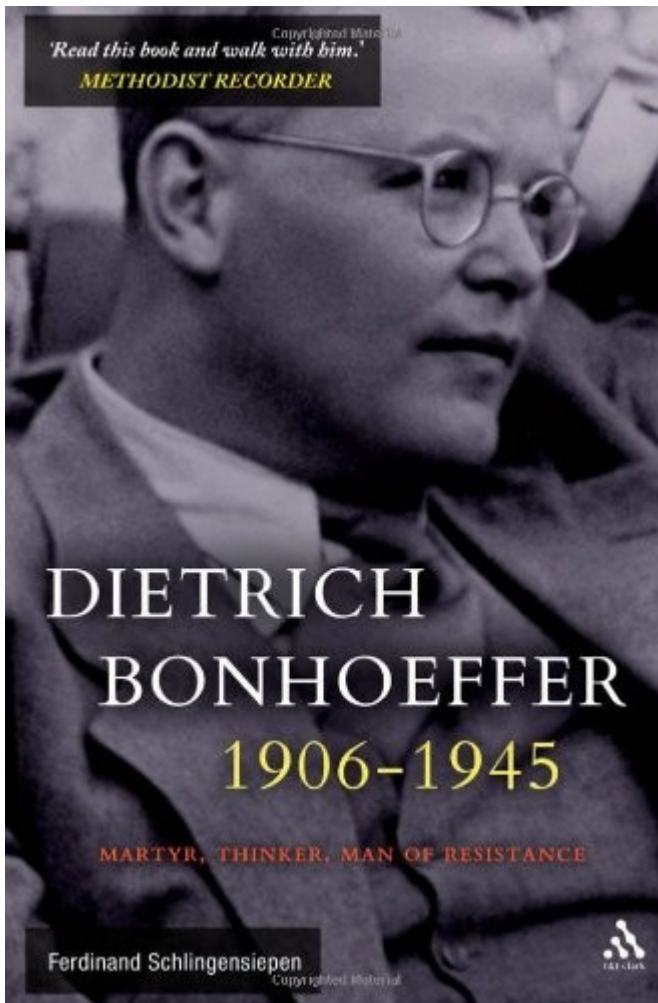


Dietrich Bonhoeffer 1906-1945, by Ferdinand Schlingensiepen

reviewed by [Barry Harvey](#) in the [March 22, 2011](#) issue

In Review



Dietrich Bonhoeffer 1906-1945

by Ferdinand Schlingensiepen, trans. Isabel Best
T & T Clark

Dietrich Bonhoeffer continues to captivate the Christian imagination in the English-speaking world 65 years after his murder by the Nazi regime, but this does not mean that his life and thought are always well understood. Individuals from across the ideological spectrum have for years lifted his ideas and actions out of their time and place in history so they can conscript them for their own causes. Drawing parallels between the present and the past is wrought with difficulties in any discussion of a historical figure, and in the case of Bonhoeffer, a complex individual who lived in a turbulent and fragmentary time, it is particularly problematic.

One measure of a good biography is the degree to which it keeps this anachronistic tendency in check. When judged by this criterion, Ferdinand Schlingensiepen's new book is without peer. The author's knowledge of Bonhoeffer and his familiarity with the massive amount of research that has been done over the past 50 years are readily apparent, and they result in a clear and compelling picture of Bonhoeffer's life, work and witness.

As one of the founders of the International Dietrich Bonhoeffer Society and a pastor and theologian in his own right, Schlingensiepen is a natural choice to follow in Eberhard Bethge's footsteps as Bonhoeffer's premiere biographer. His father was principal at one of the Confessing Church seminaries, a personal connection to this contentious period in German history that adds to his detailed grasp of the principal sources. He was also a close friend of Bethge, who approached him early on about writing an abridged version of his classic biography. Given the passage of time and with new information coming to light since Bethge published his work, especially the correspondence between Bonhoeffer and his fiancée Maria von Wedemeyer, Schlingensiepen concluded that a fresh interpretation of Bonhoeffer's life and thought was needed.

The philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre says that no one is ever more than the coauthor of one's own life story: each of us enters upon a stage that we did not design or build, there to find ourselves part of action that is not of our own making. Bonhoeffer is no exception, and Schlingensiepen excels at navigating through the many settings, characters and plots that converge to form the contours of this life. His facility in this regard is particularly important when he is narrating the convoluted twists and turns of the church struggle in the 1930s. German church polity, both then and now, differs significantly from the arrangement that Americans are used to, as does the relationship between the churches and the state. The failure to

understand these differences has often led scholars and ministers on both sides of the ideological aisle to posit dubious contextual comparisons.

Schlingensiepen is equally masterful at relating the intimate relationships of Bonhoeffer's life, beginning with relationships with his family members, many of whom were also involved in the conspiracy against the Nazis. In addition, he is able to examine Bonhoeffer's relationship with Bethge, and he gives due credit to Bonhoeffer's close friend and dialogue partner. Finally, Schlingensiepen's account of Bonhoeffer's brief but lively courtship with von Wedemeyer, carried out largely by correspondence, is particularly winsome.

I would have liked to see Schlingensiepen reflect a bit further on Bonhoeffer's participation in the conspiracy to assassinate Hitler in light of Bonhoeffer's friendship with Jean Lasserre at Union Seminary, his focus on the Sermon on the Mount in *Discipleship* and elsewhere, and his espousal of a peace ethic during his work with the ecumenical movement. James McClendon and others have made a compelling case that biography is an appropriate genre in which to do theology, and Schlingensiepen acknowledges that it is a legitimate aspect of the biographer's enterprise, noting in the preface that when Bethge published his book, Bonhoeffer's involvement in the resistance had to be defended to a German public that had yet to come to terms with its own behavior during the Nazi regime. Given that this defense is no longer necessary, it would seem that enough time has passed to inquire anew about Bonhoeffer's momentous decision to set aside what he had said and written before the war and cast his lot with those who sought to kill Hitler.

Raising these sorts of questions does not require that one either condone or condemn Bonhoeffer for his involvement in the resistance. What it does is to continue the very sort of theological reflection that he undertook regarding this decision in *Ethics* and *Letters and Papers from Prison*. For example, Bonhoeffer raised the question of concrete success in the essay "After Ten Years." Judged by this (admittedly slippery) standard, the conspirators were not successful: they did not bring down the Third Reich, they did not eliminate Hitler, and they did not appreciably shorten the war. Some have argued that they may even have made matters worse by providing the regime with convenient scapegoats for past military defeats and by inciting further its paranoid determination to fight on to the last. In short, the conspiracy failed to "seize the wheel," to use the aphorism that Bonhoeffer employed as he urged the Confessing Church to take action on behalf of the victims of an unjust state by bringing its apparatus to a halt.

McClendon suggests that the note of tragedy in Bonhoeffer's story is but an element in the greater tragedy of the Christian community in Germany—specifically, its failure over the years to cultivate institutions and practices that would have provided women and men with the necessary habits of mind and behavior to recognize and resist fascism. As Schlingensiepen carefully documents, Bonhoeffer possessed those skills to an extraordinary degree and tried throughout the decade of the 1930s to foster them in the churches in Germany and in ecumenical circles, but to no avail. With the outbreak of the war, and in the absence of communal institutions and practices that would have made a distinctively Christian form of action possible, he became a victim in a tragic drama.

McClendon's interpretation has affinities with Schlingensiepen's comments about Bonhoeffer's frustrations with the shortcomings of the Confessing Church. Had he followed up on these comments and brought his own considerable experience and insight to bear on them, what is already a good biography could have been very good indeed. That said, we are in his debt for the good work that he has done, opening a new window into the remarkable life, witness and scholarship of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.