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# Dietrich Bonhoeffer

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**Dietrich Bonhoeffer** IPA: [ di tr ɕ bo nhøf ] (February 4, 1906 – April 9, 1945) was a **German Lutheran pastor, theologian**, participant in the **German Resistance** movement against **Nazism**, a founding member of the **Confessing Church**. His involvement in plans by members of the **Abwehr** (the German Military Intelligence Office) to **assassinate Adolf Hitler** resulted in his execution. Bonhoeffer was arrested in March 1943, imprisoned, and eventually executed by hanging shortly before the war's end.<sup>[1]</sup>

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## Dietrich Bonhoeffer

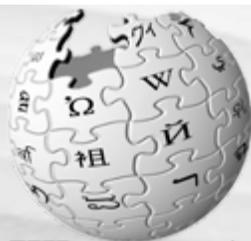


Born	February 4, 1906 <span><span></span></span> <a href="#">Breslau</a>
Died	April 9, 1945 (age 39) <span><span></span></span> <a href="#">Flossenbürg concentration camp</a>
Nationality	<span><span></span></span> <a href="#">German</a>
Education	<a href="#">Doctorate</a> in theology
Occupation	Pastor, professor, theologian
Religious beliefs	<a href="#">Lutheran</a> ( <a href="#">Confessing Church</a> )
Children	(none)
Parents	Karl and Paula Bonhoeffer

## Family and youth

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Bonhoeffer was born in Breslau ([Wrocław](#)). He and his sister [Sabine](#) were twins. His brother [Walter](#) was killed during [World War I](#), while his other brother, [Klaus Bonhoeffer](#), was killed during [World War II](#). His sister married [Hans von Dohnanyi](#) and was the mother of the conductor [Christoph von Dohnanyi](#) and the later mayor of [Hamburg](#), [Klaus von Dohnanyi](#). His father, [Karl Bonhoeffer](#), was a prominent German [psychiatrist](#) in [Berlin](#). His mother, Paula, [home-schooled](#) the children. Though he was expected to follow his father into [psychiatry](#), Bonhoeffer decided to become a theologian and later a pastor. He attended college in [Tübingen](#) and later at the [University of Berlin](#), where he received his [doctorate](#) in theology at the age of 21. As he was under 25, church regulations kept him from being ordained. This gave him an opportunity to go abroad. Bonhoeffer spent a [post-graduate](#) year abroad



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studying at [Union Theological Seminary](#) in [New York City](#). He would often visit the [Abyssinian Baptist Church](#) in [Harlem](#), where he became acquainted with the [African-American spiritual](#). He acquired a collection of spirituals, which he took back to Germany.

## Confessing Church

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Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1932)

After his return from America, Bonhoeffer would play a large role in the Confessing Church. Although Bonhoeffer was originally a [Lutheran](#), he became frustrated with its "liberal theology" after discussions with [Karl Barth](#), an eminent theologian. Barth believed that "liberal theology" (understood as emphasizing personal experience and societal development) minimized Scripture, reducing it to a mere textbook of metaphysics while sanctioning the deification of human culture. Barth and Bonhoeffer often debated rationalist and [Hegelian](#)-derived theology against Reformation doctrine, and Barth won over Bonhoeffer. Although Bonhoeffer

would never totally abandon liberal theology, he did feel it was too constraining and responsible for the lack of relevance in the church. Bonhoeffer and Barth became main figures of the "[neo-orthodox](#)" movement mid-20th century in German- and English-speaking Protestantism.

Bonhoeffer lectured on theology in Berlin and wrote several books. Bonhoeffer, [Martin Niemöller](#), [Karl Barth](#) and others established the [Confessing Church](#). In August 1933, he co-authored the [Bethel Confession](#) with [Hermann Sasse](#) and others. Between 1933 and 1935, he served as pastor of two German-speaking Protestant churches in [London](#): St. Paul's and Sydenham. He traveled to India to study non-violent resistance with [Gandhi](#), and returned to Germany to head a [seminary](#) for [Confessing Church](#) pastors, first in [Finkenwalde](#) and then at the [von Blumenthal](#) estate of [Gross Schlönwitz](#), which was closed at the outbreak of [World War II](#). The [Gestapo](#) first banned him from preaching, then teaching, and finally any kind of public speaking. During this time, Bonhoeffer worked closely with numerous opponents of Adolf Hitler.

## War years

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Bonhoeffer played a key leadership role in the Confessing Church, which openly opposed Adolf Hitler's [Antisemitism](#). He called for church resistance to Hitler's policies towards the [Jews](#). The Confessing Church was not large, but it represented a major source of [Christian](#) opposition to the Nazi government.

