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The Nazi Persecution of the "Jehovah's Witnesses", 1933-1945

Jehovah's Witnesses endured intense persecution under the Nazi regime. Actions against the religious group and its individual members spanned the Nazi years 1933 to 1945. Unlike Jews and Sinti and Roma "Gypsies", persecuted and killed by virtue of their birth, Jehovah's Witnesses had the opportunity to escape persecution and personal harm by renouncing their religious beliefs. The courage the vast majority displayed in refusing to do so, in the face of torture, maltreatment in concentration camps, and sometimes execution, won them the respect of many contemporaries.

Founded in the United States in the 1870s, the Jehovah's Witnesses organization sent missionaries to Germany to seek converts in the 1890s. By the early 1930s, only 20,000 (of a total population of 65 million) Germans were Jehovah's Witnesses, usually known at the time as "International Bible Students."

Even before 1933, despite their small numbers, door-to-door preaching and the identification of Jehovah's Witnesses as heretics by the mainstream Protestant and Catholic churches made them few friends. Individual German states and local authorities periodically sought to limit the group's proselytizing activities with charges of illegal peddling. There were also outright bans on Jehovah's Witnesses' religious literature, which included the booklets *The Watch Tower* and *The Golden Age*. The courts, by contrast, often ruled in favor of the religious minority. Meanwhile, in the early 1930s, Nazi brown shirted storm troopers, acting outside the law, broke up Bible study meetings and beat up, individual Witnesses.

After the Nazis came to power, persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses intensified. Small as the movement was, it offered, in scholar Christine King's words, a "rival ideology" and "rival center of loyalty" to the Nazi movement. Although honest and as law-abiding as

their religious beliefs allowed, Jehovah's Witnesses saw themselves as citizens of Jehovah's Kingdom; they refused to swear allegiance to any worldly government. They were not pacifists, but as soldiers in Jehovah's army, they would not bear arms for any nation.

In April 1933, four months after Hitler became chancellor, Jehovah's Witnesses were banned in Bavaria and by the summer in most of Germany. Twice during 1933, police occupied the Witnesses' offices and their printing site in Magdeburg and confiscated religious literature. Witnesses defied Nazi prohibitions by continuing to meet and distribute their literature often covertly. Copies were made from booklets smuggled in mainly from Switzerland.

From 1935 onward, Jehovah's Witnesses faced a Nazi campaign of nearly total persecution. In 1935 some 400 Jehovah's Witnesses were imprisoned at Sachsenhausen concentration camp. In 1936 a special unit of the Gestapo (Secret State Police) began compiling a registry of all persons believed to be Jehovah's Witnesses, and agents infiltrated Bible study meetings. By 1939, an estimated 6,000 Witnesses (including those from incorporated Austria and Czechoslovakia) were detained in prisons or camps. Some Witnesses were tortured by police in attempts to make them sign a declaration / renouncing their faith, but few capitulated.

In response to Nazi efforts to destroy them, the worldwide Jehovah's Witness organization became a center of spiritual resistance against the Nazis. After 1939 most active Jehovah's Witnesses were incarcerated in prisons or concentration camps. Some had fled Germany. In the camps, all prisoners wore markings of various shapes and colors so that guards and camp officers could identify them by category. Witnesses were marked by purple triangular patches. Even in the camps, they continued to meet, pray, and make converts. In Buchenwald concentration camp, they set up an underground printing press and distributed religious tracts.

According to Rudolf Hoess, Commandant of Auschwitz, SS Chief Heinrich Himmler often used the "fanatical faith" of Jehovah's Witnesses as an example to his own SS troops. In his view, SS men had to have the same "unshakable faith" in the National Socialist ideal and in Adolf Hitler that the Witnesses had in Jehovah. Only when all SS men believed as fanatically in their own philosophy would Adolf Hitler's state be permanently secure. In the Nazi years, about 10,000 Witnesses were imprisoned in concentration camps, most of them of German nationality. After 1939, small numbers of Witnesses from Austria, Belgium, Czechoslovakia, the Netherlands, Norway, and Poland (some of them refugees from Germany) were arrested and deported to Dachau, Bergen-Belsen, Buchenwald, Sachsenhausen, Ravensbrueck, Auschwitz, Mauthausen, and other concentration

camps. An estimated 2,500 to 5,000 Witnesses died in the camps or prisons. More than 200 men were tried by the German War Court and executed for refusing military service.

In my thesis I intend to analyze the changing and unchanging patterns which occurred and adjusted during the Nazi regime and after among the Jehova's Witnesses organization. In further researching, I will emphasis the power of a strong belief over the will to stay alive without the pride of your faith, and according to the choice the believers had made, I will analyze the consequences.