The good White Christian women of Nazi Germany

Despite what you've read, most of them didn't resist.

by D. L. Mayfield in the April 7, 2021 issue

FACING HISTORY: A crowd of women, children, and soldiers of the German Wehrmacht give the Nazi salute on June 19, 1940. (AP photo)

Recently I started reading *Frauen*, Alison Owings's 1993 collection of oral histories of women who lived through the Third Reich. Owings realized that nobody had bothered to ask the women of Germany their thoughts on the war or the rise of Nazism. Men—the generals, the guards—had been interviewed so much that the phrase "I was only following orders" became a part of our cultural understanding of World War II. But what about the women? Owings wondered. Why did so many good Christian German women support the Nazi Party?

The answer is complicated, of course, and the collected testimonies show this to be true. But Owings found several commonalities. For one, there was a firm belief that German systems were above reproach and corruption and that German leaders were law-abiding. (Indeed, many Jewish Germans trusted the government so much they

refused to leave despite growing anti-Semitism.)

Another thread is the Christian history of Germany, including the legacy and life of Martin Luther, and the cultural belief that God divinely grants power to the leader. A song popular in Germany before the time of Hitler pleaded, “Oh God, send us a Führer who will change our misfortune by God’s word.” One woman told Owings she loved this song and that she, like many others, welcomed Hitler because Germany needed a strong man sent by God to beat the threat of communists.

Owings did interview several women who resisted the Nazi Party in large and small ways. But the majority of her interviews reflect the wider German public: most women were either supportive of the Third Reich or passively upheld it by conforming to its norms, staying silent, and focusing solely on their own families.

The truth is, good Christian women supported Nazism because it benefited them, and it seemed to reinforce the cultural values that gave meaning and purpose to their lives. They believed God was in control and had blessed their culture and their leader for special greatness—and that outsiders and foreign influence needed to be subjugated or eradicated in order for Germans to protect themselves.

Reading the oral histories of German women, I was struck by how familiar their rationale for supporting Nazism sounded to my ears. By joining the Nazi Party, these women were assured better schools and education for their children. How could they pass that up? When the Nazis came to power, there were more jobs for the “true” Germans; unemployment was almost nonexistent. The economy was up. Children obeyed their parents and prayed and sang Christian songs in school. Middle class, bourgeois, White Christian values were espoused and approved of by the majority of the culture—and this thrilled the good Christian women of Germany.

Growing up evangelical, I learned a bit about the Holocaust, but much of my information came from a single book: *The Hiding Place*, by Corrie ten Boom. Ten Boom’s Dutch family sheltered a Jewish family in their house during Nazi occupation. When they were discovered, the Ten Booms were sent to the Ravensbrück concentration camp. Corrie survived, but her father and sister did not. As a child, I read and reread her book, which ends with a story of a former Ravensbrück guard coming up to speak to her after she gave a talk on forgiveness. Ten Boom, filled with the love of God, was able to forgive him. I found it to be an incredibly inspirational story. The entire book was about people who loved Jesus taking great risks to love

their neighbors. Reading it, I understood that we should follow suit.

Only later, much later, did I wonder about the particulars of that last story. The guard who came up to Corrie Ten Boom said that after the war, when he was done being a guard, he “became” a Christian. He did not remember ten Boom or the pain he inflicted on her personally, although she remembered him and his whip well. He asked her to say aloud the words of forgiveness so he could rest assured in the blessings of being a forgiven Christian.

In truth, the vast majority of Germans were already Christians during the Holocaust. More than half of the German population was Lutheran, while 40 percent was Catholic. Did this guard happen to be among the small minority of non-Christians? Or had he identified as a Christian the entire time he tortured and killed his fellow neighbors? The latter is much more likely to be true. But this was not a part of the narratives I heard growing up.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was another name familiar to me as an American evangelical. The theologian, pastor, and member of the small resistance movement in Germany was held up to us as an example of what “real” Christians did during the Nazi regime: stand up to the evil Nazis, risking death in order to love their neighbors and end a horrific war.

Bonhoeffer is better known today than Ten Boom, in part because of best-selling biographies like *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy*, a 2010 book by Eric Metaxas that continues to sell at a brisk pace. American readers are taken with the idea of a “real” Christian who did not capitulate to power or culture but resisted evil. But Metaxas is a prominent spokesman for Christian nationalism in the United States. On his popular radio show, he encouraged Christians to “fight to the death, to the last drop of blood, because it’s worth it” to overturn the “fraudulent” 2020 election and keep Donald Trump in power. Metaxas, someone who prides himself on being able to point out the dangers of Nazi Germany, has thrown all of his cards in with Trumpism and those who support it.

Metaxas says Bonhoeffer was a “real” Christian among posers. He says the same thing about himself and the Christians who support Donald Trump and his promise to make America and White evangelicalism great again. Metaxas does not view Nazis as Bonhoeffer’s only foes; there were also the more liberal Lutherans and Catholics of his own community. White American evangelicals are adept at conjuring and

tracing a history in which exemplar figures are cast in the narrow role of their own theological forebears: Bonhoeffer and Corrie ten Boom are the heroes we could see ourselves being, because we are the only true Christians we know.

