

BONHOEFFER THE ASSASSIN?

Challenging the Myth,
Recovering His Call to Peacemaking

MARK THIESSEN NATION,
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AND DANIEL P. UMBEL


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In memory of Franz Hildebrandt (1909–85),
Bonhoeffer’s “best-informed and most like-minded friend”
(Eberhard Bethge)

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however, to Bonhoeffer's close friend Franz Hildebrandt. I sometimes wonder how the legacy of Bonhoeffer might have been perceived if Hildebrandt had not needed to leave Germany in 1937. From meeting him and having a brief conversation with him in 1984, I am hopeful he would be pleased with our book.

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FOREWORD

What about Dietrich Bonhoeffer?" I have lost track of how many times I have been asked that question after giving a lecture. The lecture may have only mentioned in passing my commitment to Christian nonviolence, but it seems the mere suggestion that Christians should be committed to nonviolence is enough to put someone on the defensive. So they ask, "What about Dietrich Bonhoeffer?" My questioner may not know a great deal about Bonhoeffer or have read deeply in his work, but they "know" he was a participant in one of the plots that allegedly sought to kill Hitler. That is quite sufficient, they seem to think, to call into question a commitment to Christian nonviolence.

In response to the question about Bonhoeffer I have always accepted the premise that Bonhoeffer was in fact part of the *Abwehr* plot to kill Hitler. But I also emphasize that Bonhoeffer was a pacifist, having been deeply influenced by Jean Lasserre during his time at Union Theological Seminary in New York. Lasserre, moreover, was not a "liberal pacifist." Lasserre's advocacy of nonviolence was based in Scripture and, in particular, on the Decalogue. In like manner, Bonhoeffer's commitment to nonviolence was not something he could or would easily abandon because that commitment was grounded in his reading of the Sermon on the Mount. In short, as Nation argues, you cannot separate Bonhoeffer's Christology and his commitment to nonviolence. They are one.

I also point out to those that use Bonhoeffer to challenge a commitment to nonviolence that there are a number of ambiguities surrounding his participation in the plot against Hitler. For example, we know from Bonhoeffer's negotiations with the British that the plotters did not originally seek to kill Hitler because they feared if they killed Hitler the German people might turn Hitler into a martyr. Moreover, Bonhoeffer's work with the *Abwehr* was first

and foremost motivated by his desire to avoid being drafted into the military. I observe, therefore, we simply do not have the evidence necessary to know how deeply Bonhoeffer was involved in the plot against Hitler or what he may have thought about his alleged willingness to be engaged in an attempt to kill Hitler.

I have to acknowledge, however, that there are some passages in *Ethics* about responsibility and guilt that seem to reflect Bonhoeffer's attempt to think through his involvement in the plot to take Hitler's life. Because I have always thought Bonhoeffer's *Discipleship* to be the definitive statement of his "ethics," I confess I am not sure how some of the passages in the *Ethics* are to be read in light of what he says in his earlier book. That is complicated by my conviction that if you begin to read Bonhoeffer from the beginning, that is, with *Sanctorum Communio*, I believe you cannot help but see that the fundamental theological commitments that shaped his life and work are constant throughout his life.

I relate how I have tried to respond to the question "What about Dietrich Bonhoeffer?" to suggest the significance of this book by Nation, Umbel, and Siegrist. What they have done is nothing short of revolutionary. Through careful scholarship they have called into question the fundamental assumptions that seem to make the question about Bonhoeffer's participation in the plot against Hitler, as well as attempts such as mine to respond to that question, problematic. For example, with considerable detail they take us through the plots against Hitler in which Bonhoeffer might have had the opportunity to be involved to show that we have no evidence that he was. There is, therefore, no indication in Bonhoeffer's life or work that he ever abandoned his pacifism to join a plot to kill Hitler.

Nation, Umbel, and Siegrist are quite methodical in how they develop their argument. Though it may seem artificial, they first provide an account of his life before engaging in close reading of his theological work. Their decision to separate his life from his work proves necessary if they are to challenge the presumption—a presumption that functions for many as a given—that Bonhoeffer was involved in a plot to kill Hitler. That presumption, they show, has shaped the reception of Bonhoeffer's theology, particularly in the United States, in a problematic manner. By first treating Bonhoeffer's life, therefore, they are able to offer a persuasive reading of his theological development that challenges those that assume his later work stands in some tension with his earlier theology.

I found both parts of the book extremely helpful. In particular, their account of the relationship between *Discipleship* and *Ethics* will be profoundly significant for how Bonhoeffer is read in the future. The unfinished character of *Ethics*, of course, means we will never know how Bonhoeffer would have finally put the book together, but I think the suggestions that Nation, Umbel,

and Siegrist make about how these two works are interrelated is persuasive. Their account of Bonhoeffer's account of the relationship between responsibility and guilt in *Ethics* is extremely important. They have, I think, finally provided the decisive argument against those that would read Bonhoeffer on responsibility through the eyes of Reinhold Niebuhr.

