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CHRISTIAN CHURCHES IN NAZI GERMANY
(1933-1945)

- DOCTORAL THESIS -

- ABSTRACT -

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Keywords: Christian Churches, Nazi Germany, *Reichskirche*, Confessing Church, Vatican, Adolf Hitler, Nazi Party, German Christians, Catholic Church, Protestant Church.

We would make clear that we have no purpose to incriminate the whole German people. We know that the Nazi Party was not put in power by a majority of the German vote. If the German populace had willingly accepted the Nazi program, no Storm-troopers would have been needed in the early days of the Party and there would have been no need for concentration camps or the Gestapo¹.

These words were spoken by Chief U.S. Prosecutor Robert H. Jackson in his opening speech at the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg on November 21, 1945. Despite the unprecedented historical context in which they were spoken, they remain, even almost 80 years after the end of the horrors of war, a starting point for any historical research into the events of that period. The literature abounds with analyses, accounts, documents and conspiracies about Nazi Germany and, in particular, about Hitler's Circle of Power. Much is still being written on the subject and, we believe, will be written for many years to come, which is very good. With our research initiative, we intend to join this wave of analysis of the Nazi phenomenon. We are not aiming for a general historiographical approach, but rather to offer an analysis from the perspective of church history.

We are now at the point where most of those who lived through those events have departed. Their testimonies have been meticulously recorded and analysed in depth. The generations that come after us have the right to know everything that happened then, not only as information but also as a lesson for the future. Priest Professor Gabriel-Viorel Gârdan, in the introductory study to the volume *Ghid pentru studiul Istoriei Bisericești*² (*Guide for the Study of Church History*), said that the history of the Christian Church offers us the possibility to broaden our own experience in Christ by sharing in the experience of those of the past. In this way, we show not only that we honour the saving efforts of those before us, but that we enrol ourselves in the *Mystical Body of the Church* as timeless members of the *Church in Heaven*.

We are aware that we are part of the Romanian Orthodox Church and that our research is mainly focused on the Roman Catholic and Protestant Churches in Germany, which might

¹ IMT, Blue Series, vol. II, Nürnberg, 1947, 21 Noiembrie 1945, pp. 102-103.

² Gabriel-Viorel GÂRDAN, „Cunoaștere și autocunoaștere sau despre necesitatea studierii istoriei bisericești”, in Justo L. Gonzales, *Ghid pentru studierea Istoriei Bisericești*, translated by Cezar Login and Gabriel-Viorel Gârdan, Presa Universitară Clujeană, Cluj-Napoca, 2010, p. 11.

raise questions such as: What good does it do us to know what *other* Churches have done? How does the experience of *other* Christians help us Orthodox Christians?

Before answering these kinds of questions, we think it would be good to remember that, until recently, Orthodox Romanians lived for half a century under an authoritarian, persecuting and atheistic regime, which left its mark on the religious conscience of entire generations. Thirty years after the fall of the communist regime, we have still not found the cadence of authentic Orthodox spirituality and we are still trying to understand *how* and *why* the Church behaved in one way or another during that period and why its members reacted differently to the challenges of authoritarian political rule.

Argument

The subject of our thesis is one on which historians have had very different positions over the years. In the bibliography, we have identified three main motivating currents, on the basis of which the works on the relationship between Church and State in Nazi Germany have been realized. The first trend is the memoirist one, which is to be found mainly in the writings of the first years after the war. It is marked by a strong subjectivism, influenced almost invariably by the experiences of those who lived through the Nazi persecutions and horrors but survived. The second current is the conspiratorial or ideological one, typical of the Cold War period and still promoted in secular circles, in which, depending on the political agenda, the papers were conceived for propaganda reasons aimed at legitimizing one option or another. We shall call the third current the documentary one, because the main bibliographical source of the research has been official documents from the period of the Nazi administration, with the clear objective of presenting the historical facts and, as far as humanly possible, of decanting the historical truth as accurately as possible.

We would like to follow this documentary trajectory. In our thesis we aim to emphasize the experience of those who experienced Nazism at first hand, arguing their accounts with the documentary evidence at our disposal, without in any way excusing or accusing, but explaining and understanding very well the historical context in which the events took place.

