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Hist 133B

Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Importance of *Widerstand und Ergebung*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German Protestant theologian who was born in Breslau, Germany on February 4, 1906 (Sherman). At a young age, no one expected Bonhoeffer to end up in the church due to his musical talent (“Biography”). He had a few people in his family who would be considered “churchmen”, but not nearly enough influence to overshadow his possible professional music career. After choosing to be a theologian and a minister at the age of 14, he was met with heavy resistance from his older brother who told him that religion would be a distraction in the current fight for human rights, which was during World War 1 (“Biography”). Choosing to pursue a career in religion at this time in history is a big demonstration of the type of man Bonhoeffer was, even in his early stages of life. He was simply trying to understand the world around him and do what he felt right and necessary. He explains this concept better in his own work by saying that the “ultimately responsible question is not how I extricate myself heroically from a situation, but [how] a coming generation is to go on living” (*Letters and Papers from Prison).* There was no money or glory ahead on his path, but he still felt compelled enough to fight for what he believed was the right side of history.

Another important man to note is Eberhard Bethge. His name is found next to Bonhoeffer’s on nearly every book edition as an editor as well as on the original text. He met Bonhoeffer after attending one of his seminars and became his close friend as well as a confidant during an era where trust was at an all-time low (Feil). Bethge had the same fighting spirit that Bonhoeffer did, as he was arrested for an attempted assassination of Adolf Hitler on July 20, 1944, but was rescued by Soviets before his trial. He is the man that can be credited with compiling and editing the writings of Bonhoeffer.

The first publishing of the book *Widerstand und Ergebung* was in 1951 by München: C. Kaiser. There is not much to be found other than books published under the same name when looking for more information about C. Kaiser, but it does seem to be a popular publisher. This work, or collection of works, has been published and edited dozens of times and is readily available in a variety of languages. When looking strictly through the UCSB library database, there are 22 different editions of *Widerstand und Ergebung* in just German and English alone with the results split relatively evenly. There was also a Spanish and a French translation, but most of the other translations that came up only mentioned the work partially, not a direct translation. These works tackled the theoretical concepts Bonhoeffer discusses in a broader sense, which were also presented in Chinese and Italian. When looking at goodreads.com, there were 131 editions available of Letters and Papers from Prison in a variety of different mediums and languages which included some less popular dialects like Icelandic. There are also numerous enlarged editions of the text which include extra personal letters as well as theological reflections, according to a review of the text (Letters and Papers from Prison). Some of the most notable translations are the French translation in 1957 and the English translation in 1953. This is due to the speed at which the translations came out. There are thousands of German books that were written shortly after World War 2, but there was a need to get this one translated and spread to the masses at an accelerated rate. But why is that? The other most notable translation comes from 1967 and according to John Godsey, who was an American theologian, it was so many levels above the previous editions, that all others ought to be burned (Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 8). Although this may be hyperbolic speech, it also serves as an indicator of the shear amount of effort that has gone into collecting, editing, and distributing Bonhoeffer’s words, over 20 years after he was killed.

The work in totality, Letters and Papers from Prison, is a collection of letters and reflections during Bonhoeffer’s time in prison from 1943 to 1945. The reason that this book is so revolutionary and sought after is because it applies religion during a time where it was absent in a national sense. Yes, there were many people who said they were religious during World War Two, but it would be very hard for any person during that time to say that they were strong believers or acted in accordance with their beliefs in a world that looked so evil. There was a fight for survival and to stand on your beliefs to the point of execution is something that is very rare in history and demonstrates why there was such a demand for this book. If the author was willing to die for what he wrote in there, it must be worth indulging.