To view history this way is to engage in a triumphalist retelling of the story of dominant-culture Christians, marrying the flourishing of their particular religion to the politics of their nation-state. And it leads to Bonhoeffer biographers stumping for abusive politicians and dismissing the wide range of Christians calling for other ways of being in the world. History demonstrates that the fruits of Christian nationalism are always horrific, descending into violent rhetoric and violent means to uphold power. Nor does it bode well for the church's own thriving. Today, just 55 percent of Germans claim to be members of Catholic or Protestant churches.

While prominent Christians like Metaxas, Jerry Falwell Jr., and others might make national headlines for their support of authoritarianism that protects them, they aren't acting alone. White women make up one of the largest voting blocs in the United States, and since the 1950s they have consistently voted majority Republican, including in 2016 for Donald Trump. White evangelicals as a whole turned out in record numbers for Trump in 2016, and despite claims that the tides were turning, 2020 showed much of the same. White evangelical women voted for policies that would protect them and their interests over the interests of their neighbors.

Jane Junn, a professor of gender studies and political science, says this isn't earth-shattering news to anyone who has been paying attention. "The Republican Party is the party of keeping the white heteropatriarchy intact," she said in a recent interview. "These women have agreed to accept second-class status with their gender, as long as the Republican Party puts them first with race and keeps them safe."

Of course, not many women would frame it in these terms for themselves. They might say that they voted with their families, culture, and religion in mind. They voted to protect themselves from the specter of socialism, for their 401k balances and for lower taxes, for the choice to educate their children in the way they see as best, to keep their neighborhoods "safe," for "godly Christians" to take back America and make it great again. And for good Christian women to be prioritized and protected in society (no matter what the costs might be to others).

This is similar to what the women in *Frauen* said when asked about their support of the Third Reich. It is similar to what Corrie ten Boom wrote about many of her fellow townspeople, all good Dutch Christians, who joined the Nazi Party because of the physical benefits—more food, clothing, the best jobs and housing—but also because of their conviction that this was the best course of action for them and their culture. It was decades before the women of the Third Reich were forced to reckon with the horrors of the Holocaust. (One of the main ways this cultural reckoning happened in Germany was through the US series *Holocaust*, which aired on German national television in 1979.) The increased awareness of how Jewish people were treated during the war split some families apart.

One woman told Owings that her children, who grew up learning about the Holocaust in school as part of the cultural reckoning curriculum, could not believe she supported Hitler. They dismissed her version of history. Meanwhile, friends around her own age would gather to have whispered conversations about how things were better back in the old days and how accounts of atrocities were highly overblown.

Owings writes in the introduction to *Frauen* that the more she talked to and thought about German women—the half of the German population that had been ignored in efforts to understand how the Third Reich was so successful in its devastation—the closer these women seemed to American women. I am only now starting to understand the parallels between Christian nationalism in the United States and that of the Third Reich, partly because my education focused only on the few Christians who resisted evil. The majority did not. But focusing on those few who did made it easier for me and others to ignore the reality that most good Christians did not call out evil during the Third Reich.

As for the exceptions, what made them able to resist the pervasive call of privilege and protection offered by Christian nationalism? Ten Boom credits her father’s love for all people, along with her brother’s urging her to break evil laws in order to help save people’s lives, with helping her lead the resistance movement in her city. Reggie L. Williams, author of *Bonhoeffer’s Black Jesu*s, makes the compelling case that the only reason Bonhoeffer was able eventually to resist the fervent nationalism of his countrymen was that he had spent a year marinating in the Black church in Harlem, absorbing a real relationship with a suffering servant Jesus. Without this necessary and world-shaking experience, Bonhoeffer most likely would not have been able to resist the tides that drove the rest of his people to seek safety in

power.

And yet today we find ourselves with a best-selling Bonhoeffer biographer declaring he would die for Trump and that blood should be spilled over the “stolen” election of 2020. Metaxas, as much as I would like to ignore it, is a “real” Christian—just as much as I am, just as Bonhoeffer was, just as the 80 percent of White evangelicals who voted for Donald Trump are, just as 98 percent of the citizens of Nazi Germany were.

Instead of daydreaming about being one of the very few who resisted, I am now faced with a much more complex reality. It is true that Christian faith led Corrie ten Boom and Dietrich Bonhoeffer to explicitly renounce evil against their neighbor and risk their lives for love. We should read those stories and continue to share them. But we also need to remember the Christian faith of the majority of Germans who supported Nazism, including the “good” and “virtuous” Christian women who were the backbone of the Third Reich. While they may not have been on the front lines of the battlefield, there are multiple ways to fight a war—and one way is through upholding ideology on the home front.

The sickness and violence of Christian nationalism in the United States today have striking historical parallels. And good White Christian women like myself will one day have our own reckoning with how our choices affected our neighbors.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “The ones who didn’t resist.”