In 1939, Bonhoeffer joined a secret group of high-ranking military officers in the [Abwehr](#) ([Military intelligence](#) Office), who planned to end the National Socialist regime by killing Hitler. Bonhoeffer was arrested in April 1943 after money used to help Jews escape to [Switzerland](#) was traced to him. He was charged with [conspiracy](#) and imprisoned in Berlin for a year and a half.

## Imprisonment and execution

[\[edit\]](#)

After the failure of the [July 20 Plot](#) on Hitler's life in 1944 and the discovery of secret documents relating to the conspiracy by the Gestapo in September 1944, Bonhoeffer's connections with the conspirators were discovered. He was transferred from the military prison in Berlin Tegel, where he had been held for 18 months, to the detention cellar of the house prison of the Reich Security Head Office, the Gestapo's high security prison. In February 1945 he was secretly moved to [Buchenwald concentration camp](#), and finally to [Flossenbürg](#).<sup>[2]</sup> On April 4, 1945, the diaries of [Admiral Wilhelm Canaris](#) were discovered and in a rage upon



Flossenbürg concentration camp, Arrestblock-Hof: Memorial to members of German resistance executed on April 9, 1945

reading them Hitler ordered that the conspirators be destroyed.<sup>[3]</sup>

Bonhoeffer was condemned to death on April 8, 1945, by SS judge [Otto Thorbeck](#) at a [drumhead court-martial](#) without witnesses, records of proceedings or a defence in [Flossenbürg concentration camp](#).<sup>[4]</sup> He was executed there by [hanging](#) at dawn on April 9, 1945, just three weeks before the Soviet capture of Berlin and a month before the [capitulation of Nazi Germany](#). Like other executions associated with the [July 20 Plot](#), the execution was brutal. Bonhoeffer was stripped of his clothing, ridiculed by the guards, and led naked into the execution yard. A lack of sufficient gallows to hang the plotters caused Hitler and Nazi propagandist [Josef Goebbels](#) to use meathooks from slaughterhouses to slowly hoist the victim by a noose formed of [piano wire](#).<sup>[5]</sup> Asphyxiation is thought to have taken half an hour.<sup>[6]</sup>

Hanged with Bonhoeffer were fellow conspirators [Admiral Wilhelm Canaris](#), Canaris' deputy [General Hans Oster](#), military jurist General [Karl Sack](#), General Friedrich von Rabenau<sup>[7]</sup>, businessman [Theodor Strünck](#), and [German resistance](#) (anti-Nazi) fighter [Ludwig Gehre](#), Bonhoeffer's brother, [Klaus Bonhoeffer](#), and his brothers-in-law [Hans von Bohmny](#) and [Rüdiger Schleicher](#) were executed elsewhere later in the month.

## Legacy

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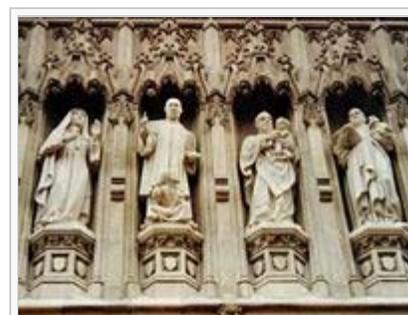
Bonhoeffer is commemorated as a theologian and martyr by the [Evangelical Lutheran Church in America](#), the [Church of England](#) and the [Church in Wales](#).

English translations of Bonhoeffer's works, most of which were originally written in German, are available:

- *The Young Bonhoeffer 1918–1927*. Fortress Press, 2002. ISBN 0-8006-8309-9.

This first volume in the Fortress Press critical edition of Bonhoeffer's work gathers his earliest letters and journals through his graduation from [Berlin University](#). It also contains his early theological writings up to his dissertation. The seventeen essays include works on the patristic period for [Adolf von Harnack](#), on Luther's moods for Karl Holl, on biblical interpretation for Professor Reinhold Seeberg, as well as essays on the church and eschatology, reason and revelation, Job, John, and even joy. Rounding out this picture of Bonhoeffer's nascent theology are his sermons from the period, along with his lectures on homiletics, catechesis, and practical theology.

