

Dahlem or Barmen?

The spark that ignited the Confessing Church in Germany

The Confessing Church of Germany was a reactionary group that formed in response to the Nazi rise to power in 1933. Throughout the year 1934, tensions escalated between the pro-Nazi German Christian movement and the Confessing Church. This culminated in the Barmen Synod of May 1934 and the Dahlem Synod of October 1934. At the Barmen Synod Karl Barth penned the Barmen Declaration, an influential document that proclaimed the loyalty of Confessing Church members to the Word of God alone rather than the dictates of the Nazi government. The attendees of the Dahlem Synod approved the document of focus, *The Declaration of Independence from the Nazi State*, to further assert their rejection of Nazi authority in the Protestant Church. They were German Protestant Church leaders and pastors who were selected through a vote by the confessing congregations, or the ones that subscribed to the Barmen Declaration.¹ These people primarily opposed to Nazi authority within the church, but were not necessarily anti-Nazi in matters outside of the Protestant Church. The synods at Barmen and Dahlem would presumably be linked closely in any historical recollection of the Confessing Church, especially considering they were the first two meetings held by the organization. However, this is not generally the case as different authors appear to favor either the Barmen Declaration at the Barmen Synod or the *Declaration of Independence from the Nazi State* at the Dahlem Synod as the defining document that truly separated the Confessing Church from the rest of the German Protestant Church. It is unusual that each author seemed to ignore a key portion of history when they wrote their narratives on the Confessing Church through either the absence or downplaying of one of the Synods while focusing entirely on the other. This was reasonably justified in some cases such as

¹ Wikipedia contributors, "Prussian Union of Churches," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Prussian_Union_of_Churches&oldid=885452868 (accessed March 20, 2019)

with the biographies, which focus more on an individual rather than the overarching story of the Confessing Church. However, it still was unnecessary for multiple authors to champion the Barmen Synod without even acknowledging the Dahlem Synod or its importance to the Confessing Church movement and vice versa.

Annotated Bibliography in Chronological Order

- *Kirchliches Jahrbuch 1933-1944* (Gütersloh 1948) p. 70.²
The original source of the *Declaration of Independence from the Nazi State* taken from Robert Moeller's work *The Nazi State and German Society* is found in a Church Yearbook. The only copy available in the United States according to a WorldCat search of "Kirchliches Jahrbuch 1933-1944" is at the Princeton Theological Seminary. This document was created in October 1934 at a Synod of the German Confessing Church in Dahlem. The participants at the Synod rejected the notion of a unified German Protestant Church effectively under the boot of the Nazi Reich, so they officially declared a schism between themselves and the German Christians, who were much more in line with Nazi policies, with this document.
- Aus der Botschaft der Dahlemer Bekenntnissynode III und IV, *Kirchliches Jahrbuch, 1933-1945*. Gütersloh, 1948, p. 77. Gütersloher Verlagshaus, Gütersloh, in der Verlagsgruppe Random House GmbH, München
The original German text for the *Declaration of Independence from the Nazi State* presented on the GHDI website has several noticeable discrepancies from the version in *The Nazi State and German Society*. For one, the date in Moeller's work is October 21, 1934 while that listed on GHDI is October 20 of that year. This is likely explained by the fact that GHDI references a different source than what the source of the source of Moeller's work did. Thus there appears to be some disagreement on when exactly this document was made. Furthermore, the English translation of the GHDI title is different from *The Declaration of Independence from the Nazi State* provided in Moeller. A Google translation of the GHDI

² From Moeller: From Jeremy Noakes and Geoffrey Pridham, eds., *Nazism, 1919-1945: A Documentary Reader*, vol. 2, *State, Economy, and Society, 1933-1939* (Exeter, U.K.: University of Exeter Press, 2000), 39

German title is *The Confessing Church: Excerpt from the Declaration of the Second Confessional Synod of the German Protestant Church in Berlin-Dahlem*.

Of course it is very possible Moeller decided to shorten the source's title in writing *The Nazi State and German Society*. However what seems more plausible is that this is another manifestation of the difference in the original sources between Moeller and GHDI.