With regards to discrepancies, there have not been any of notable significance. Most reviews of the book have an immense amount of respect for Bonhoeffer and his work. The negative reviews seemingly come from the comparisons of different editions of the book. Some find the extended edition of the book boring as it includes more material that can be tiresome to read as it does not have the importance or significance that the original letters from the first publication do. The extended editions of this work tend to include letters that were not originally accessible in the first edition of the work as a means of providing greater context and clarity to Bonhoeffer and his experiences. There was not a way to get access to the original English translation, but in terms of structure, the book is put into parts based on when the letters were written. The eighth volume,1st edition of *Letters and Papers from Prison*, written in 2010, has four parts. His interrogation starting in 1943, awaiting his trial from August 1943 to April 1944, holding out for the coup attempt, which lasted until July of 1944, and the final part being what happened after the failed coup until February of 1945. The part where the different editions vary is between how many letters are in each part as well as some having an introduction to contextualize what is about to be read. This has been the formula from the beginning as there were various reasons, both personal to Bethge as well as publishing concerns, to withhold some of the material (Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 8). The end product they were seemingly trying for was a perfect blend of content and context, so that it could be appreciated by the widest audience possible without leaving out important information or boring the reader.

One of the biggest contributions that this work had to the rest of the world was the concept of Religionless Christianity. This idea is revolutionary in terms of the Christian faith at the time because the main focus of religion was to determine what happened after you die. Bonhoeffer turned this idea on its head and said that religion is not about dying, but rather bringing about a way of living and “being for others” as reviewed by Schnekloth, in *Christian Century* (Hooten). Bonhoeffer may not be the first person to have this thought, but he was able to write it down and he allowed it to be distributed for mass consumption. The reason this book was translated so many times and republished was because it raised a very important concept in the Christian faith that has been forgotten and corrupted. Living virtuously for other people in the present, not fighting for a future spot in heaven. All of human history shows religious bouts over who thinks they are right about getting to the promised land. But Bonhoeffer said that everyone has their priorities backwards and that people who call themselves Christians need to start living like the faith they pretend to represent.

**Bibliography in Chronological Order**

* “Biography.” International Bonhoeffer Society, English Language Section, October 22, 2023. https://bonhoeffersociety.org/about/bonhoeffer/biography/.  
  ***This website was used to get various information about Bonhoeffers life. It was compiled using different works on Bonhoeffer as well as various articles and books written about him which helps establish credibility.***
* Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. 2010.*Letters and Papers from Prison: [Front Matter]*, edited by John W. De Gruchy. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press. <https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cdocument%7C4748280>.   
  ***This was the English translation that I used for the structure and basic understanding of his work. It was well labeled and easy to access. It was also nearly 2 times longer than the original publication length (448 vs 776 pages)***
* Feil, Ernst (2011). ["Eberhard Bethge, Freund und Biograph Bonhoeffers und Theologe des Ersten Gebots"](https://www.vrkg.de/images/pdf/jahrbuch/JEKGR60-2011.pdf) (PDF). *Monatshefte für Evangelische Kirchengeschichte des Rheinlandes*. **60**: 345–366.  
  ***This was where the quote was found. It was translated in the biography page but was credited from this specific work.***
* “Letters and Papers from Prison.” Goodreads. Accessed February 25, 2024. https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/760019.Letters\_and\_Papers\_from\_Prison.   
  ***This website was used as a way to find other editions of the book that were not shown in the UCSB library serch or WorldCat. It also allowed you to order editions based on publication and the reviews of each edition are very helpful in distinguishing the differences without reading the full text.***
* HOOTON, P. (2022b). *Bonhoeffers religionless Christianity in its Christological context*. FORTRESS ACADEMIC**. *This is the original work that the review below was based upon***
* Schnekloth, Clint. “In a Secular Age, Bonhoeffer’s ‘Religionless Christianity’ Is Evergreen.” The Christian Century. Accessed February 25, 2024. https://www.christiancentury.org/review/books/secular-age-bonhoeffer-s-religionless-christianity-evergreen.   
  ***This was used to explain the concept of Religionless Christianity as it applies in a broader sense. It helps give context to the time as well as what they believe Bonhoeffer was trying to establish.***
* Sherman, F.. "Dietrich Bonhoeffer." Encyclopedia Britannica, January 31, 2024. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Dietrich-Bonhoeffer>  
  ***This source was also used to find out more biographical information about Bonhoeffer and as way to check for inconsistencies between other sources.***

