

The call to moral resistance

Trump isn't Hitler. Still, the Confessing Church models how we might respond to the new president.

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January 20, 2017

Since election day, I've read Volker Ullrich's new [biography](#) of Adolf Hitler—all 758 pages of it (not counting endnotes, bibliography, and index). In our current moment, it's tempting to make comparisons between Hitler and Donald Trump. Both have narcissistic personalities. Their strongest traits are their effective use of rhetoric and propaganda. Each demonstrates impatience with the details of public policy and prefers to rule by edict. The most predictable thing about each of them is their unpredictability.

Further, people continually underestimated both Hitler and Trump. When Hitler came to power in 1933, party members around him thought they could control and contain him. They soon learned otherwise. Three months after becoming chancellor he had pretty well full reins of the government. In the case of Trump, the Republican party establishment underestimated him throughout his campaign. Who would have thought a year ago that he would now be our president?

But we should [be careful](#) about making facile comparisons between Hitler and Trump—and not just because we don't know yet how Trump will conduct himself in office. Such comparisons give Trump too much power and can weaken our own response to him. They suggest a certain inevitability that our government will move in an authoritarian direction, if not a totalitarian one. We have to resist any such suggestion, lest it become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

We can learn, though, from the German people's responses to Hitler—particularly during the early years when they might have been able to do something about his

rise to power. About 80 percent of the population was bothered by the night in 1938 when, with Hitler's consent, thugs went on a vicious rampage, burning synagogues, ransacking Jewish business, and attacking Jews in their homes. Though troubled by what they observed happening on Kristallnacht, these citizens talked about it quietly, among themselves. They didn't publicly protest or resist. This privatized response emboldened Hitler to become even more radical in implementing his "final solution to the Jewish question." And we know how that turned out.

Nazi Germany is a cautionary tale, an impetus for keeping history from repeating itself. Never again. Not here.

I've been intrigued by the fact that many of my Christian friends are looking to Dietrich Bonhoeffer for wisdom in our time. Bonhoeffer projected a moral voice during a very dark time in his life and the life of his nation. He wasn't naïve about political matters, nor was he disengaged politically. But it was his moral voice that mattered most. I hope that this is the overriding lesson we learn from him.

The political mess we're currently in cannot be overcome merely through political means without moral ends. Bonhoeffer engaged in resistance to Hitler that was as prudential as it was theological, but his underlying motivations were unarguably Christian.

Now more than ever, the church needs to recover its Christian identity. A confessing church, today as in Bonhoeffer's time, distinguishes itself from any nationalistic religion. One discipline that could aid the recovery of such an identity for our faith would be to eschew critiques of the Trump administration that are merely political and partisan, instead anchoring our criticism and resistance in moral terms.

The Christian church is a universal body without borders. Being Christian means recognizing that Trump isn't our ultimate ruler, Jesus is. Commitment to Jesus frees us for moral resistance. And moral resistance, as Bonhoeffer reminds us, compels us to love our neighbors, pray for our enemies, forgive people who wrong us, and welcome all strangers.