It is also necessary to mention that in the works of Romanian historians this subject is very poorly treated, and in church history it is almost ignored. That is why, we believe, such research is very necessary for those who want to understand what Nazism really meant for Christians in Germany, as well as how the Church tried to survive that totalitarian regime. On the other hand, our analysis attempts to decipher the particularities of the relations between the

totalitarian state and the Church in general, the vulnerabilities that the Church had to face in a context of inferiority in which it was often subjected to abusive measures.

Methodology, limitations and structure of the thesis

Since this is a historical research, the methods used are specific: diacritical, analytical, synthetic and comparative-analytical. Whenever possible, we have insisted on the causal relationships of events and also mentioned their consequences. Thus, contextual analysis (cause-event-consequences) has been a methodological principle that we have tried to implement consistently, drawing on documentary evidence, much of it unpublished, from archival sources and published materials. We cannot ignore the fact that the research perspective is that of church history. In this sense, as I mentioned in the introduction, we take into account the mission of the Church in society, we refer to the Christological principle, integrating historical data into the eschatological reality that any church historian must keep in mind when analysing the facts and the historical course of the Church. The Church actualizes the work of salvation in society and at the same time opens the world to eschatological realities.

The aim of the paper is to present the situation of the Christian Churches in Nazi Germany, forced to carry out their pastoral mission in an increasingly authoritarian, inflexible and conflictual political environment, and on the other hand, to contribute to the understanding of the means influencing the relationship between the Church and the totalitarian state in general.

The main objectives that we have targeted in our research are the following:

1. To identify the documentary background that will allow the historiographical reconstruction of an image as close as possible to the historical reality of the subject addressed in the doctoral research;
2. To present in a diachronic manner and in a contextual perspective (cause-event-consequences) the evolution of the relationship between Church and State in Nazi Germany;
3. To identify the causes and forms of anti-religious measures that the Nazis knew and applied;
4. To observe how the Christian Churches in Germany tried to accommodate/adapt to the new political, social and cultural realities of the Third Reich and to carry out their work in this context;

5. To illustrate the impact of Nazi policies on the mission of the Christian Churches in a society that experienced dramatic changes and faced unimaginable horrors;
6. To identify and understand how the Christian Churches in Nazi Germany opposed Hitler's regime and the impact of this opposition on the totalitarian policies of the state.

The limitations of our research are determined by several factors. First of all, we mention technical limits, dictated by the fact that this paper is a doctoral research, which must fit within the time limits imposed by the duration of the doctoral program. Another research limitation is that of the time period and geographical space on which we focus our analysis. In order to keep the accuracy of the content with the theme stated in the title of the paper, we will limit ourselves mainly to the historical facts that took place within the territorial limits of Nazi Germany as we find them in the period 1933-1939. For the period 1939-1945, when the territory of Germany expanded through the conquests of the Second World War, we will limit ourselves only to the analysis of the life of the Church in the historical Reich, leaving the analysis of the aspects of the occupied territories for future research. Another research limitation is dictated by the documentary background. It should be noted that the historical period under our analysis abounds in documentary and archival material. This, however, cannot be analysed in its entirety in a single research approach. We have identified, we believe, the most important archival documents for the proposed approach, but we are aware that there are many other documents that we have not been able to identify or to which, for objective or security reasons, we have not had access.

Contents

This thesis is organized in 5 chapters, arranged chronologically and at the same time following a thematic logic. Throughout the writing we have kept the central line of exposition of the historical facts regarding the relations between the state and the Christian churches in Nazi Germany.

The first chapter, *Prolegomena*, is a technical, introductory one, in which we argue our choice of theme, we explain the limits and methodology of our research and we analyse the current state of research in the literature in our country and in Romanian, but especially in the research of the literature in international circulation. An important part of this first chapter is the analysis of the documentary background. Here we have focused on the main archival sources and mentioned the challenges raised by their analysis.

The second chapter is a contextualizing one, in which we summarize the republican period in Germany from the end of the First World War until Adolf Hitler's rise to power. We consider it necessary to go through this chapter, even if it falls outside the period of research, since it was Germany's pre-Nazi period that generated many of the crises that would influence the success of the Nationalist-Socialist ideological program and the vulnerability of the Christian Churches to the totalitarian regime led by the NSDAP and Adolf Hitler.

