of the Church. In meetings, however, the members continued to testify to the divinity of the Mormon Church and did not repudiate the divine call of the General Authorities in the United States.

In spite of superficial similarities between the Church organization and the Nazi Party structure, no connection existed between the two. The Nazis on their own were careful to keep traditional Christian forms intact. Nazi speakers often used familiar Christian imagery. Hitler's closest companions were called his "apostles," while he himself was often referred to as the "savior."<sup>24</sup> Mormons could easily see such similarities, but any parallels which existed between the Church and the Party resulted from circumstance rather than plan. Hitler may have known of the Church's organization, but the Russian Communist Party or any other political party could just as easily have served as a model for his master plan. A few members stretched a point to show the leadership principle manifest in both Mormonism and Nazism, with the president as undisputed leader of the Church, and the *Führer* occupying the same position in the party. The SA and the SS could, they said, have been the equivalents of the Aaronic and Melchizedek Priesthoods, but such reasoning shows an incomplete understanding of both Church and party organization and particularly of the functions of each.<sup>25</sup>

The Church's stand on the Jewish question could have seriously damaged its position in Germany during the Third Reich. Mormon literature refers to the Jews as a "chosen people" and speaks of their return to their homeland. Solomon Schwarz, a deacon in the Barmbeck Branch and one of a few members with some Jewish blood, was not afraid to admit it. The Gestapo forced him to wear the Star of David on his arm and later sent him to Theresienstadt concentration camp where presumably he died, his Mormon membership notwithstanding.<sup>26</sup>

Evidently a few German Mormons harbored anti-Semitic feelings. In the Altona Branch chapel, someone placed a sign on the door stating that Jews were not allowed to visit the meetings.<sup>27</sup> This was common practice on public buildings throughout Germany but shockingly out of place on a Mormon meeting house. Rudolf Kaufmann was denied baptism by his branch president in Hamburg in 1941 because he was partly Jewish. The district president, however, overrode his decision and performed the baptism.<sup>28</sup>

Church members have reported that they knew of the horrors to which the

Jews were subjected. One Mormon, an expert mechanic, described his task of installing specialized machinery at Auschwitz concentration camp. The atrocities he witnessed so horrified him that he eventually suffered a mental collapse.<sup>29</sup> The majority of Mormons, however, avoided the Jewish problem if at all possible and were terrified if missionaries attempted to convert people with Jewish blood to the Church.<sup>30</sup>

The German Mormons were faced with a bitter dilemma: if they remained silent and went about their own business, they could be reasonably safe. If they in any way openly disagreed with the Nazis, they came to grief. Many felt they could do more in the long run by biding their time and remaining alive.

A few Mormons fought openly against the party. The most celebrated case concerns four young men between sixteen and seventeen years old who were daring enough to speak out and risk arrest. Helmuth Hübner, also known as Helmuth Gudat, a young Mormon living in the St. Georg Branch in Hamburg, and his friends Rudolf Wobbe, Karl-Heinz Schnibbe, and Gerhard Duwer, listened to British shortwave newscasts. Violently anti-Nazi, the four determined that the information from the British broadcasts should be distributed throughout Hamburg. Hübner mimeographed handbills bearing such titles as, "What Happened to General Schoerner, the Army Commander in Serbia?"; "Hitler the Murderer;" and "The Hitler Youth We Were Forced to Join," and placed them in mail boxes and phone booths and even tacked them on official party bulletin boards. Not content with this, Hubner began to write interpretive essays attacking party leaders, including Hermann Goering and others.<sup>31</sup>

The implications of this case for the Church are obvious. Not only was Hübner a Mormon in good standing, he had used office machinery belonging to the Church to duplicate some of his handbills. The boys were arrested, tried, and convicted of treason. The general indictment against them read in part:

These handbills contain besides British war news slanders and insinuations against the *Führer* and his lieutenants; inflammatory attacks on the measures and institutions of the National Socialist government. They also demanded that the war be ended by the overthrow of the *Führer*.<sup>32</sup>

Wobbe received a term of ten years in a penitentiary, Schnibbe five years and Duwer four. Hübner was beheaded with a battle axe in the prison at Berlin-Plötzensee.<sup>33</sup>

Hübner's stepfather, a non-Mormon, accused Otto Berndt of instigating the entire plan. The Gestapo confiscated all the branch records and reports and interrogated Berndt for three days. At last they decided that the boys acted on their own and the Church was not involved.<sup>34</sup>

The Gestapo, however, did not let the matter rest. They ordered Berndt to see that Hübner was excommunicated from the Church for his crime. Berndt refused to do this, insisting that the Church had no right to excommunicate him.<sup>35</sup> Berndt's stand was overridden by the president of the St. Georg Branch and the acting president of the West German Mission, and Hübner was duly excommunicated on 15 February 1942. After the war the First Presidency reviewed this case and posthumously restored Hübner to full standing in the Church.<sup>36</sup>

While many individual cases of persecution occurred, the Nazi government never attempted systematically to destroy the Mormons as it did the Jehovah's



*Young Nazi supporters in SAAR Territory, 1934*

Witnesses. Those Mormons who served sentences in concentration camps were not interned because of their religious beliefs but because of politically motivated statements or acts. Heinrich Worbs, a Mormon residing in Hamburg, spent six months in a camp for disparaging remarks he made at the unveiling of a statue honoring a Nazi war hero. He died soon after his release from the tortures he had suffered.

