

The logo for ResearchOnline@ND, featuring the text "ResearchOnline@ND" in white on a dark blue rectangular background. The "@" symbol is stylized with a red circle around it.

Solidarity: The Journal of Catholic Social Thought and Secular Ethics

Volume 3 | Issue 1

Article 9

2013

Review: The Ultimate Price

Brian Fox

The Graduate Center, City University of New York, bfox23@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <http://researchonline.nd.edu.au/solidarity>
ISSN: 1839-0366

COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA
Copyright Regulations 1969
WARNING

This material has been copied and communicated to you by or on behalf of the University of Notre Dame Australia pursuant to part VB of the Copyright Act 1969 (the Act).

The material in this communication may be subject to copyright under the Act. Any further copying or communication of this material by you may be the subject of copyright protection under the Act.

Do not remove this notice.

Recommended Citation

Fox, Brian (2013) "Review: The Ultimate Price," *Solidarity: The Journal of Catholic Social Thought and Secular Ethics*: Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 9.

Available at: <http://researchonline.nd.edu.au/solidarity/vol3/iss1/9>

This Book Revision is brought to you by ResearchOnline@ND. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Solidarity: The Journal of Catholic Social Thought and Secular Ethics* by an authorized administrator of ResearchOnline@ND. For more information, please contact researchonline@nd.edu.au.



Review: The Ultimate Price

The Ultimate Price

Brian Fox

Annemarie S. Kidder, *Ultimate Price: Testimonies of Christians Who Resisted the Third Reich*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2012. xxix +177 pages, Paperback \$22.00

Although the self-proclaimed “thousand-year Reich” lasted less than a decade and a half (1933-45) the shadow cast by its brutality may attain that exalted age in deserved infamy, as it continues to be a subject of much-needed study both scholarly and popular. Indeed, many somber but important questions are continually being addressed in scholarship on the Nazi Reich, such as: How did the Nazi ideology succeed, was it more a question of brute force and fear?; To what extent were the German people complicit?; and could it happen again, or here? The best contemporary historical scholarship has yielded a narrative which corrected the worst prejudices of the initial “*Sonderweg*” (Peculiar Way) theory which in part suspected the German nation of being socially backwards and culturally pre-modern and thus peculiarly susceptible to control by the Nazis. Such an ideological interpretation now lives on in a degenerate form in the more embarrassing works of popular history, such as the books of Daniel Goldhagen. Rather than atavistic, the brutality of the Nazis and their successful oppression and indoctrination of the populace was made possible mainly by the modern aspects of German life, especially its nationalism, centralized state and bureaucracy, as well as its technological, educational, and media means of destroying subsidiary loci of social authority and power. The work of Christopher Browning, for example, has led to the sobering conclusion that rather than psychologically perverse the Germans who assisted the Nazi regime in its most murderous acts remind us of the wisdom of Dostoyevsky’s insight that “Man can get used to anything . . . the beast!” The decisions Germans faced to go along with the demands of the regime and police state, or to turn inward and try and muddle through passively (inner emigration), or to overtly resist (and in what form and degree) were made by quite typical modern persons not unlike us.

One prominent area where interesting research continues to be made focuses on the search for a resistance to Nazism. The exacting demands of hindsight after tragedy and tyranny have—unsurprisingly—led to little satisfaction over the extent and degree of resistance found; we are left wanting there to have been *more* heroes. Annemarie Kidder tells us, in *Ultimate Price: Testimonies of Christians Who Resisted the Third Reich*, that resistance against the Nazis is understood in the broadest way possible, as “any conscious attempt to stand up against the National Socialist regime.” This spacious definition is due to no particular social or cultural grouping in Germany coming out as exceedingly heroic, with the sole well-known exception of the Jehovah’s Witnesses. Certainly this fuels the debates mentioned above over the relative merits of the German people in general versus those who, with more justice on

their side, stress the insidious and effective means of terroristic and propagandistic control mastered by the Nazis, as well as their success in escalating their criminality in some degree of secrecy and most grotesquely under the cover of war.

