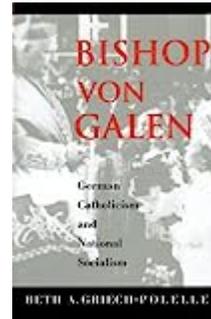




Beth A. Griech-Polelle. *Bishop von Galen: German Catholicism and National Socialism.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002. 259 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-09223-3.



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Catholics and Nazis

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Historians of the Church Struggle in Germany during the Nazi period fall into two categories: those who adopt a prescriptive, and those who follow a descriptive, approach. The former are anxious to avoid the mistakes of the past and to call the Church to a truer and more prophetic discipleship. With all the advantages of hindsight, they seek to improve the past in order to reform the future, especially when dealing with personalities who exercised moral influence. A good example is the recent treatment of Pope Pius XII. The descriptive historians, however, are often too captivated by the actual history so that they choose to overlook alternatives that existed at the time, or ignore those individuals who argued for a different path. They readily enough seek to portray the Church as the victim of events, or allow themselves to believe that the police state was too powerful to be overcome. There is therefore a need to tread a fine line between a critical approach based on today's values and a more defensive tone based on the values prevalent at the time of the narrative. How to gain a sufficient empathy with past events and personalities without falling

into an apologetic stance, or how to shape a critical position without adopting anachronistic or over-idealized criteria, is a demanding feature of the historian's task. And the greater the distance in space and time between the author and the subject, the more this dilemma necessitates a careful balance.

Clemens August Graf von Galen was a member of the Westphalian aristocracy, very conscious of his family's traditional upholding of the political, social, and religious values of this milieu. Its most notable characteristic was the creation of a protective enclave for Catholics, which enabled them, over the centuries, to survive the persecutions and political pressures of their opponents, both Protestant and secular. At the time of von Galen's birth, Bismarck's *Kulturkampf* was at its height. The Catholic determination to resist firmly any encroachments on their values and institutions was part of von Galen's upbringing, and later came to characterize his career as Bishop of Muenster, the citadel of Catholic Westphalia. But the price of this stance was to turn Catholics inwards and to reinforce their sense that only Catholics belonged within their circle of obligation. The conserva-

tive leadership of such men as von Galen lamented the unraveling of the feudal-aristocratic structure of society, as well as the loss of the First World War, and the rise of Communism. The advent of Nazism was at first greeted as promising a restoration of Germany's national greatness. But von Galen, like others, was soon disillusioned and retreated to the Catholic bastion to defend his heritage.

Beth Griech-Polelle has little sympathy for this position. Instead, she believes that the Catholic leadership was to blame for its readiness to come to terms with the Nazi state in the 1933 Concordat, and for its failure to take a more militant defence of the Nazis' victims, especially Jews. In this view, she follows a number of earlier English-speaking historians, going back to Gunter Lewy in 1964. Her indictment is therefore not new; it is argued rather repetitively and with fervor, though it may be unfamiliar to a North American audience.

Von Galen, she believes, along with the rest of the hierarchy, was so hampered by the memory of the *Kulturkampf* that he failed to use his moral authority to address issues beyond those affecting Catholics. In their desperate attempt to preserve Catholic organizations, while maintaining their loyalty to the German state, the bishops failed to defend the rights of all human beings. She describes von Galen's desire to keep Catholic values alive by preserving Catholic institutions as a not very ambitious or creative goal. Moreover, she sees his famous 1941 sermons as self-centered and limited protests, in the face of his continued urging of overall loyalty to the Fatherland and prayer for its victory over Communism. In fact, she claims, on the issue of euthanasia, von Galen carefully waited until the Protestant clergy had protested first.

Such revisionist views about the man widely regarded as the "Lion of Muenster" and the foremost Catholic resister to Nazi tyranny clearly place Griech-Polelle in the category of prescriptive critics. Her view of the Church, as well as its political and moral obligations, would seem to lack a comprehension of the Catholic milieu at the time, and to be drawn from a post-Second Vatican Council stance. But such counter-factual history runs the risk of losing sight of the realities of the situa-

tion in Nazi Germany, where Catholic priests and laity were imprisoned, or even executed, on the flimsiest of pretexts. The "smell of fear" was something none could escape. Von Galen's courageous sermons, delivered in the expectation that he would be arrested immediately, may with hindsight seem insufficient. At the time, coming at the very moment of Hitler's greatest military victories, they were an astounding act of defiance; and they were seen as such by the Nazis.

In Griech-Polelle's view, however, such actions do not compensate for the Bishop's culpable silence on the fate of the Jews, about which he certainly knew. Evidently he did not consider them as being within the circle of Catholic obligation. So too she is critical of von Galen's traditional nationalism and his refusal in 1945 to admit any German guilt for the atrocities committed in the East. Likewise she takes issue with the exaggerated post-war hagiography describing von Galen in super-heroic terms. In her final chapter, the author extends her moralistic criticisms to include Pope Pius XII, joining the recent chorus of those who believe his silence essentially meant collaborating with the Nazis in order to preserve the Church's institutional interests. But her argument is seriously weakened by a mistranslation of one of the Pope's letters, and by her imputation that von Galen was named a Cardinal for following Pius's weak-kneed policies. Von Galen, she states, was not a real resister, but rather practiced only a selective opposition. In her opinion, his failure to build solidarity with other persecuted segments of society left a questionable moral legacy for Catholics.

This case is based on an extensive and well-informed reading of the secondary literature, though apparently without using any new archival sources. Her idealistic expectations of church leaders, and of von Galen in particular, however, may not be shared by all readers. More realistic, perhaps, was the 1945 opinion of a British Foreign Office official, who assessed von Galen as "the most outstanding personality among the clergy in the British zone.... Statuesque in appearance and uncompromising in discussion, this oak-bottomed old aristocrat ... is a German nationalist through and through." This is surely a truer epitaph.

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