I have no doubt this book will stir considerable controversy. It will do so because they challenge habits of interpretation of Bonhoeffer that have been taken for granted for many years. The "obvious" is never given up without a struggle. But Nation, Umbel, and Siegrist have done their homework. I am sure, therefore, they will be more than ready to hold their own in the debates the book will no doubt produce.

For it is not just those that use Bonhoeffer to justify violence that this book challenges, but the argument they develop means I must rethink how I have been responding to the question "What about Bonhoeffer?" No longer should the presumption behind the question be granted. Not only do we have no indication that Bonhoeffer was involved in a plot against Hitler's life, but we can now approach his work with fresh eyes in the hope of learning from him how to go on in the face of the presumption there is no alternative to war.

It would be a mistake, however, if the significance of this book is understood only to force a reinterpretation of Bonhoeffer's life and work. Far more important this book means the question "What about Bonhoeffer?" must now perform a different function. If you think Bonhoeffer not only lived a remarkable life but was a significant theologian, then his commitment to nonviolence cannot be dismissed. In short, you cannot have both Bonhoeffer and war. To entertain the question "What about Bonhoeffer?" means the assumption of the inevitability of war must now be challenged.

Those that use the question about Bonhoeffer to justify war assume that someone has to oppose the Hitlers of the world. Yet it is often forgotten that this was the same justification made by Christians—Catholic and Protestant Christians—who served in Hitler's army because they presumed there is no alternative to war. Of course that presumption will continue to operate and confuse as long as Christians fail to acknowledge that the Church is the alternative to war. "What about Bonhoeffer?" turns out, therefore, to be a question that, given the argument of this important book, makes the challenge of Christian nonviolence unavoidable.

Stanley Hauerwas
Duke Divinity School
May 2013

INTRODUCTION

Here alone lies the force that can blow all this hocus-pocus sky-high—like fireworks, leaving only a few burnt-out shells behind.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–45), a pastor and theologian, is perhaps best known today for his involvement in the conspiracy to topple the Hitler government, which included involvement in efforts to kill Hitler, leading to Bonhoeffer’s subsequent execution at the hands of the Third Reich. That Bonhoeffer’s resistance to the Nazis has captured the imagination of both the public and scholars is not surprising. But what if the nature of that resistance was different than what is commonly supposed? Would that change our view of Bonhoeffer? Would it make him less admirable? Would we see his theology, his ethics, and his example in a different light?

Early in my work on this book, my wife and I watched the film *Valkyrie*, starring Tom Cruise.¹ This is a cinematic version of the best-known attempt to kill Hitler. It is a powerful and moving story. Here we see a number of military officers and government officials who are willing—at great potential cost to themselves—to attempt to overthrow the Hitler government (of which they are, at this point, very much a part). Cruise plays one of the central characters in this unfolding story: Claus Schenk von Stauffenberg (1907–44).² On April

1. *Valkyrie*, directed by Bryan Singer (Beverly Hills: MGM, 2008), DVD.

2. For two brief accounts of Stauffenberg, see Joachim Fest, *Plotting Hitler’s Death: The Story of the German Resistance*, trans. Bruce Little (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1996), 202–36; and Roger Moorhouse, *Killing Hitler: The Plots, the Assassins, and the Dictator Who Cheated Death* (New York: Bantam Books, 2006), 251–68. For the definitive account of Stauffenberg’s

7, 1943, while in Africa under Rommel's command, Stauffenberg had been seriously wounded in combat, losing an eye, his right hand, and two fingers of his left hand. The film shows Hitler personally commending Stauffenberg for his bravery. What Hitler doesn't know is that his chief of staff to the commander of the reserve army was by June of 1944—at the very moment Hitler commends him as a model officer—involved in an unfolding plot to kill the Führer. In fact Stauffenberg is, by this point, committed to carrying out the assassination himself. He is one of the few conspirators involved in Hitler's military briefing conferences—one of the rare places where someone has guaranteed access not only to Hitler but also to Himmler and other top officials. Thus on July 20, 1944, Stauffenberg carried a bomb with him into the briefing room at Hitler's headquarters, the Wolf's Lair, near Rastenburg, East Prussia. As planned, he exited the room before the bomb exploded. As an eyewitness recalled, "In a flash the map room became a scene of stampede and destruction. . . . There was nothing but wounded men groaning, the acrid smell of burning and charred fragments of maps and papers fluttering in the wind."³ From a safe distance Stauffenberg heard the explosion. He assumed the attempt was successful. Hitler was dead! Stauffenberg flew back to Berlin and began to implement the takeover of the Hitler government, with the Führer himself safely out of the way—or so he believed. As it happened, Hitler suffered only minor injuries. By 1:00 a.m. the German people were reassured by Hitler himself that he was alive and still the Reichsführer of Germany. Thousands of executions followed this attempt on Hitler's life. Stauffenberg himself was executed close to midnight on July 20.