One natural place to look for resisters is amongst those of Christian religious belief as indeed the Nazis mythology and ideology was both virulently anti-Semitic and anti-Christian, although it was clearly more surreptitious about the latter bigotry. Yet, we have been living through strange times judging by the focus of many of the popular works shaping public understanding of the sources of Nazi ideology and success. The oddity of popular-level history of the Nazis consists in the longevity of the claim that Nazism represents a form of diseased religious zealotry. This tortured line of reasoning began as an intra-German *Kulturkampf* of the Seventies and Eighties which placed blame for the Nazi tyranny by turns—depending on the tastes of the author—on either Catholicism, Protestantism, or both. Outside of Germany this line of thought has been most prominently seen in the works published as part of the “Pius Wars” focused on the purported lack of adequate response to Nazism provided by Pope Pius XII. Kidder is not completely above taking sides in this culture war, unfortunately, as unjustified blanket claims such as that the “failure of the Catholic hierarchy to confront Hitler left acts of resistance up to individual Catholics, including priests and bishops” (xix). Leaving aside that bishops (such as the three she immediately mentions) are part of the hierarchy just slighted, the evidence of the testimonies she presents suggests the deeply effective and cunning means by which the Nazi Regime prevented many overt confrontations with the Church, and utilized stratagems which made resistance a product of secretive and largely individual efforts. For example, reprisals were often targeted towards the many and the innocent, such as shutting down publishers and arresting their employees after the Encyclical “Mit brennender Sorge” was promulgated on Palm Sunday 1937. The Nazis also propagandized the populace through prosecutions and smear campaigns against priests and nuns for frequently trumped up charges of moral and sexual corruption of the German youth. The latter technique for undermining Church authority by playing on long-lived Protestant and secular prejudices, particularly against the cloistered life, is yet alive and well in the media of many western democracies. Kidder also gives the impression that Catholic Germans were more likely than Protestants to support the Nazi regime although scholarship rather supports the reverse. Thankfully such slights on the part of Kidder are not too egregious or prominent and she is generally ecumenical in claiming that all organized Christian Churches “ignored” Nazi persecution of the Jews and were too obeisant to civil authority. To truly move beyond the fruitless and splenetic popular debates only solid and time-consuming historical and archival research will suffice, a scholarship still largely lacking.

While Kidder’s slim volume and her introduction do not pretend to be a significant work of scholarship it does take a small step in the right direction by presentation of selected extant writings of German Christians who chose to resist. This is a collection of primary documents,

of diary entries, letters from prison, sermons, and extracts of published essays and hymns from seven Christians persecuted by the Nazis for their religiously motivated resistance. Most significantly, while the writings presented of the first four resisters were previously available translated into English, those of the last three are translated and made available for the first time. Kidder presents the following resisters: Dietrich Bonhoeffer, famed Protestant theologian; Franz Jägerstätter, a lay Catholic pacifist and conscientious objector; Alfred Delp, Jesuit priest; Sophie Scholl, Protestant student; Jochen Klepper, Protestant hymnist and novelist; Bernhard Lichtenberg, Provost of Berlin's Catholic Cathedral; and Rupert Mayer, another Jesuit Catholic priest. Each resister is introduced by Kidder and she provides editorial commentary for each writing selection.

Ultimate Price is a fairly ecumenical work both in the theological as well as general sense of the word. For in addition to detailing the actions of four Catholics and three Protestants in an even-handed manner she is also neutral about the various differences in actions and motives from one to another. It is enough that they attributed their actions to their Christian faith; yet, their means of resistance are not seamlessly compatible as regards moral theology. We are presented with the examples of two collaborators with the Kreisau Circle which plotted Hitler's assassination (Bonhoeffer and Delp), alongside a pacifist and conscientious objector (Jägerstätter and arguably Scholl), and a man who chose suicide along with his wife and youngest daughter (Klepper). I am most skeptical about the compatibility of Klepper's choice of suicide and Christian belief, and his own words suggest he was not unaware of the problem: "We know what suicide would mean in our case: three-fold murder, disobedience to God, losing one's patience . . . discarding trust [in God]. . . . But it is not the unforgivable sin against the Holy Spirit" (122). Klepper's diary entries read as those of a deeply confused, yet pious, Christian soul; certainly there was much cause for moral and theological confusion in Germany in the Thirties.

Another fascinating juxtaposition is present in the selection of famous theologian Bonhoeffer's 1929 sermon compared to his writings after the Nazi takeover. The early sermon perfectly suggests the strong draw for so many Weimar intellectuals for the fad of deeply irrational and amoral existentialism. Bonhoeffer goes so far as to claim that the true Nietzschean "Superman" who is "beyond good and evil" is the Christian free from any moral law who acts only because God's will has so led him at that particular moment. Bonhoeffer informed his congregation in 1929 that "There are no actions which are bad in themselves—even murder can be justified" (6) and his sermon reminded this reader of Luther's famous proclamation that "reason is a whore." Faced with real state terror and evil Bonhoeffer's later writings recover a sense of respect for the moral law and are at least somewhat shorn of his early anti-normativist existentialism. It is such insights into the mind of German Christians of the time, in which the true benefit of reading *Ultimate Price* lies.