- Barth, Karl. *The German Church Conflict*. Translated by P.T.A. Parker. Lutterworth Press, 1965.

This translation of Karl Barth's personal account of the conflict between members of the Protestant Church and the Nazi Reich is very revealing of the motivations that drove the eventual formation of the Confessing Church. In particular, Karl Barth's understanding of the Gospel, which was presented through the Declaration of Barmen, asserted that "Jesus Christ, as witnessed by the Scripture, is the one Word of God which we hear and obey and in which we trust in life and death" while rejecting the heresy of paganism and Nazi ideology (Parker 1956, 10). Barth acknowledges in this work how influential the decisions made at both the Barmen and Dahlem Synods were to the Confessing Church, but does not go into any details about Dahlem. This would imply that Barth was not heavily involved in the Dahlem Synod, especially compared to the Barmen Synod at which he drafted the Declaration of Barmen.

- Parker, T.H.L. *Karl Barth*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1970.
As mentioned in Noakes and Pridham, the Confessing Church created the Pastors' Emergency League that eventually led to the drafting of the Protestant *Declaration of Independence from the Nazi State*. In his book, Parker elaborates on how Karl Barth, who principally created the Barmen Declaration in May 1934, saw his role shift from a theological thinker to a more openly political stance as the Confessing Church distanced itself increasingly from the Nazi state. The actual independence declaration document is unfortunately not referenced in this work as it is made clear that Karl Barth's greatest contribution to the Confessing Church cause was the aforementioned Barmen Declaration. Although the *Declaration of Independence from the Nazi State* was an important step to the Confessing Church,

it was ignored in this book because it just wasn't relevant enough to a biographical account of Karl Barth.

- Baranowski, Shelley. *The Confessing Church, Conservative Elites, and the Nazi State*.

The Edwin Mellen Press, 1986.

Curiously, Baranowski does not even specifically refer to the *Declaration of Independence from the Nazi State* in her work. In fact, the author emphasizes that the Barmen Declaration, created by Karl Barth, was by far the most influential document to the creation of the Confessing Church. If anything, Baranowski glosses over the time period of the fall of 1934 during which the independence declaration was made and only sparingly mentions that the Confessing Church forced an end to the proposition of a unified German Christian Church in the fall of 1934 when the Dahlem Synod took place.

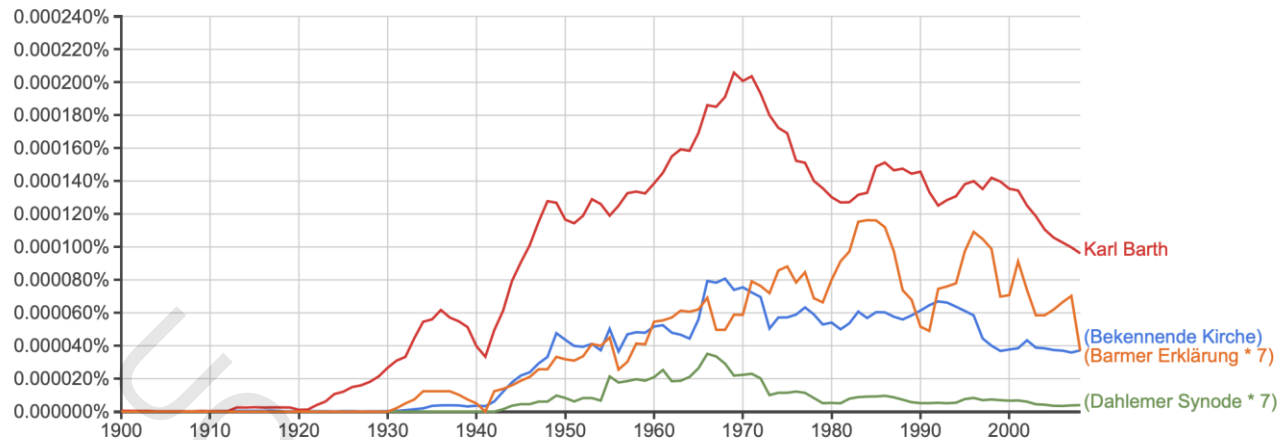
- Bergen, Doris L. *Twisted Cross: The German Christian Movement in the Third Reich* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996.