I wonder how a film director might create a film centered not on Stauffenberg but rather on another significant figure in the resistance, Helmuth James Count von Moltke (1907–45).⁴ Such a film might well focus on Moltke's work

life in English, see Peter Hoffman, *Stauffenberg: A Family History*, 3rd ed. (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009). For a fuller account of the many attempts on Hitler's life, with some of the most relevant documents, see Ian Kershaw, *Luck of the Devil: The Story of Operation Valkyrie* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009). For a thorough, easy to follow, chronological account, see Nigel Jones, *Countdown to Valkyrie: The July Plot to Assassinate Hitler* (London: Frontline Books, 2008). For the most thorough account of the resistance movements in English, see Peter Hoffman, *The History of the German Resistance 1933–1945*, 3rd ed. (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996). The brief narrative that follows draws upon details from these accounts.

3. As quoted in Moorhouse, *Killing Hitler*, 263.

4. For brief accounts of Moltke, see Beate Ruhm von Oppen, introduction to *Letters to Freya, 1939–1945*, by Helmuth James von Moltke, ed. and trans. Beate Ruhm von Oppen (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), 3–25; and Hans Mommsen, "The Kreisau Circle and the Future Reorganization of Germany and Europe," in *Alternatives to Hitler: German Resistance Under the Third Reich* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2003), 134–51. For a full account, see Ger van Roon, *German Resistance to Hitler: Count von Moltke and the Kreisau Circle*, trans. Peter Ludlow

for the *Abwehr*, the military intelligence agency for which he began work in the fall of 1939 (about a year before Dietrich Bonhoeffer).⁵ Moltke seemed perfect for the job. He came from a prominent military family and was a lawyer, specializing in international law. His job description said that he was to gather military intelligence for the *Wehrmacht*, the Armed Forces, using his expertise to assist Germany in its war efforts. This entailed reading reports regarding German military efforts as well as those of other nations; it also involved extensive travel. However, what he actually did differed significantly from his job description. Admiral Wilhelm Canaris, who headed the *Abwehr*, and Hans Oster, his right-hand man, facilitated what came to be referred to as a “nest of resistance” within this military organization.⁶ A number of the resisters who later came to be well known worked within the *Abwehr*. Moltke was one. Thus Moltke used his position in the *Abwehr*—and used knowledge gained through his work—to resist Hitler.

Through his travels and access to documents, Moltke came to know much about the war that Germany was waging. A letter to his wife on October 21, 1941, gives us an important glimpse into the war and how Moltke reflected on it, important enough that we quote him at length:

The day is so full of gruesome news that I cannot write in peace, although I retired at 5 and have just had some tea. But my head aches all the same. What affects me most at the moment is the inadequacy of the reactions of the military. [Officers] Falkenhausen and Stülpnagel have returned to their posts instead of resigning after the latest incidents [i.e., the shootings of hostages on September 3], dreadful new orders are being issued, and nobody seems to see anything wrong in it all. How is one to bear the burden of complicity?

In one area in Serbia two villages have been reduced to ashes, 1,700 men and 240 women from among the inhabitants have been executed. That is the “punishment” for an attack on three German soldiers. In Greece 220 men of one village have been shot. The village was burnt down, women and children were left there to weep for their husbands and fathers and homes. In France

(London: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1971); and Michael Balfour and Julian Frisby, *Helmuth von Moltke: A Leader Against Hitler* (London: Macmillan, 1972).

5. *Abwehr* literally means “defense.” *Abwehr* is the name used for the central military intelligence agency within Germany, the center of espionage and counter-espionage activities for the German Supreme Command (OKW).

6. Sabine Dramm, in her recent book on Bonhoeffer, challenges some tendencies to exaggerate the numbers of resisters in the *Abwehr*. According to Dramm, at its peak the *Abwehr* had thirteen thousand employees working at all levels. Only about fifty of these could be counted as “supporters of the resistance,” which amounts to 0.4 percent of the whole workforce. See Sabine Dramm, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Resistance*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 33.

there are extensive shootings while I write. Certainly more than a thousand people are murdered in this way every day and another thousand German men are habituated to murder. And all this is child's play compared with what is happening in Poland and Russia. May I know this and yet sit at my table in my heated flat and have tea? Don't I thereby become guilty too? What shall I say when I am asked: And what did you do during that time?

Since Saturday the Berlin Jews are being rounded up. They are picked up at 9.15 in the evening and locked into a synagogue overnight. Then they are sent off, with what they can carry, to Litzmannstadt [Lodz] and Smolensk. We are to be spared the sight of them being simply left to perish in hunger and cold, and that is why it is done in Litzmannstadt and Smolensk. . . .

