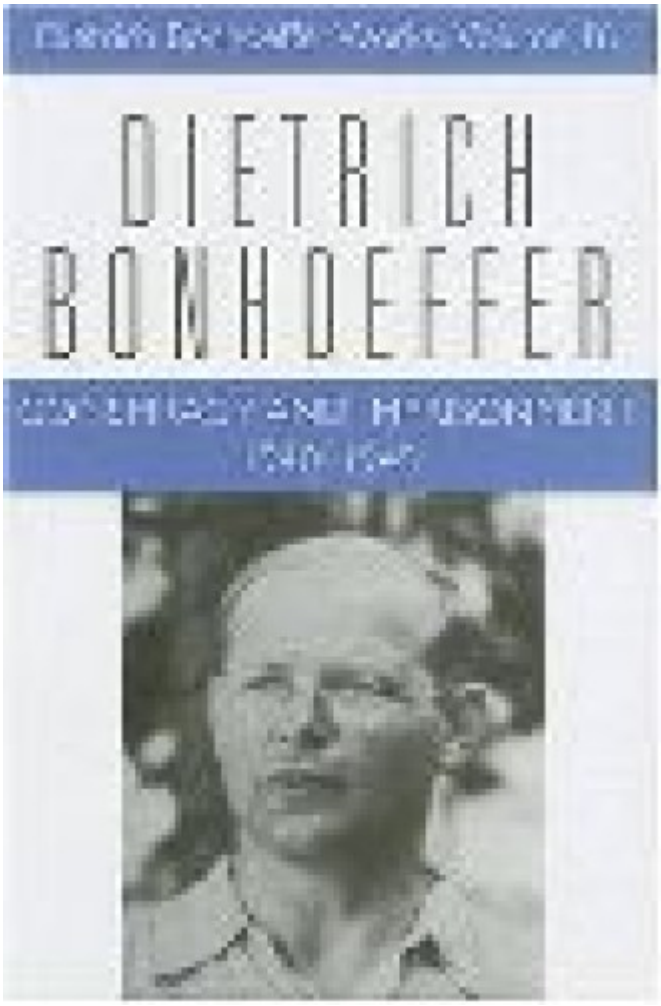
A life interrupted

By Craig L. Nessan in the October 17, 2006 issue

In Review



Conspiracy and Imprisonment, 1940-1945: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Works, Vol. 16

Mark Brocker
Fortress

This book documents a life interrupted. It might be argued that every life knows interruption, though we rarely look at it that way. For all of us human fallibility, accidents, illness, political events and death overtake what we imagine should be the normal course of our lives. This reality becomes stark in this biography of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Bonhoeffer's early and consistent resistance to the intrusion of Nazi ecclesial, political and military machinations is well known: his bold involvement in the Confessing Church, his directorship of the underground seminary community at Finkenwalde (from which time we have his book *Life Together*), his summons to costly discipleship, the increasing repression of the mid-1930s and his decision to return to Germany in 1939 (although he had the opportunity to become an exile in the United States). We also have become familiar with the contours of his life from the time of his arrest on April 5, 1943, until his execution on April 9, 1945, through both his correspondence from prison with family and friends (especially Eberhard Bethge) and the tantalizing passages describing his theological turn toward a nonreligious interpretation of Christianity, published as *Letters and Papers from Prison*.

Recently students of Bonhoeffer have begun to incorporate into their portrait of his life his correspondence with Maria von Wedemeyer, his fiancée, published in 1995 as *Love Letters from Cell 92*. But the story of his life from 1939 to his arrest in 1943, which includes his service with German military intelligence, his participation in a plot to assassinate Hitler and his work on a plan for a new Germany, has been less known. This book, which translates the original German edition and supplements it with additional material, changes that.

In this comprehensive collection of letters, documents, essays and notes, as well as a smaller number of sermons and meditations, we read how one disciple of Jesus Christ dealt with the escalating interruption that was Nazi Germany. After the forced closing of Finkenwalde, Bonhoeffer continued to illegally train students to serve in the Confessing Church through underground pastorates and through the system of supporting ordinands in "collective pastorates" in eastern Pomerania. This work finally led the government to ban Bonhoeffer from public speaking, including teaching and preaching, on September 4, 1940. This edict also imposed residency restrictions and required him to regularly report his whereabouts.

Although this coerced silence gave Bonhoeffer opportunity to intensify the writing of his intended magnum opus, *Ethics*, it also put him in imminent danger of conscription into the military. After the German victory over France and under “the consistent threat of surveillance and censorship,” Bonhoeffer entered a “double life.” While remaining committed to the Confessing Church, he became an agent for military intelligence, and there he became involved in the plot to overthrow Hitler’s regime. Here emerges the great moral question raised by Bonhoeffer’s life: Under what conditions, if any, does one choose to become an interruption in order that other interruptions may cease? One can only imagine how this double life appeared to those who saw the decision only from the outside. At one point even his colleague and confidant Karl Barth seemed to question Bonhoeffer’s trustworthiness.

As this volume amply documents through both Bonhoeffer’s own writings and other original source material, he became deeply enmeshed in treasonous activities aimed at overthrowing the government of his beloved Germany. For a Protestant theologian, such engagement was unprecedented. Among these activities was his involvement in Operation 7, which smuggled 14 “non-Aryans” into Switzerland under the guise of an operation of military intelligence. While initially it was the charge of avoiding conscription that led to his arrest, Bonhoeffer’s connection to Operation 7 offered further evidence of sedition, which deepened his legal predicament.