The third chapter analyses the first period of Nazi rule, the so-called "period of consolidation of power". This chapter is the most generous in terms of the number of pages, as this period was very much dependent on the way in which the Christian Churches and the Nazi government related to each other until 1945. This part of our research is characterized by a more detailed analysis of the attempts of the Christian Churches in Germany to adapt to the new political and social reality and, above all, to find administrative and dogmatic unity within an ideological regime with hegemonic pretensions on all levels.

The fourth chapter sets out the challenges of the life of the Christian Churches in the "Golden Age" of Nazi rule (1935-1939). Our attention has been focused on analysing how Christian communities tried to live and assert themselves in the context of a Nazi regime that was, on the one hand, very popular, and on the other increasingly authoritarian, inflexible and confrontational.

The final, fifth chapter examines the period of the Second World War and the work of the Christian Churches in war-torn Germany. The period 1939-1945 is very complex in terms of events and their rapid succession. In order to maintain the assumed frameworks of the research, we have focused only on those events that took place on the original territory of the German Reich, without considering the incorporated or conquered territories. We were especially concerned with the impact the war had on the mission of the Christian churches in German society. In this latter part of the paper we also took a critical look at anti-Semitism in society and in the Church, as well as at some of the draconian measures implemented by the Nazi regime under the umbrella of the War, including against the Churches. We have not ignored the Orthodox Church, even if contextually it was not of major interest in the dynamics of Nazi Germany. Its situation can help us to understand the totalitarian phenomenon in relation to the Orthodox Church in Romania and can open up new lines of research, or at least it can better nuance the incriminating analyses of the Church.

The end of the research is dedicated to conclusions, bibliography and appendices. The bibliography is organized in several branches, starting with the archival documents, mentioning

both the subject index and the index of the files, and for the archival documents available digitally, the web link is also mentioned. The collections of published documents are grouped in another section of the bibliography, including those available online. The last two sections of the bibliography are reserved for scholarly works, books and articles, published both in print and in digital format. The archival documents as well as a large part of the collections of published documents are in German, while the documents of the *International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg* are in English. Most of the works consulted are in English and German.

Documentary Fund

Motivated by the recommendations of the priest who is the PhD supervisor professor and by the predilection for the historical document, promoted by the school of ecclesiastical history in Cluj, we have paid a great deal of attention to the documentary fund. We have used collections of published and unpublished documents from archival collections in Germany and other countries. We mention here the archival files from the German Federal Archives - Bundesarchiv, the Archives of the Evangelical Church in Germany - Evangelisches Zentralarchiv in Berlin, the Karl Barth Archives - Karl Barth Archiv in Basel and the Stuttgart Church Archives - Landeskirchliches Archiv Stuttgart. It is important to note that access to these archives was very difficult, as the period of the doctoral studies coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic, during which physical presence in the Archives was practically impossible. In this context, we made great use of information technology, managing, through a very good collaboration with the Bundesarchiv in Berlin, to receive electronically all the archival documents necessary for the study. A major challenge was to identify the relevant archival sources, as both the Bundesarchiv and the Evangelisches Zentral Archiv in Berlin have recently undergone a major reorganization process, redistributing the archival records into new collections with different indexing from the ones we found in the scholarly works published before 2000. In this sense, we consider that our research brings a substantial novelty to this subject, not only for Romanian historiography, but also for international historical research, because we have updated the references of the documents, facilitating their analysis for future scientific endeavours. Practically, for the first time, in a documentary research focused on this subject, at least for historiography written in Romanian, references are made to the reorganized and updated documentary sources.

In matters concerning the Catholic Church's relationship with Nazi Germany, we have turned to the published documents of the German bishops, contained in the collections edited by Bernhard Stasiewski and Ludwig Volk, *Akten deutscher Bischöfe über die Lage der Kirche, 1933-1945*, as well as to the Reich Foreign Office documents concerning Germany's relationship with the Vatican. Unfortunately, we were not able to consult the documents in the Vatican archives for several reasons. The research of the archive of Pope Pius XII, open for a short period between 2019-2020, was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to the suspension of the research endeavours, and the duration of the doctoral studies would not have allowed us to extend our research to these documentary fonds.

Another documentary fonds, very useful for our endeavour, was the Nuremberg International Tribunal, which we had at our disposal in its entirety through the *Library of Congress, USA* and the General Donovan archive fonds, available by the courtesy of Cornell University in Ithaca, New York.