How can anyone know these things and still walk around free? With what right? Is it not inevitable that his turn will come too one day, and that he too will be rolled into the gutter?—All this is only summer-lightning, for the storm is still ahead.—If only I could get rid of the terrible feeling that I have let myself be corrupted, that I do not react keenly enough to such things, that they torment me without producing a spontaneous reaction. I have mistrained myself, for in such things, too, I react with my head. I think about a possible reaction instead of acting.⁷

With such overwhelming suffering before him, Moltke may have, quite understandably, felt that he didn't do enough. But Moltke was indeed *acting* in his role with the Abwehr—though not, as most Germans at the time would have perceived it, on behalf of Germany. Making allies where he could, he attempted to work against the escalation of the war as well as to mitigate atrocities masquerading as legitimate war tactics, such as those described above. These efforts involved gathering specific data and communicating with relevant German officials, attempting to convince them of the need to obey international laws, sometimes utilizing arguments of self-interest—such as mutual, respectful treatment of political prisoners—in order to be convincing. He improved local conditions for people where he could through invoking legal principles. After he knew that Jews were being deported, he attempted to get them rerouted to countries that would be a safe haven for them. When possible, he personally helped Jews escape to safe territories.⁸ Armed with his extensive information and his connections with the German resistance movement, he communicated especially with his friends in England. He wanted them to be apprised of what was happening.

7. Moltke, *Letters to Freya*, 174–75.

8. This was true, for example, in two 1943 cases when he intervened at great personal risk to help Danish Jews in one instance and Norwegian Jews in another to escape to Sweden (Dramm, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Resistance*, 139–40).

And he wanted them to know that there were Germans, like himself, who wanted to see the Hitler government defeated and wanted a different German society to emerge.

Moltke's position in the Abwehr enabled him to do the practical work of an international lawyer. However, the particulars of what he did—engaging in risky acts of compassion—were motivated, shaped, and sustained by his Christian faith. As he put it to his English friend Lionel Curtis in a letter in 1942:

Today it is beginning to dawn on a not too numerous but active part of the population not that they have been misled, not that they are in for a hard time, not that they might lose the war, but that what is done is sinful, and that they are personally responsible for every savage act that has been done, not of course in a mortal way, but as Christians. Perhaps you will remember that, in discussions before the war, I maintained that belief in God was not essential for coming to the results you arrive at. Today I know I was wrong, completely wrong. You know that I have fought the Nazis from the first day, but the amount of risk and readiness for sacrifice which is asked from us now, and that which may be asked from us tomorrow require more than right ethical principles, especially as we know that the success of our fight will probably mean a total collapse as a national unit. But we are ready to face this. The second great danger which confronts us as soon as we get rid of the NS [National Socialist] force is to visualize Europe after the war. We can only expect to get our people to overthrow this reign of terror and horror if we are able to show a picture beyond the terrifying and hopeless immediate future.⁹

This letter reflects Moltke's central passions and convictions. These convictions led him not only to do his difficult work through the Abwehr; they also led him to organize a resistance group that came to be known as the "Kreisau Circle," named for his family estate on which some of the meetings were held. As Joachim Fest has put it, "What brought the Kreisau group together was not principally a determination to overthrow the Nazi regime but rather the common project of planning, through their preparatory discussions, what a modern, post-Hitler Germany would look like."¹⁰

The members of the Kreisau Circle disagreed among themselves on a variety of issues, including the use of violence to topple the Hitler government, although Fest is probably right that "most members of the Kreisau Circle rejected

9. Helmuth James von Moltke, "Letter in English from Moltke to an English Friend," in Roon, *German Resistance to Hitler*, 376–77. Though this book is mostly a secondary account written by Ger van Roon, it also contains one hundred pages of letters and documents from the Kreisau Circle.

10. Fest, *Plotting Hitler's Death*, 158.

any sort of violence.”¹¹ What becomes obvious to anyone who reads about this resistance group is that they believed that the problems in Nazi Germany were not just Hitler and a few of his henchmen. There were fundamental problems in Germany that could not be resolved merely through a few changes in the top leadership. Knowing of the atrocities of the Nazi war effort, some within this group believed that the only way that Germany could become a healthy contributor to Europe or the world was to be brought to its knees through utter defeat. Not all agreed. But at least within the context of this group, the primary focus was that of envisioning a new post-Hitler Germany. This was a clear enough emphasis that Peter Hoffman, one of the foremost authorities on the resistance movements, has said of the Kreisau Circle: “They had little or no confidence in the prospects of a military coup, and they pursued what might be described as a pacifist option of resistance.”¹²

But in the meantime, before there was a “post-Hitler Germany,” Moltke did what he could to express his Christian convictions in tangible ways— as strange as it may seem at first glance—through a military intelligence agency within Germany. His work in the Abwehr allowed him to be relieved of military duty on the front lines and thus killing in the name of Hitler. It also gave him opportunities to mitigate some of the worst destructiveness of the German armed forces. And it afforded him opportunities to give aid to those very people who were potential victims of the German nation at the time. As one summary statement has it: “By wielding his legal expertise like a bureaucratic monkey wrench to counter the deportation and murder of Jews and the execution of captured soldiers, he saved untold lives.”¹³ However, it was the Kreisau Circle to which Moltke devoted his free time and energy.¹⁴ And by all accounts he was its central force and leading light. It gave him hope and sustained him spiritually to be among a group of resisters who were envisioning another world for the future. Such a world had to be envisioned from the ground up and in specific terms. For as he said to his friend Lionel Curtis, “We need a revolution, not a coup d’état.”¹⁵ Some historians believe that in the end Moltke approved of

11. *Ibid.*, 160. He does not mean most were pacifist; he means they were unwilling to assassinate leaders.