Under the pretext of gathering intelligence, Bonhoeffer also made trips to Switzerland and Sweden, where he used his ecumenical contacts to negotiate on behalf of a post-Hitler German government. Most important in this regard were his relationships with Willem Visser ’t Hooft, secretary of the World Student Christian Federation (and later general secretary at the formation of the World Council of Churches) and especially his friend George Bell, Anglican bishop of Chichester. Bell used the information supplied by Bonhoeffer to try to persuade the British government to send signals that it would be ready to negotiate with the German opposition should the Hitler regime fall. The British government deemed this proposal not to be in Allied interest because, in its judgment, the opposition had failed to demonstrate that it was a serious force. Some of the most striking documents in this volume are internal memos between Bell and Anthony Eden, the British secretary of state for foreign affairs.

Bonhoeffer was also involved with those who drafted documents that could serve as the basis for a new order of government after the coup, and he composed a pronouncement pointing toward reorganization of the Protestant church, which could

be used in congregations at the conclusion of the war. The editors question whether Bonhoeffer was sufficiently imaginative in conceiving of a new German government and whether he went far enough toward the idea of democracy rather than encouraging a return to a more traditional German state.

All of these plans came to naught with the failure of the July 20, 1944, assassination attempt against Hitler. From this time onward, Bonhoeffer's fate was sealed, as was that of the other conspirators, including his brothers-in-law Hans von Dohnanyi (his intimate link to the Office of Military Intelligence) and Rüdiger Schleicher.

Bonhoeffer's execution at the Flossenburg concentration camp shortly before the end of the war is, of course, the ultimate marker of a life interrupted, but the entire book reflects the series of interruptions that invaded both his professional and personal life. Professionally Bonhoeffer was forced by the government ban to sacrifice his public vocation as a preacher and theologian, and he had to become extremely cautious in contacting his former students. Some of the most moving testimony in the volume is found in the circular letters Bonhoeffer composed to maintain contact with the pastors he had trained, almost all of whom were conscripted into military service and many of whom died in the war. In these letters Bonhoeffer names those who had been killed and offers profound pastoral reflections on the significance of their lives. To those who remained, Bonhoeffer gave counsel about living faithfully in circumstances vastly different from their life together at Finkenwalde.

Bonhoeffer's theological work also bears the marks of interruption. Although the ban on speaking made time available for working on his *Ethics*, this work consists of fragments. Some of the sections from the first edition of *Ethics*, which the editors have for reasons of historical accuracy decided to keep separate from the critical edition, are included here. Most provocative is the essay "What Does It Mean to Tell the Truth?" Here Bonhoeffer wrestles with a profound existential question that plagued his conscience: "The truthfulness of our words that we owe to God must take on concrete form in the world. Our word should be truthful not in principle, but concretely. A truthfulness that is not concrete is not truthful at all before God." As one reads the documents pertaining to Bonhoeffer's interrogation, including papers he composed to deceive his interrogators, the subtleties of this essay become all the more vivid. Its completion also interrupted, this essay remains only an enticing fragment.

Signs of interruption are manifest in Bonhoeffer's personal life as well. Bonhoeffer immersed himself in relationships on many levels. The names of those with whom he corresponded reveal the scope of his influence, not only among theological colleagues but among both prominent and lesser figures in many other arenas. Bonhoeffer corresponded particularly intimately with his closest friend and confidant Eberhard Bethge, who edited his *Letters and Papers from Prison*. It was the interruption of their friendship that prompted Bethge to devote the rest of his life to the preservation of the Bonhoeffer legacy.

Bonhoeffer was a devoted family member throughout his ordeal. The depth of attachment is revealed in his correspondence with his parents, siblings and other relatives. This volume also includes ten early letters from Dietrich to Maria that chronicle the obstacles they faced in convincing her mother that the relationship should continue. The letters depict the sometimes underestimated maturity that characterized their relationship despite their age difference, and portray the circumstances leading to their engagement. Fuller exploration of the meaning of this tragically interrupted relationship remains on the agenda for future Bonhoeffer scholarship.

When the last chapter is closed, one unanswered question persists: By what calculus does one decide to no longer merely suffer interruption but to become a great interruption in the lives of others, in order that other interruptions might cease? This question applies to both states and individuals. What are the criteria by which a nation may go to war and create interruption on a massive scale? What are the criteria according to which I might justify taking another's life? Must there not also be such a calculus in the case of suicide bombers? The danger of individual or collective self-deception renders this dilemma especially treacherous, and reference to God or religion makes the problem seem even more unsolvable. Could Bonhoeffer have been wrong about his answer?

The introduction, afterword, translation, appendices and critical apparatus are all stellar work by a dedicated team of scholars whose contribution to future study is enormous. This volume reveals why Bonhoeffer is the most fascinating and arguably the most significant of 20th-century theologians, particularly as we face the interruptions of our own time. Throughout the interruptions of his life, Bonhoeffer placed the living Christ at the center of it all. He knew and witnessed to the truth that only a suffering God can finally help us. We need this word of promise. And as we struggle to be faithful in our own times of patriotic fervor, national idolatries and

warmaking, we also need to grapple with Bonhoeffer’s complex relationship to his own country.

It is fitting that the book concludes with Bonhoeffer naming a petition that Jesus taught his disciples, a petition that we should also ardently pray: “May your kingdom come!”

Together with Renate Wind, Craig L. Nessan translated and edited Fortress's edition of Bonhoeffer's Who Is Christ for Us?