- *Barcelona, Berlin, New York: 1928–1931*, a translation of *Barcelona, Berlin, Amerika: 1928–1931*. Fortress Press: not yet released.
- *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*. Clifford Green (editor);



Gallery of 20th Century Martyrs at Westminster Abbey. From left, [Mother Elizabeth of Russia](#), [Martin Luther King](#), [Oscar Romero](#) and [Dietrich Bonhoeffer](#)

Reinhard Krauss (translator); Nancy Lukens (translator). Fortress Press, 1998. [ISBN 0-8006-8301-3](#). Bonhoeffer's dissertation, completed in 1927 and first published in 1930 as *Sanctorum Communio: eine Dogmatische Untersuchung zur Soziologie der Kirche*. In it he attempts to work out a theology of the person in society, and particularly in the church. Along with explaining his early positions on sin, evil, solidarity, collective spirit, and [collective guilt](#), it unfolds a systematic theology of the Spirit at work in the church and what it implies for questions on authority, freedom, ritual, and eschatology.

- [Act and Being](#). Clifford Green (editor); Reinhard Krauss (translator); Nancy Lukens (translator). Fortress Press, 1996. [ISBN 0-8006-8302-1](#)

Bonhoeffer's second dissertation, written in 1929–30 and published in 1931 as *Akt und Sein*, deals with the consciousness and conscience in theology from the perspective of the [Reformation's](#) insight into the origin sinfulness in the “heart turned in upon itself and thus open neither to the revelation of God nor to the encounter with the neighbor.” Bonhoeffer's thoughts about power, revelation, Otherness, theological method, and theological anthropology are explained.

- *Ecumenical, Academic and Pastoral Work: 1931–1932*, translation of *Ökumene, Universität, Pfarramt: 1931–1932*. Fortress Press: not yet released.
- *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1–3*. John W. de Gruchy (Editor); Douglas Stephen Bax (Translator). Fortress Press, November 20, 1997. [ISBN 0-8006-8303-X](#).

*Creation and Fall*, lectures given at the University of Berlin in 1932–33 during the demise of the [Weimar Republic](#) and the birth of the [Third Reich](#). In a book published in 1933 as *Schöpfung und Fall*, Bonhoeffer called his students to focus their attention on the word of God the word of truth in a time of turmoil.

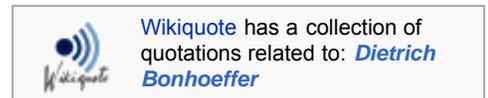
- *Christology* (1966) London: William Collins and New York: Harper and Row. Translation of lectures given in Berlin in 1933, from vol. 3 of *Gesammelte Schriften*, Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1960. retitled as *Christ the Center*, Harper San Francisco 1978 paperback: [ISBN 0-06-060811-0](#)
- *London: 1933–1935*, translation of *London: 1933–1935*. Fortress Press: not yet released.
- *The Cost of Discipleship* (1948 in English). Touchstone edition with introduction by [Bishop George Bell](#) and memoir by G. Leibholz, 1995 paperback: [ISBN 0-684-81500-1](#). Critical edition published under its original title *Discipleship*: John D. Godsey (editor); Geoffrey B. Kelly (editor). Fortress Press, 2000. [ISBN 0-8006-8324-2](#)

Bonhoeffer's most widely read book begins, "Cheap grace is the mortal enemy of our church. Our struggle today is for costly grace." That was a sharp warning to his own church, which was engaged in bitter conflict with the official nazified state church, The book was first published in 1937 as *Nachfolge* (Discipleship). It soon became a classic exposition of what it means to follow Christ in a modern world beset by a dangerous and criminal government. At its center stands an interpretation of the [Sermon on the Mount](#): what Jesus demanded of his followers—and how the life of discipleship is to be continued in all ages of the post- resurrection church.

- *Theological Education at Finkenwalde: 1935–1937*, translation of *Illegale Theologenausbildung: 1935–1937*. Fortress Press: not yet released.
- *Theological Education Underground: 1937–1940*, translation of *Illegale Theologenausbildung: 1937–1940*. Fortress Press: not yet released.
- *Life Together and Prayerbook of the Bible* James H. Burtness (coauthor); Geoffrey B. Kelly (editor); Daniel W. Bloesch (translator). Fortress Press: 1995. [ISBN 0-8006-8305-6](#).