**Edition List**

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| --- | --- | --- |
| German | English | Other |
| Books:  1951  Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, and Eberhard Bethge. *Widerstand und Ergebung: Briefe und Aufzeichnungen aus der Haft*. [1. Aufl.]. München: C. Kaiser, 1951. Print.  1954  Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, and Eberhard Bethge. *Widerstand und Ergebung: Briefe und Aufzeichnungen aus der Haft*. 6. erweit. Auf. München: Kaiser, 1954. Print.  1959  Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, and Eberhard Bethge. *Widerstand und Ergebung : Briefe und Aufzeichnungen aus der Haft*. 9. Aufl. München: C. Kaiser, 1959. Print.  1962 Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, and Eberhard Bethge. *Widerstand und Ergebung : Briefe und Aufzeichnungen aus der Haft*. München: C. Kaiser, 1962. Print. (Edited by Eberhard Bethge)  1966  Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, and Eberhard Bethge. *Widerstand und Ergebung : Briefe und Aufzeichnungen aus der Haft*. [30., durchgesehene, im Anhang und register erg. Aufl.]. München: C. Kaiser, 1966. Print.  1968 Paperback Edition  Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, and Eberhard Bethge. *Widerstand und Ergebung: Briefe und Aufzeichnungen aus der haft*. Munchen ; Hamburg: Siebenstern Taschenbuch Verlag, 1968.  1970 second expanded edition  Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Widerstand und Ergebung : Briefe und Aufzeichnungen aus der Haft*. Ed. Eberhard Bethge. Neuausgabe. München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1970. Print.  1978  Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, and Eberhard Bethge. *Widerstand und Ergebung : Briefe und Aufzeichnungen aus der Haft*. 10. Aufl. des Taschenbuches. Gütersloh? Gütersloher Verlagshaus, G. Mohn, 1978. Print.  Collection of works 1986-99  Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, and Eberhard Bethge. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke*. München: Chr. Kaiser, 1986. Print.  1998 edition  Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Widerstand und Ergebung : Briefe und Aufzeichnungen aus der Haft*. Ed. Christian Gremmels et al. Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser, 1998. Print.  2011, Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke. Band 8, Widerstand und Ergebung : Briefe und Aufzeichnungen aus der Haft*. Ed. Ilse Tödt et al. 1. Auflage der Taschenbuchausgabe. Gütersloh, Germany: Gütersloher Verlagshause, 2011. Print.  2017  Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Theologische Briefe Aus “Widerstand Und Ergebung.”* Edited by Thorsten Dietz, Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2017. | 1953  Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Letters and Papers from Prison*. London: SCM Press, 1953. Print.  1954  Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Prisoner for God : Letters and Papers from Prison*. Ed. Eberhard Bethge. Trans. Reginald H. (Reginald Horace) Fuller. New York: Macmillan, 1954. Print.  1960  Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Prisoner for God: Letters and Papers from Prison*. Ed. Eberhard Bethge. Trans. Reginald H. Fuller. New York: Macmillan, 1960. Print.  1962 Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Letters and Papers from Prison*. Ed. Eberhard Bethge. New York: Macmillan, 1962. Print.  (English translation of the edit, shows importance)  1965  Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Letters and Papers from Prison*. London: SCM Press, 1965 (Paper Back)  1967  Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Letters and Papers from Prison*. Ed. Eberhard Bethge. 3rd ed. rev. and enl. edition, London: S.C.M. Press, 1967. Print.  1967 Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, and Eberhard Bethge. *Letters and Papers from Prison.* Rev. ed. New York: Macmillan, 1967. Print.  1971 Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Letters and Papers from Prison*. Ed. Eberhard Bethge. Enlarged ed. London: SCM Press, 1971. Print.  1972  Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Letters and Papers from Prison*. Ed. Eberhard Bethge. [First American] enlarged edition. New York: Macmillan, 1972. Print.  2010  Bonhoeffer, Dietrich et al. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works. Vol. 8, Letters and Papers from Prison*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010. Print. | 1957 French  Poulat, Emile. “Bonhoeffer (D.) Widerstand und Ergebung.” 1957: n. pag. 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