12. Peter Hoffman, introduction to *The Power of Solitude: My Life in the German Resistance*, by Marion Yorck von Wartenburg (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), xx.

13. From the dust jacket of Moltke, *Letters to Freya*, inside front flap. Sabine Dramm refers to Moltke as one of “the two most important regime-critical civilians in the Military Intelligence Foreign Office,” Bonhoeffer’s brother-in-law, Hans von Dohnanyi, being the other (Dramm, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Resistance*, 102).

14. The first small but formal gathering of those who came to be called the Kreisau Circle took place at least as early as August 1940 (Roon, *German Resistance to Hitler*, 141).

15. As quoted in Mommsen, “Kreisau Circle,” 139.

the assassination of Hitler. However, no one of whom I am aware believes that we have really understood Moltke or the Kreisau Circle that gathered around him if we focus primarily on his possible links to attempts on Hitler's life. Beate Ruhm von Oppen paraphrases and quotes from a farewell letter that Moltke wrote to his two sons on October 11, 1944, after nearly nine months in jail. He wanted them to know from him what the cause of his execution was:

“Throughout an entire life, even at school, I have fought against a spirit of narrowness and unfreedom, of arrogance and lack of respect for others, of intolerance and the absolute, the merciless consistency among the Germans, which found its expression in the National Socialist state. I exerted myself to help to overcome this spirit with its evil consequences, such as excessive nationalism, racial persecution, lack of faith, and materialism.” He continued that from their point of view the Nazis were therefore right in killing him. But they were wrong to kill him inasmuch as he had always opposed acts of violence, like the attempted coup of 20 July 1944, for a number of reasons, but chiefly because it would not change the mentality behind the Third Reich.¹⁶

In his last letter to his wife, on January 11, 1945, Moltke said the following:

The decisive phrase of the trial was: “Herr Graf, one thing Christianity and we National Socialists have in common, and only one: we demand the whole man.” I wonder if he realized what he was saying? Just think how wonderfully God prepared this, his unworthy vessel. At the very moment when there was danger I might be drawn into active preparations of a putsch—it was the evening of the 19th that Stauffenberg came to Peter [Yorck]—I was taken away, so that I should be and remain free from all connection with the use of violence.¹⁷

Let us consider a few questions. If Moltke were to become well known, would his name mostly be associated with the “plots to kill Hitler”? Would his contemporary importance mostly be seen in relation to those clearly willing to assassinate the Führer, such as Stauffenberg? After all, Moltke worked with the Abwehr and was executed precisely because his name was linked to conspirators, some of whom did attempt to kill Hitler. Would we ignore what seems to be his expressed desire, in some of his last words, that he not be associated with the assassination attempt of July 20, 1944? And would we

16. Von Oppen, introduction to *Letters to Freya*, 3. Moltke's widow in an interview confirms that he was opposed to the attempts to kill Hitler. See Dorothee von Meding, “Freya von Moltke,” in *Courageous Hearts: Women and the Anti-Hitler Plot of 1944*, trans. Michael Balfour and Volker R. Berghahn (Providence, RI: Berghahn Books, 1997), 70, 73.

17. Moltke, *Letters to Freya*, 410. Also see Freya von Moltke, *Memories of Kreisau and the German Resistance*, trans. Julie M. Winter (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003).

mostly ignore the central focus of his short life, including his work to save the lives of Jews and his work to curb German military abuses? Including the fact that his clearest and deepest commitments and convictions seemed to be expressed in the context of the organization that he founded, the Kreisau Circle, which by all accounts was centrally about envisioning a new German society that valued the Christian faith, small communities, individual responsibility, and so on—not on mounting a violent coup?

And would we imply that somehow Stauffenberg's life and commitments were more important than Moltke's—because he engaged in the ultimately “responsible” act of attempting to assassinate Hitler? Even though Moltke was probably responsible for the saving of thousands of lives? Even though Stauffenberg, as a military officer, was probably responsible for the killing of hundreds, if not thousands, of people as part of the German military?¹⁸ Even though Stauffenberg not only failed in his attempt to kill Hitler but, precisely because of this obvious attempt, provoked the eventual execution of thousands of people, including Moltke?¹⁹

I ask these questions because it seems that something very much like this has happened to the legacy of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Of course, the particulars of their two lives differ. However, it should be obvious that Bonhoeffer's daily life, linked with his theological writings, from the fall of 1940 until his arrest in April of 1943, as an agent of the Abwehr, comes much closer to the life and legacy of Moltke than of Stauffenberg.²⁰

I have watched the fine 1982 documentary film *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Memories and Perspectives* many times. It is mostly composed of interviews with Bonhoeffer's family members and former students. I am always quite moved when I watch the interview with Emmi Bonhoeffer, the widow of Klaus Bonhoeffer,

18. However, it should also be said about Stauffenberg that, according to Peter Hoffman, he attempted “throughout 1942 . . . singlehandedly and against overwhelming odds . . . to convince senior commanders on the eastern front to overthrow Hitler.” Peter Hoffman, introduction to *To the Bitter End: An Insider's Account of the Plot to Kill Hitler 1933–1944*, by Hans Bernd Gisevius, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (original German 1946; New York: DaCapo Press, 1998), xvii.