- The stimulus for the writing of *Life Together* was the closing of the preacher's seminary at Finkenwalde. The treatise contains Bonhoeffer's thoughts about the nature of Christian community based on the common life that he and his seminarians experienced at the seminary and in the “Brother's House” there. *Life Together* was completed in 1938, published in 1939 as *Gemeinsames Leben*, and first translated into English in 1954. Harper San Francisco 1978 paperback: [ISBN 0-06-060852-8](#)

- *Prayerbook of the Bible* is a classic of Christian spirituality. In this theological interpretation of the Psalms, Bonhoeffer describes the moods of an individual's relationship with God and also the turns of love and heartbreak, of joy and sorrow, that are themselves the Christian community's path to God.
- *Ethics* (1955 in English by SCM Press). Touchstone edition, 1995 paperback: [ISBN 0-684-81501-X](#). Fortress Press 2004 critical edition: Clifford Green (editor); Reinhard Krauss (translator); Douglas W. Stott (translator); Charles C. West (translator). [ISBN 0-8006-8306-4](#).  
Written in prison and published in 1943 as *Ethik*, this is the culmination of Bonhoeffer's theological and personal odyssey. Based on careful reconstruction of the manuscripts, freshly and expertly translated and annotated, the critical edition features an insightful introduction by Clifford Green and an afterword from the German edition's editors. Though caught up in the vortex of momentous forces in the Nazi period, Bonhoeffer systematically envisioned a radically Christocentric, incarnational ethic for a post-war world, purposefully recasting Christians' relation to history, politics, and public life.
- *Fiction from Tegel Prison* Clifford Green (editor); Nancy Lukens (translator). Fortress Press: 1999. [ISBN 0-8006-8307-2](#).  
Writing fiction—an incomplete drama, a novel fragment, and a short story—occupied much of Bonhoeffer's first year in Tegel prison, as well as writing to his family and his fiancée and dealing with his interrogation. "There is a good deal of autobiography mixed in with it," he explained to his friend and biographer Eberhard Bethge. Richly annotated by German editors Renate Bethge and Ilse Todt and by Clifford Green, the writings in this book disclose a great deal of Bonhoeffer's family context, social world, and cultural milieu. Events from his life are recounted in a way that illuminates his theology. Characters and situations that represent Nazi types and attitudes became a form of social criticism and help to explain Bonhoeffer's participation in the resistance movement and the plot to kill Hitler.
- *Letters and Papers from Prison*  (first English translation 1953 by SCM Press). This edition translated by Reginald H. Fuller and Frank Clark from *Widerstand und Ergebung: Briefe und Aufzeichnungen aus der Haft*. Munich: Christian Kaiser Verlag (1970). Touchstone 1997 paperback: [ISBN 0-684-83827-3](#)
- *Conspiracy and Imprisonment 1940–1945* Mark Brocker (editor). Fortress Press: 2006. [ISBN 0-8006-8316-1](#)  
In hundreds of letters, including letters written to his fiancée, Maria von Wedemeyer (selected from the complete correspondence, previously published as "Love Letters from Cell 92" Ruth-Alice von Bismarck and Ulrich Kabitz (editors), Abingdon Press (April 1995) [ISBN 0-687-01098-5](#)), as well as official documents, short original pieces, and a few final sermons, the volume sheds light on Bonhoeffer's active resistance to and increasing involvement in the conspiracy against the Hitler regime, his arrest, and his long imprisonment. Finally, Bonhoeffer's many exchanges with his family, fiancée, and closest friends, demonstrate the affection and solidarity that accompanied Bonhoeffer to his prison cell, concentration camp, and eventual death.
- *A Testament to Freedom: The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (1990). Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson, editors. Harper SanFrancisco 1995 2nd edition, paperback: [ISBN 0-06-064214-9](#)



## Works about Bonhoeffer

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### Books

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### Non-fiction

[[edit](#)]

- Gillian Court, *Heart of Flesh: Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a study in Christian prophecy* (Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, 2007). ISBN 0-85169-330-x
- Keith Clements, *Bonhoeffer and Britain* (Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, 2006). ISBN 0 85169 307 5
- Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Theologian, Christian, Man for His Times: A Biography* Rev. ed. (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2000).
- Stephen R. Haynes, *The Bonhoeffer Legacy: Post-Holocaust Perspectives* (Fortress Press, 2006). ISBN 0-8006-3815-8.
- Stephen Plant, *Bonhoeffer* (Continuum International Publishing, 2004). ISBN 0-8264-5089-X.
- Edwin Robertson, *Bonhoeffer's Legacy: The Christian Way in a World Without Religion* (Collier Books, 1989). ISBN 0-02-036372-9.
- Edwin Robertson, *The Shame and the Sacrifice: The life and teaching of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1987). ISBN 0-340-41063-9.
- Dallas M. Roark, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Makers of the Modern Theological Mind*. (Word Publishing Group, 1972) ISBN 0849929768
- Audrey Constant, *No Compromise: The story of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* Faith in action series. ISBN 0 08-029272-0 (non net) ISBN 0 08-029273-9 (net)

## Fiction

[edit]

- Denise Giardina, *Saints and Villains* (Ballantine Books, 1999). ISBN 0-449-00427-9. A Fictional Account of Bonhoeffer's life.
- Mary Glazener, *The Cup of Wrath: A Novel Based on Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Resistance to Hitler* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 1996). ISBN 1-57312-019-7.
- George Mackay Brown, *Magnus* (Hogarth Press, 1973). A novel in which the imprisoned 10th century Orcadian saint Magnus Erlendsson is transformed into Bonhoeffer.