Thus, while the Church operated on a greatly limited scale in Germany during the Third Reich, and especially during the chaotic war years, its growth was hindered more by fear and general pressures than by organized Nazi persecution. While some Mormons actively supported the Nazi regime and a few tried to undermine it, the majority simply accommodated themselves to it, outwardly at least.

A terribly difficult question, however, lies behind this historical record: the proper position of the Church toward the Nazi regime. Was it enough to keep the Church organization running smoothly with the hope that it could eventually ride out the peril, or should the Church have actively resisted the Nazis? Church members who followed the teachings of the Church to obey the government of their country found that their religious beliefs did not cause them any particular trouble. Those who opposed the regime generally died for that opposition.

In an interview after the American performance of his play *The Deputy*, the German playwright Rolf Hochhuth said: "To me, Pius (Pope Pius XII) is a symbol, not only for all leaders, but for all men — Christians, Atheists, Jews. For all men who are passive when their brother is deported to death. Pius was at the top of the hierarchy and, therefore, he had the greatest duty to speak. But every man — Protestants, the Jews . . . all had the duty to speak."<sup>37</sup>

Some young, idealistic German Mormons agree with Hochhuth's position

and criticize their Church's policy of noninterference in political affairs. To condemn, however, comes easily, particularly with hindsight. To be caught opposing the Nazi regime meant imprisonment or death. Few Mormons today can comprehend the force of living under such fear. While acknowledging the nobility of dying to oppose Hitler, many argue that living for a greater cause, the Church, is even more noble.

<sup>1</sup>Questionnaire sent by author to a small group of Church members in Germany. Hereafter referred to as "Questionnaire."

<sup>2</sup>Interview with Burt Horsley, 20 October 1967, and interview with Karl Grothe, 13 April 1968.

<sup>3</sup>Justus Ernst, "Highlights from the German Speaking L.D.S. Mission 1836-1960." Unpublished chronology of history of German missions, p. 1.

<sup>4</sup>"Annual Mission Statistics" (MSS, Church Historian's Office, Salt Lake City, Utah), 1933 and 1939.

<sup>5</sup>Reported in the interview with Karl Grothe, 13 April 1968.

<sup>6</sup>Letter from Roy Welker to the author, 6 June 1968. Welker does not identify any of the men.

<sup>7</sup>Alfred C. Rees, "Im Lande der Mormonen," *Völkischer Beobachter*, 14 April 1939.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.* The slogan "Gemein Nutz vor Eigennutz" is one which appears continually throughout Nazi literature.

<sup>10</sup>James E. Talmage, *A Study of the Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City, Utah: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1913), p. 423.

<sup>11</sup>Interview with M. Douglas Wood, 4 October 1967.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup>Scouting was forbidden 1 May 1934. Ernst, p. 38.

<sup>15</sup>"Swiss-German Mission Manuscript History" (MSS, Church Historian's Office, Salt Lake City, Utah), 30 September 1935.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.* 30 September 1934, 31 March 1935, and 30 June 1935. See also "German-Austrian Mission Manuscript History" (MSS, Church Historian's Office, Salt Lake City, Utah), 30 September 1935.

<sup>17</sup>Ernst, p. 39.

<sup>18</sup>Missionaries were evacuated from the German Missions as early as 15 September 1938, but were allowed to return to their fields by 5 October 1938. The final evacuation order came on 25 August 1939. Interview with M. Douglas Wood. See also *Deseret News*, Church Section, 15 June 1940.

<sup>19</sup>The declaration of war between the United States and Germany made it necessary for all messages from Salt Lake City to go through the mission headquarters in Switzerland.

<sup>20</sup>Questionnaire. See also "East German Mission Manuscript History" (MSS, Church Historian's Office, Salt Lake City, Utah), 9 September 1940.

<sup>21</sup>Form 42 F.P. (MSS, Church Historian's Office, Salt Lake City, Utah), 1933 and 1945.

<sup>22</sup>Letter from Johanna Berger to Thomas E. McKay, "East German Mission Manuscript History," 9 September 1940.

<sup>23</sup>Interview, Otto Berndt with author, 13 February 1968.

<sup>24</sup>Werner Betz, "The National Socialist Vocabulary," *The Third Reich* (London: 1955), pp. 786-789, quoted in George L. Mosse, *Nazi Culture* (New York: The Universal Library, 1968), p. 235.

<sup>25</sup>Questionnaire.

<sup>26</sup>"Swiss-German Mission Manuscript History," 30 June 1935. Berndt Interview.

<sup>27</sup>Berndt Interview.

<sup>28</sup>Berndt Interview.

<sup>29</sup>Interview, Ernst Winter with Author, 3 April 1968.

<sup>30</sup>"West German Mission Manuscript History" (MSS, Church Historian's Office, Salt Lake City, Utah), 31 December 1939.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, 31 December 1941.

<sup>32</sup>Willi Brandt, K. D. Bracher, *Conscience in Revolt: Sixty-four Stories of Resistance*. Collected by Annedore Leber (London: Vallentine, Mitchell, 1957), p. 8.

<sup>33</sup>"West German Mission Manuscript History," 31 December 1941.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup>Berndt Interview.

<sup>36</sup>"West German Mission Manuscript History," 31 December 1941. See also Hamburg District Record (MSS, Church Historian's Office, Salt Lake City, Utah), No. 23404, No. 994.

<sup>37</sup>Judy Stone, "Interview with Rolk Hochhuth," *The Storm Over the Deputy*, ed. Eric Bently (New York: Grove Press, 1964), p. 43.

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**To sin by silence when they should protest  
makes cowards of men.**

— Abraham Lincoln

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