19. See Anton Gill, *An Honorable Defeat: A History of German Resistance to Hitler, 1933–1945* (New York: Henry Holt, 1994), viii.

20. On Moltke and Bonhoeffer, see Dramm, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Resistance*, 133–53. Dramm is, to some extent, in this chapter specifically focusing on distinctions between the two. It seems that Bonhoeffer's work in the Abwehr mostly consisted of continuing his ecumenical contacts throughout Europe and Scandinavia, to inform his friends of activities and progress of the German resistance movements, and to solicit assistance where possible from others. Additionally, the Abwehr gave him an exemption from military service, time to study theology and meet with theologians, and the opportunity to do some writing both on *Ethics* and otherwise. He also did some of the other things Moltke did, but he wasn't an expert in international or military law like Moltke and thus couldn't begin to accomplish as much.

Dietrich's brother, who was also executed for being tied to the conspiracy. At one point in the film she is speaking of one of her last conversations with her husband, when he was convinced his arrest was imminent.

I forgot if it was on this occasion or later when [my husband] came in August to see the children for the last time, when I asked him: "When you will be arrested what can I do?" And he said: "You can't do anything. It will be as if I fell into a lion's den. Try to save your life for the children. And you will get help from friends." I have to go my way. But I feel [she pauses, apparently holding back tears] at least my children will never have to be ashamed of their father. That he had known about [all the horrible things going on] and hadn't done anything.²¹

Having studied the Nazi era, World War II, and the Holocaust of the Jews fairly extensively, I empathize with her. I hear the quite understandable, if sad, pride in her voice. Unlike the overwhelming majority of Germans at the time, her husband *did something* to try to stop Hitler. Unlike many others, their children "will never have to be ashamed of their father." He acted "responsibly." Who would not be moved? But her husband was not a theologian. More importantly, unlike his brother Dietrich, he was not a theologian who had committed a significant portion of his life to a serious study of the Sermon on the Mount and to teaching about and living costly discipleship based upon that study.

On January 14, 1935, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a letter to his brother Karl-Friedrich. He was expressing his excitement about his ongoing discoveries as he prepared sermons for the congregation he was pastoring in London, England—especially what he was learning through his engagement with the Scriptures:

Perhaps I seem to you rather fanatical and mad about a number of things. I myself am sometimes afraid of that. But I know that the day I became more "reasonable," to be honest, I should have to chuck my entire theology. When I first started in theology, my idea of it was quite different—rather more academic, probably. Now it has turned to something else altogether. But I do believe that at last I am on the right track, for the first time in my life. I often feel quite happy about it. I only worry about being so afraid of what other people will think as to get bogged down instead of going forward. I think I am right in saying that I would only achieve true inner clarity and honesty by really starting to take the Sermon on the Mount seriously. Here alone lies the force that can blow all this

21. Emmi Bonhoeffer, excerpts from interview in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Memories and Perspectives*, directed by Bain Boehlke (Lansdale, PA: Trinity Films, 1983), DVD. Transcription has been amended slightly to improve Emmi Bonhoeffer's English.

hocus-pocus sky-high—like fireworks, leaving only a few burnt out shells behind. The restoration of the church must surely depend on a new kind of monasticism, which has nothing in common with the old but a life of uncompromising discipleship, following Christ according to the Sermon on the Mount. I believe the time has come to gather people together and do this.²²

By referring to a force that can “blow all this hocus-pocus sky-high—like fireworks,” it does not appear that Bonhoeffer imagines that what he is discovering through living with the Sermon on the Mount is either a kind of safe, individually tailored pietism or some pure idealism with little relevance for daily living in the midst of the Third Reich. No, he believes he is grasping something simultaneously relevant for the restoration of the church and explosive of normal existence. He will name his discovery more fully through the manifesto that will in book form be titled *Nachfolge*, or in the first English translation, *The Cost of Discipleship*, and now simply *Discipleship*.²³

In a little more than three months Bonhoeffer will start a seminary for the Confessing Church at Zingst and then move it to Finkenwalde less than two months later. The training in a “new kind of monasticism,” Bonhoeffer’s attempts at the “restoration of the church,” will begin. It is interesting to hear the impressions left on a student at the Finkenwalde seminary, Joachim Kanitz:

That semester we worked on the exegesis of the Sermon on the Mount; later on he worked this into his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*. It became clear to us on the basis of this Bible study that it is not possible for Christians to justify killing or to justify war. So, of course, we also had to talk about the very immediate question of what we would do if it came to war or even if it didn’t come to war, what we would do if we were drafted, since the draft had been introduced. We were just the age that would be taken first. We worried because we didn’t think this through all that carefully because there was so much else to be concerned about—there was the question of the church and the Jews and our work in the parish. When it came to the point when we were in fact drafted—I was called

22. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *London: 1933–1935*, ed. Keith W. Clements, trans. Isabel Best, vol. 13 of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 284–85.