We have also been generously granted access to published collections of documents, many of which are available digitally in the Library of the *School of Theology at Claremont, California*, which has given us unlimited access to these works.

Conclusions

Almost 80 years after the end of the Second World War that led to the fall of the Nazi regime, the Third Reich still remains a topical subject for historians, not only because of the suffering that this regime brought to Germany and Europe, but also because of the complexity of the methods used in the plan to seize absolute power and to manifest the desire to rule and subjugate the whole world. The aim of our research has been to set out in an objective and historically grounded manner the way in which the Christian Churches lived side by side with the totalitarian regime led by Adolf Hitler. Knowledge of the aspects that determined the Nazi policies applied to the Christian Churches and the ways in which these policies were implemented is crucial for understanding *the phenomenon* that was the Nazi Party in Germany. The fact that the German people bore the brunt of their defeat in the First World War, having had to live under a democratic republican regime that appeared virtually overnight, led to the emergence and development of a desire for political, social, cultural and even ecclesiastical reaffirmation. The Nazi Party, with a cynicism that has been a constant throughout the 24 years of its existence, has succeeded in exploiting these vulnerabilities and masking them in the nostalgic ideals of the Great German Reich of Bismarck's time and even of the Holy Roman Empire of the Germanic nation.

As part of the German nation, the Protestant Church and the Catholic Church were no strangers to all these problems and regrets. In order to understand, for example, the complexity of relationships and the institutional diversity of the Protestant Church in Germany, it is necessary to go back to the Reformation era and see how closely linked Church and state were at that time. The organization of the Protestant Church according to the territorial and the Head of State principle allowed it to develop on several levels and at different paces from area to area and from community to community. In 1933, almost 400 years after Luther's death, the Protestant Church in Germany was a conglomerate of religious communities united only by their adherence to the Reformation. Attempts during the period of the Weimar Republic to set up a federative administration which could be a voice for all German Protestant Christians further weakened the idea of unity, a fact which was very cleverly exploited by Adolf Hitler and members of the Nazi Party. The fact that Protestants in their heart of hearts wanted a united evangelical community is shown by the ease with which they accepted the Nazis' plan to create the Reichskirche, and seriously collaborated in writing a constitution and implementing the rules that were defined by it. What the Evangelical leaders did not realize at the time was that Hitler did not just want a functioning Reich Church, but he wanted a Reichskirche in the likeness of the Nazi Party, incorporating National Socialist ideology into the Gospel message.

The Catholic Church, on the other hand, treated with equal good faith the Nazi initiative to guarantee and protect the interests of German Catholic Christians by negotiating and signing the Concordat of 1933. Hitler's demands were known from the outset, namely to renounce any political involvement of the Catholic Church in the Third Reich. The Vatican, having already had the experience of negotiating with Mussolini's Italy, realized that this was a tribute it had to pay to a totalitarian regime. If we look at the content and the analysis of the 1933 Concordat, we can say, without fear of being wrong, that on the whole it was favourable to the Catholic Church on all levels. Again, what the German Catholics could not foresee was precisely the lack of commitment of the Nazi regime, which soon turned into threat and oppression.

If we were to characterize religious life in Germany in 1933 in any way, it would be best summed up by the phrase "religious diversity". Not only in the relationship between the Protestant and Catholic Churches, which together comprised more than 95% of the 65 million German population, but also in the relationship between Lutherans, Reformed and Unitarians, just as we can observe a diversity of opinion between German Catholics and the Vatican hierarchy. For Germany's Catholic bishops, the fear of a new *Kulturkampf* as under Bismarck was very real. Even if they had been reticent about the violence of the Nazi movement before

1933, after Adolf Hitler's legal accession to power they had no choice but to seek levers of cooperation with the Nazi state.

As far as the Protestant Church is concerned, we can see that it was most affected by the Nazi ideology and was constantly in conflict on all levels. There was an administrative conflict, with the election of Ludwig Müller as Reich bishop, but also a doctrinal conflict, with the rise of the *German Christians*. But all these crises also had a beneficial effect for the Protestant Church. The latter, in all its characteristic diversity, managed to achieve a common creed which had not been possible since the Reformation, the Barmen Declaration and the emergence of the *Confessing Church*. Even if it was never fully functional, as Müller's opponents at Barmen had wished in 1934, the *Bekennende Kirche* was the basis for the rebirth of the Evangelical Church after 1945 and its healing from the elements of Nazi ideology.