## Films

[edit]

- *Bonhoeffer* — Martin Doblmeier, 2005
- *Bonhoeffer: Agent of Grace* (2000) at the Internet Movie Database Eric Till, PBS, 2000
- *Hanged on a Twisted Cross* (1996) at the Internet Movie Database T.N. Mohan, 1996
- *A View From The Underside — The Legacy of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* - Al Staggs, 1992
- *The Restless Conscience* Hava Kohav Beller, (USA 1991)

## Plays

[edit]

- *Bonhoeffer* - a Finnish monologue play written and performed by Timo Kankainen and directed by Eija-Irmeli Lahti, premiered in January 2008 at the Seinäjoki city theatre.

## Audio Drama

[edit]

*Focus on the Family Radio Theatre* created an audio drama on the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer in 1997.<sup>[8]</sup> Titled "Bonhoeffer: The Cost of Freedom", this three-hour series was highly acclaimed and received a Peabody award for broadcast excellence in 1998. (Tyndale, 1997, 1999, 2007)

## Verse about Bonhoeffer

[edit]

- "Friday's child" by W. H. Auden, 1958

## Opera

[edit]

- *Bonhoeffer* Ann Gebuhr, 2000

Cited in Lopez-Rodriguez v. Holder  
No. 06-70868 archived on April 3, 2009

## Art (Iconography)

[edit]

- "Dietrich Bonhoeffer"  Lewis Williams, 2003

## References

[edit]

- ↑ "Dietrich Bonhoeffer Biography" . Retrieved on 2008-05-03.
- ↑ Photographs of the Flossenbürg concentration camp in April 1945 are available at <http://canaris.fotopic.net/p47455018.html> , <http://canaris.fotopic.net/p47455084.html> , and <http://canaris.fotopic.net/p47455046.html> .
- ↑ Joachim Fest (1994). *Plotting Hitler's Death: The German Resistance to Hitler, 1933-1945*. Weidenfeld & Nicholson. ISBN 0-297-81774-4.
- ↑ Peter Hoffman (1996). *The History of the German Resistance, 1933-1945*. McGill-Queen's Press. ISBN 0-77-3515313.
- ↑ Goebbels had filmed similar earlier hangings. Hitler allegedly enjoyed watching the films, but troops in the field were known to walk out in disgust and nausea whenever the films were shown.
- ↑ <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/julyplot.html> , <http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/13767/Dietrich-Bonhoeffer-Memories-and-Perspectives/overview> , <http://www.dispatch.com/live/contentbe/dispatch/2006/02/03/20060203-C1-00.html> , [http://www.atsweb.neu.edu/holocaust/a\\_question.htm](http://www.atsweb.neu.edu/holocaust/a_question.htm) .
- ↑ [1]
- ↑ RadioTheatre.org - Bonhoeffer: The Cost of Freedom - Home



Wikimedia Commons has media related to: ***Dietrich Bonhoeffer***

## External links

[edit]

- Bonhoeffer Reading Room  with extensive links to on-line primary and secondary sources, Tyndale Seminary
- Article by Douglas Huff in The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy
- Dietrich Bonhoeffer Online Exhibition  — United States Holocaust Memorial Museum
- Bonhoeffer  - German Protestant Church's website
- International Dietrich Bonhoeffer Society
- <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00g378b>

Categories: 1906 births | 1945 deaths | 20th-century theologians | German Christian theologians | Executed July 20 plotters | German Christian pacifists | German expatriates in the United States | German Lutheran theologians | German Resistance | Humanitarians | People celebrated in the Lutheran liturgical calendar | People executed by hanging | People from Wrocław | Protestant martyrs of Modern Times | Protestant victims of Nazism | Religious workers who died in Nazi concentration camps | German Protestants opposed to the Third Reich | Flossenbürg concentration camp victims | German Lutherans | Christian theologians | Christian philosophers | Christian Ethicists | Anglican saints



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