23. According to Eberhard Bethge, this book has its roots in 1932 (after Bonhoeffer’s year in New York City). Its more obvious textual roots are in sermons Bonhoeffer preached during his eighteen-month pastorate in London. Unfortunately, the manuscripts from his sermons on the Sermon on the Mount, in London, are lost. However, we have other sermons—some of which I will quote in chapter 2—which clearly are similar in wording and passion to his book *Discipleship*. Most directly Bonhoeffer presented lectures to his students at the seminary that would become the book *Nachfolge*, first published in 1937. It was first published in English as *The Cost of Discipleship* in 1948. The critical English edition, published in 2001, reflects the German title, and thus is simply *Discipleship*.

up on May 15, 1939—we went in with a bad conscience. It was against our convictions. But the alternative was being lined up against a wall and shot. I remember that when it came to the outbreak of war on September 1st 1939, I was still hoping that the Confessing Church would come out with a loud “no,” but by then it was no longer in a position to act at all.²⁴

So far Kanitz’s reflections might be expected. Yes, this is the Bonhoeffer of *Discipleship*. But this, for some, is still overly concerned with moral purity, about the identity of Christians, a sort of monasticism. Kanitz continues:

“Being for others”: this is something Bonhoeffer is particularly known for. Above all, being there for those who otherwise have no one to be with them. To cry out for all the disadvantaged people in the world. To be the church, not in such a way that it fights primarily for its own survival; but unfortunately this is what we in the Confessing Church did almost exclusively. But Bonhoeffer was one of the few in the Confessing Church who always saw the whole picture. Above all, he saw Christ as the brother of all persecuted human beings, of all people tortured and made victims of others.

Kanitz entered military service, as noted above, in May 1939. Several years later, as an officer in the military, he spoke with Bonhoeffer while on leave:

The last time I saw [Dietrich] was in the summer of 1943 [*sic*], shortly before his arrest.²⁵ I visited him in his home in Berlin while I was on leave from the Russian front. I was wearing an officer’s uniform since I was just on my way back. I was wearing the Iron Cross; I was terribly ashamed, because I had an idea of what he was involved with here in Berlin. I knew nothing for sure; he didn’t even tell his closest friends anything about the conspiracy activities. Then he asked me, in utter sincerity, without any judgment, how I had earned my medal. And all I could do was mumble that I didn’t know, that it was merely routine. It was then that my wish, my desire was strengthened to will only one thing: to survive the war and see to it that such a thing never happened again. The reason I tell about this is that through the pacifism that Bonhoeffer had taught us, that we had come to by reading the Bible, the will to resist fascism and dictatorship had been planted so firmly in me that these seven years as a soldier were utter hell for me. Sometimes I was close to insanity because of it. At any rate, the only thing I could conclude for the rest of my life was: never again.

24. Joachim Kanitz, excerpts from interviews in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Memories and Perspectives*. The two following quotes from Kanitz are also from this documentary film.

25. Bonhoeffer was arrested on April 5, 1943. Kanitz is likely remembering his visit on August 2, 1942. See *Conspiracy and Imprisonment: 1940–1945*, ed. Mark Brocker, trans. Lisa E. Dahill and Douglas W. Stott, vol. 16 of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 689.

Discipleship, the vital importance of the Christian community, being for others, crying out for the disadvantaged, resisting fascism, loving enemies (including refusing to kill in wars): all of these commitments, for Bonhoeffer, came out of a serious theological engagement with the Scriptures—especially the Sermon on the Mount—with Jesus Christ at the center. These teachings were still remembered by his former student quite powerfully in the summer of 1942. Did Bonhoeffer himself still believe them at that point?

It has struck me for many years that among numerous Christians, academics, and others, typically a three-step move is made in relation to Bonhoeffer. First, we “know” that Bonhoeffer was involved in one or more plots to kill Hitler. Second, this “knowledge” then becomes the lens through which his theological and ethical legacy is understood. Third, then, we can of course see that what we thought might be true is indeed true, that *Discipleship* and *Life Together* are works from Bonhoeffer’s less mature period before he truly confronted the hard realities of a world war and the Holocaust. These early books may still be useful as expressions of piety and devotion. But for hard, real life we need the realism captured in the language of *Ethics* and *Letters and Papers from Prison*. Thus words and phrases like “responsibility,” “this-worldliness,” “vicarious representative action,” “guilt,” “living unreservedly in life’s duties,” or “living in the realities of this world”—terms found in these later writings—are seen quintessentially as expressions that reflect and warrant his realism that led to his involvement in the plots to kill Hitler. Therefore Bonhoeffer’s life and legacy are seen much more in light of these latter two works. And whatever significance these earlier works have, they too are seen in light of Bonhoeffer’s later involvements in assassination attempts and key passages from these later works.