Bergen does not specifically cite the *Declaration of Independence from the Nazi State*, but merely discusses the “national synods in 1934, 1935, and 1936” (Bergen 1996, 12). The 1934 synod in particular is the one at which the Declaration was made. It is somewhat unclear though as the influential church leader, Karl Barth, helped to lead the Barmen Synod earlier in May 1934.

- Niemöller, Wilhelm. *Wort und Tat im Kirchenkampf*. Chr. Kaiser Verlag München 1996.

Through translations of sections of this book, it was made clear that the Dahlem Synod in general was largely a progression of the ideas that had been developed by the Barmen Synod and implicitly, the Barmen Declaration of May 1934. This corroborates well with Baranowski's *The Confessing Church*.

Additionally, it appeared that the Nazi state may have been attempting to disrupt the Dahlem Synod by ordering important church officials to meet with the government at inopportune times, forcing the session time to be pushed back. However, this did not stop the most critical participants from attending the October 20 through 21 Dahlem Synod. The author references a memorandum written in



1942 that asserts how the Dahlem and Barmer Synods were still influential eight years after the fact and that the Confessing Church, although less united than they had been previously, was still fighting to earn official recognition in the eyes of the Nazi Reich.

- Noakes, Jeremy and Pridham, Geoffrey. *1919-1945: A Documentary Reader*. Exeter, UK University of Exeter Press, 1998.

The physical copy of this work is available at the University of Wisconsin Madison.³ From the physically available passages of this edition of Noakes and Pridham, an English translation of the original declaration made at Dahlem is presented preceded by commentary on the events leading up to October of 1934. Intriguingly, Noakes and Pridham mention Karl Barth having an impact on the creation of the Confessing Church, but fail to mention the Barmer Synod held in May 1934 as well the accompanying *Barmer Declaration* that Barth wrote. The authors appear to disagree with the other works in this exploration that are more central to Karl Barth. They assert that while Barth was a very influential figure whose actions ultimately led to Church leaders meeting in Dahlem, his *Barmer Declaration* had a lesser impact than the source that they present, the *Declaration of Independence from the Nazi State*.

- Jean-Baptiste Michel, Yuan Kui Shen, Aviva Presser Aiden, Adrian Veres, Matthew K. Gray, William Brockman, The Google Books Team, Joseph P. Pickett, Dale Hoiberg, Dan Clancy, Peter Norvig, Jon Orwant, Steven Pinker, Martin A. Nowak,

³ See: <https://search.library.wisc.edu/catalog/999915591402121>

and Erez Lieberman Aiden*. *Quantitative Analysis of Culture Using Millions of Digitized Books*. 2010.