Regarding all these aspects, it is also necessary to mention that all this happened in a Germany inhabited by Germans who wanted prosperity and peace. Both the leaders of the Protestant Church and the Catholic bishops as well as the members of these Churches were Germans, who loved their nation, who bore wounds that needed healing and, as mentioned above, who felt nostalgia for a glorious past that was *stolen* in the First World War. To all these problems, hard as it is to accept, the Nazi Party and Adolf Hitler came up with quick and satisfactory answers. The Third Reich dispensed with the Weimar Republic's democratic discussions and partisan bickering, offering the average German only ideologically proven certainties. They identified the culprits - the Jews, the Bolsheviks, the Freemasons and all those who were not Aryan, offering new ideals such as German blood, German soil, Germany's divine right to rule the world and, last but not least, *the Führer* - the providential leader, the saviour. The propaganda apparatus of the NSDAP, coupled with the effectiveness of the institutions of force such as the SA, SS and *Gestapo*, soon turned Germany into a huge ideological re-education camp.

It was very difficult, if not impossible, for the Christian Churches to break out of all this reality, because they were not cut off from the context in which they lived. When we talk today about the fact that the Churches in Nazi Germany did not oppose Hitler's government more resolutely, we must not forget that the Church was made up of the same people who also made up the German state. At the community level, the state and the Church merge into the mass of the population on which both institutions are built. Church leaders were, in turn, German citizens who depended in their daily lives on the success of the state to govern. This may be one answer for the fact that very rarely was Adolf Hitler as a political person criticized by the

Church. More often than not, both the Protestant Church and the Catholic Church saw in the Führer the one who could resolve conflicts in society and even in the Church.

If we look, for example, at the case of Pastor Martin Niemöller, one of the most vocal opponents of the *Reichskirche*, we can see that, until he was imprisoned in Dachau camp as Hitler's *personal prisoner*, he did not deny the legality or the right of Hitler or the Nazi Party to rule. We find the same situation in the case of the Catholic Church, which both through the voice of the German bishops and that of Pope Pius XI protested against the blatant and repeated violation of the Concordat, but not against Hitler's complicity. All this illusion of the *Führer Principle* was also possible because the Nazi Party was not a monolith, as seen from the outside. There were several circles of power, around Hitler, each driven by the desire to grab as much power as possible at the expense of the others and to receive Hitler's validation. If one were to find a better illustration of Nazi rule between 1933-1939, it could be characterized as an oligarchic feudal regime, with the Führer at its centre and the National Socialist ideal understood in very different ways, but always in a key of absolute power.

It took the horror of the War for German society and the Churches in Germany to see the true face of Nazism, and this awakening did not come immediately. The early years of the war were full of excitement. The German *Wehrmacht* marched unchallenged across Europe and by 1941 controlled, by conquest or alliance, almost every country on the old continent. The thirst for power, the cruelty towards the Jews and everything that was not Aryan, the drain on the people for a cause that was no longer noble at all, and the increasingly obvious madness of a delirious Führer, awakened in the Church a modicum of courage to do what could be done to save those who were guilty of not being Nazis. Of course, with regard to the Holocaust and Euthanasia or the barbarity of the SS troops in the occupied territories, there is the impression that the Church could have done more.

At the institutional level, the Christian churches in Germany could not have manifested a stronger opposition during the war, at least not without the most adverse repercussions. Here we must bear in mind the soteriological mission which the Church has in society and at a personal level. The purpose of the preaching of the Gospel is to offer man the possibility of salvation, and this purpose is more important than anything, even than life or personal honour. Staunch opposition in the name of social justice, jeopardizing a soul's chance of salvation, is not desirable from a Christian Church of any kind. On this plane of analysis, church history has an advantage over secular history. It sees history not as a temporary succession of events based on action and reaction, but as an integral part of Christ's eternal plan. For the German believers

under the Nazi regime, the uninterrupted activity of the Christian churches, even through concessions, subordination or collaboration, was the foundation on which, after 1945, they were able to rebuild their lives and consciences. Without the constancy of the Gospel which was heard in the Third Reich until the last moment of its existence, Nazi ideology and Hitler's madness would have utterly desolated the German nation and perhaps European civilization.

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