What then follows from this? Of course, there are the moves that strike typical North American Christian ethicists as bizarre, such as invoking the name of Bonhoeffer to justify killing a doctor who performs abortions or a dictator in Latin America.²⁶ There is also the move—by respectable Christian ethicists and Bonhoeffer scholars—of employing Bonhoeffer to justify the (mostly) US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.²⁷ Of course, there is often the implicit justification of the Allied efforts in World War II. And then there is

26. Despite his disagreement with such logic, Rob Arner does a good job of showing the logic of justifying killing a doctor who performs abortions. See Rob Arner, *Consistently Pro-Life: The Ethics of Bloodshed in Ancient Christianity* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2010), 13–23. The reference to Latin American dictators is an allusion to a statement made by George W. Bush.

27. See Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Just War Against Terror: The Burden of American Power in a Violent World* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), where Bonhoeffer’s name is invoked several times to justify her argument. It should be mentioned that Elshtain has also written a handful of academic essays on Bonhoeffer. On Afghanistan, see Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson,

the statement I received by email. It came from a Christian educator who was a visiting scholar on our campus. Before he came he had apparently read an essay written by me on Bonhoeffer. Thus he sent me a message, saying he would like to discuss Bonhoeffer with me. Among other things, in his email he said: “If it were not for Bonhoeffer I would be a pacifist.” At first I was taken aback by this. But then I thought, this is simply a bold and candid statement that follows from what seems to me to be the standard Niebuhrian reading of Bonhoeffer and follows from the moves named in the previous paragraph.²⁸

This book will challenge that reading. Or rather it will argue not only that Joachim Kanitz is accurately remembering what he had been taught by his teacher in 1935, but that the evidence suggests that Bonhoeffer continued to believe these things in 1942 and beyond. Without question, his contexts and involvements—of necessity—changed from, say, 1935 to 1942 or 1939 to 1944. But we will argue for fundamental continuities in Bonhoeffer’s theology and life from 1932 until the end of his life. And specifically we will argue that it is highly unlikely that Bonhoeffer was involved in any assassination attempts. And since he was not involved in such attempts, there is no textual evidence that he attempted ethically to justify such attempts.

The argument will be made through the discussion that unfolds in seven chapters and a conclusion. The first three chapters will offer an overview of Bonhoeffer’s life. The first chapter will cover his life up through his involvement in helping to draft the Bethel Confession in August 1933, for what was becoming the Confessing Church. The second chapter will cover the period from his move to London, England, in October 1933 until the eve of his second trip to New York City in the summer of 1939. The third chapter will begin with the trip back to Germany, continue through Bonhoeffer’s involvement in the Abwehr and connections with the resistance movements, and end with his execution on April 9, 1945. This third chapter is less ordered by chronology, but it does cover the period from 1939 to 1945.

Since Bonhoeffer was a theologian, writings conveying theological thought were very much a part of his life. Thus the first three chapters will offer

The Cost of Moral Leadership: The Spirituality of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 115–20.

28. An early reader of this essay questioned this claim about how Bonhoeffer is understood. However, I have encountered this interpretation many times. While this is not the place to document the claim extensively, let me simply point to one source from two respected Bonhoeffer scholars who are giving what seems to me to be at least one, brief version of the standard account of Bonhoeffer’s shift from pacifism and the approach of *Discipleship* to the real, harsh world of involvement in conspiracies: Kelly and Nelson, *Cost of Moral Leadership*, 112–15. (This is not to say that there is little that is valuable in this book; there is indeed much that is useful and important.)

some significant exposure to Bonhoeffer's theology and theological ethics. However, it is chapters 4 through 7 that look in more depth at Bonhoeffer's formal writings.

Specifically, chapter 4 will deal with a lecture Bonhoeffer presented in Barcelona in 1929 on Christian ethics. This chapter will point to a formal approach to ethics that remains constant throughout Bonhoeffer's life, while also suggesting major points of disruption between 1929 and 1932 that came to affect the rest of Bonhoeffer's short life. Chapter 5 will discuss and contextualize the book *Discipleship*. It will both discuss the vital importance of this book as an expression of Bonhoeffer's mature substantive commitments and show its links to his previous and subsequent thought.

Chapters 6 and 7 will discuss Bonhoeffer's "book" *Ethics*. This will involve linking this set of originally unpublished manuscripts especially to his earlier thought. There will also be an engagement of two of the most important concepts often drawn on in discussions related to the subject of this book—namely, Bonhoeffer's understanding of responsibility and guilt. The conclusion will then summarize the main points of the book as well as look toward a future legacy for Bonhoeffer's witness, free of the myth of his involvement in assassination attempts.

Part 1

BONHOEFFER'S BIOGRAPHY RECONSIDERED

This book wrestles with theological ethics and the central question of the applicability of Jesus's teaching in a sinful, violent world, but the main argument is inescapably biographical. We are exploring how one human being, a twentieth-century German theologian and church leader named Dietrich Bonhoeffer, reflected on these issues in the context of the Third Reich, one of the most oppressive and destructive regimes in human history. The first section, the next three chapters, provides a sketch of the whole of Bonhoeffer's short life. Like any such account, this one will emphasize some elements and events more than others. Every effort has been made, however, not only to be fair in this portrayal but also to avoid distortion by omission.