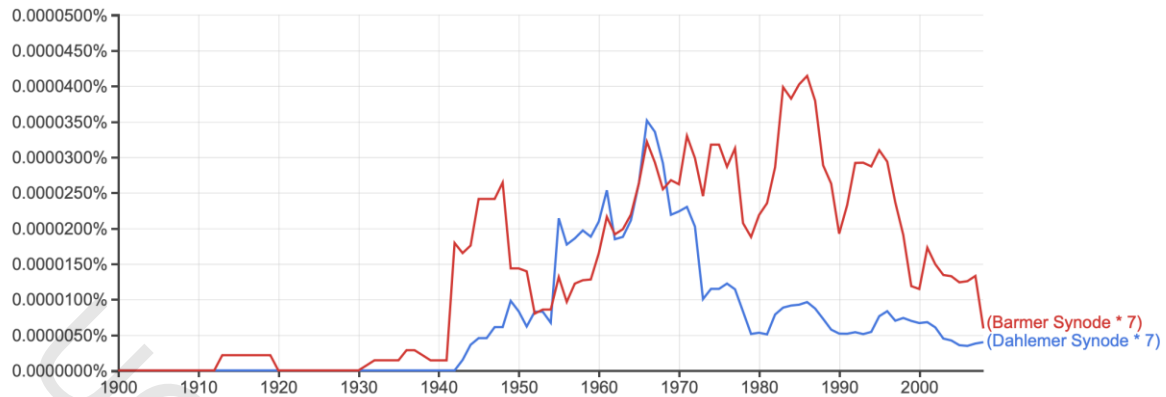
Google Books Ngram Viewer displayed some trends that reasonably coincide with the research done in this paper.⁴ This search was conducted using some key German language words. Several copies of Karl Barth's work or other books containing his name were obtained for this project, with publication ranges from the 1950s to the 1970s, so it makes sense that Barth's name would be displayed most prominently by the Ngram results during this time period. The Barmer Declaration, German Barmer Erklärung, spiked in usage during the 1930s as expected since the actual document was created in May 1934. Similarly, the Confessing Church, German Bekennende Kirche, grows slightly in usage during the 1930s, then begins following a very similar trend to the Barmer Declaration, reflecting how these two terms likely coincide heavily with one another, especially in German texts. The Dahlem Synod, Dahlemer Synode in German, did not show up very much until the late 1950s and 1960s. Research in this paper has shown that some works pertaining to the Confessing Church tend to at least mildly overlook what took place at Dahlem, and the low usage of the German phrase for this event appears to confirm the relative disregard it is shown by authors. In another search comparing the frequency of Dahlemer Synode to Barmer Synode, it is apparent that while the two phrases appear at approximately the same rate for two decades of time, overall the Barmer Synode shows up in a much higher prevalence after 1970 than the Dahlemer Synode.⁵ This further confirms that at least in German texts, the Barman Synod is considered far and away the more influential of the two Confessing Church meetings.

⁴ The link to the exact Ngram search conducted is:

https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=%28Bekennende+Kirche%29%2CKarl+Barth%2C%28Dahlemer+Synode%29%2C%28Barmer+Erklärung%29%29&year_start=1900&year_end=2008&corpus=8&smoothing=3&share=&direct_url=t1%3B%2C%28Bekennende%20Kirche%29%3B%2Cc0%3B.t1%3B%2CKarl%20Barth%3B%2Cc0%3B.t1%3B%2C%28Dahlemer%20Synode%20%2A%207%29%3B%2Cc0%3B.t1%3B%2C%28Barmer%20Erklärung%20%2A%207%29%3B%2Cc0#

⁵ The link to the Ngram search conducted is:

[https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=%28Dahlemer+Synode%29%2C%28Barmer+Synode%29%29&year_start=1900&year_end=2008&corpus=8&smoothing=3&share=&direct_url=t1%3B%2C%28Dahlemer%20Synode%20%2A%207%29%3B%2Cc0%3B.t1%3B%2C%28Barmer%20Synode%20%2A%207%29%3B%2Cc0#t1%3B%2C\(Dahlemer%20Synode%20%2A%207\)%3B%2Cc0%3B.t1%3B%2C\(Barmer%20Synode%20%2A%207\)%3B%2Cc0](https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=%28Dahlemer+Synode%29%2C%28Barmer+Synode%29%29&year_start=1900&year_end=2008&corpus=8&smoothing=3&share=&direct_url=t1%3B%2C%28Dahlemer%20Synode%20%2A%207%29%3B%2Cc0%3B.t1%3B%2C%28Barmer%20Synode%20%2A%207%29%3B%2Cc0#t1%3B%2C(Dahlemer%20Synode%20%2A%207)%3B%2Cc0%3B.t1%3B%2C(Barmer%20Synode%20%2A%207)%3B%2Cc0)



- German History in Documents and Images. “The Confessing Church: Excerpt from the Declaration of the Second Confessing Synod of the German Protestant Church in Berlin-Dahlem (October 20, 1934).” GHDI.org. http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=1569 (accessed March 7, 2019).
GHDI in its narrative prior to the actual document created at the Dahlem Synod states that it was a vital document that directly challenged the authority of the Nazi state. Although a history of Hitler’s attempt to control the German Protestant Church is provided, there is no mention of the Barmen Declaration or the Barmen Synod.