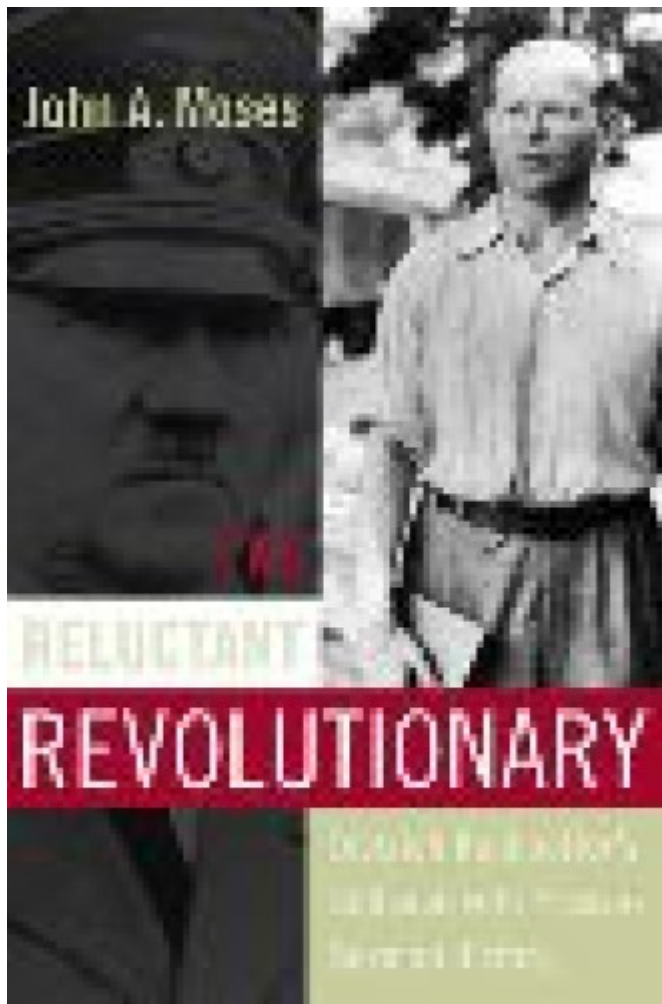


# The Reluctant Revolutionary: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Collision with Prusso-German History

reviewed by [Robert Cornwall](#) in the [April 6, 2010](#) issue

## In Review



## The Reluctant Revolutionary: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Collision with Prusso-German History

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The martyrdom of Dietrich Bonhoeffer is a well-known story that has proven inspirational and instructive to people across the theological and political spectrum. His ruminations on a religionless Christianity gave fodder to the Death of God movement, and his participation in the conspiracy to assassinate Hitler has given encouragement to violent antiabortion movements. For many who live between these extremes, his writings on discipleship and community have been especially appreciated. There is, it would seem, a Bonhoeffer for everyone.

*The Reluctant Revolutionary*, written by John Moses, a historian of modern Germany, explores the Bonhoeffer behind the legend, providing an important tonic to the Rorschach-like use of Bonhoeffer's legacy. Moses places Bonhoeffer in a historical context that stretches from the time of Bismarck in the late 19th century through the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.

It is possible to find many different Bonhoeffers because Bonhoeffer was both a product of his culture and a rebel against it. To understand him, we must understand the Lutheranism that formed him theologically, as well as the political ideologies of his age. These stemmed from Luther's two-kingdoms doctrine and the Hegelian doctrines of the power state and the world spirit. Together, these ideologies insisted that the state was divinely ordained and should not be resisted, that the German people and culture were superior to others because they embodied Hegel's world spirit, and that it was the German responsibility to spread this superior German culture to their lesser neighbors—and to impose it by military force if necessary. It was this martial spirit that drove German politics and foreign policy from Bismarck to Hitler, with important support coming from the religious faculties of the German academy, among whom were Bonhoeffer's own teachers. This combination of ideologies formed a strait-jacket that impeded German ability to embrace modern democracy and resist the racism and militarism of the Nazis.

Coupled with the reigning political ideologies was an entrenched anti-Semitism. Even after the German constitution had granted full citizenship to Jews in 1871 (a status that was removed by the Nuremberg Laws of 1935), Jews continued to be cultural outsiders who, in the minds of many, corrupted the purity of German identity. This sensibility was further reinforced by Luther's supersessionist theology of glory. As Moses points out, even those who resisted Hitler's impositions on the church found it difficult to resist his anti-Judaism. Thus, even as bold a statement as

the Barmen Declaration says nothing about the Jewish question.

The book's title, *The Reluctant Revolutionary*, refers to the fact that Bonhoeffer stood almost alone among his peers in extracting himself from this Lutheran-Hegelian straitjacket. He stood so far outside the mainstream of German opinion that even after the war many Germans considered him a traitor to his people. Indeed, it was not until the mid-1950s that the first memorial service was held in Germany for him—and that proved controversial. Immediately after the war, Bonhoeffer's evolving views of Judaism, which were laid out most explicitly in his *Ethics*, made little impact on his colleagues. Yet, as Moses notes, Bonhoeffer's views would prevail over time.

With this most careful telling of Bonhoeffer's story, the reader begins to understand the process by which Bonhoeffer could break free of his context, including ideas of German exceptionalism and the anti-Semitism of the community. This transformation was influenced in part by his travels to Rome and the United States, as well as his ecumenical involvements and his encounters with the theology of Karl Barth. His exposure to worlds outside Germany allowed him to develop a different paradigm for understanding his own culture.

Bonhoeffer was also fortunate to have been born into a family with enlightened views of the Jewish people, and his twin sister married a baptized Jew. Still, even as late as the early 1930s, he continued to share the supersessionism of his fellow German Lutherans. He held out hope for the redemption of the Jewish people but believed it would come only through baptism—a view that was held by most of his Confessing Church colleagues, whose main complaint against Nazi church practices was that they banned baptized Jews from church leadership. By the time Bonhoeffer wrote *Ethics*, however, he had come to see the Jews as the brothers and sisters of the Jewish Jesus, whether or not they had been baptized, and as people against whom the church and German society had sinned. As his own views developed, he came to see the Confessing Church as falling short of the gospel.

Readable and thoughtful, *The Reluctant Revolutionary* makes a helpful contribution to our understanding of a Protestant saint. What is unique is the contextual breadth of this telling of Bonhoeffer's story. Moses does not try to replicate Eberhard Bethge's biography, but instead provides a historian's view of Bonhoeffer's difficult and reluctant but ultimately revolutionary break from his own theological and cultural context. It would be unfortunate if this contribution were overlooked because it was published by a small independent press. One might quibble at points

with the interpretation or be distracted by the occasional typographic error, but Moses has provided us with an important new vantage point for understanding and appreciating the witness of Bonhoeffer's life and work.