

Introduction

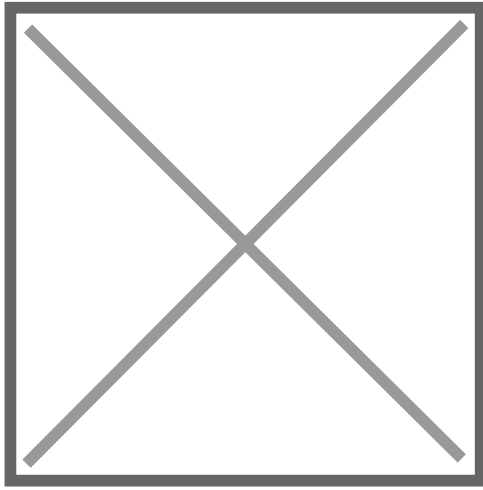
Dietrich Bonhoeffer (German: [ˈdiːtʁɪç ˈbɔ̃nhøːfɐ] [ⓘ]; 4 February 1906 – 9 April 1945) was a German [Lutheran](#) pastor, [neo-orthodox](#) theologian and anti-[Nazi](#) dissident who was a key founding member of the [Confessing Church](#). His writings on Christianity's role in the secular world have become widely influential; his 1937 book [The Cost of Discipleship](#) is described as a modern classic.^[1] Apart from his theological writings, Bonhoeffer was known for his staunch resistance to the Nazi dictatorship, including vocal opposition to [Nazi euthanasia program](#) and genocidal [persecution of Jews](#).^[2] He was arrested in April 1943 by the [Gestapo](#) and imprisoned at [Tegel Prison](#) for a year and a half. Later, he was transferred to [Flossenbürg concentration camp](#).

Bonhoeffer was accused of being associated with the [20 July plot](#) to assassinate Hitler and was tried along with other accused plotters, including former members of the [Abwehr](#) (the German Military Intelligence Office). He was hanged on 9 April 1945 during the collapse of the Nazi regime.

Studies in America

In 1930, Bonhoeffer moved to America with the intent of attaining a Sloane Fellowship at New York City's [Union Theological Seminary](#).^{[4]: 94} Bonhoeffer was greatly unimpressed with American theology. He described the students as lacking interest in theology and would "laugh out loud" when learning a passage from [Martin Luther's](#) *Sin and Forgiveness*.^{[5]: 16} During his time there, he met Frank Fisher, a black seminarian who introduced him to the [Abyssinian Baptist Church](#) in [Harlem](#), where Bonhoeffer taught [Sunday school](#) and formed a lifelong love for the African-American church.^{[4]: 108} He heard [Adam Clayton Powell Sr.](#) preach the "Gospel of Social Justice" and became sensitive to the social injustices experienced by racial and ethnic minorities in the U.S., as well as the ineptitude of churches when it came to bringing about [integration](#).^[8] He was captivated by the sermons he witnessed in Negro churches.^{[4]: 111} The originally nationalist Bonhoeffer^{[5]: 16} later changed his views after seeing [All Quiet on the Western Front](#),^[9] which shows the horrors of war.^{[4]: 112-113} Later in life he favored the views of [pacifism](#), which promoted love for all people and placed a high value on each individual life. Bonhoeffer became involved with the [ecumenical Christian](#) movement, which eventually led him to resist [Adolf Hitler](#) and the [Nazis](#).^{[4]: 113}

Return to Germany

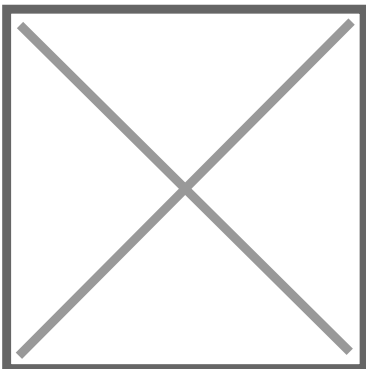


Bonhoeffer on a retreat weekend with [confirmands](#) of Zion's Church congregation (1932)[\[10\]](#)

After returning to Germany in 1931, Bonhoeffer became a lecturer in [systematic theology](#) at the University of Berlin. Deeply interested in [ecumenism](#), he was appointed by the World Alliance for Promoting International Friendship through the Churches (a forerunner of the [World Council of Churches](#)) as one of its three European youth secretaries. At this time he seems to have undergone a personal conversion, as he changed from being a theologian primarily attracted to the intellectual side of Christianity, to being a dedicated man of personal faith, resolved to literally carry out the teachings of Christ, revealed in the Gospels.[\[11\]](#) On 15 November 1931, at age 25, he was ordained at [Old-Prussian United St. Matthew \[de\]](#) in [Berlin-Tiergarten](#).

Underground seminaries

In 1935, Bonhoeffer was offered a coveted opportunity to study [non-violent resistance](#) under [Mahatma Gandhi](#) in his [ashram](#). However, remembering Barth's rebuke, Bonhoeffer decided to return to Germany instead, where he was the head at an underground seminary in [Finkenwalde](#) for training Confessing Church pastors. As the Nazi suppression of the Confessing Church intensified, Barth was driven back to Switzerland in 1935; Niemöller was arrested in July 1937; and in August 1936, Bonhoeffer's authorization to teach at the University of Berlin was revoked after he was denounced as a "pacifist and enemy of the state" by Theodor Heckel.



Memorial of Bonhoeffer in front of [St. Peter's Church](#), Hamburg

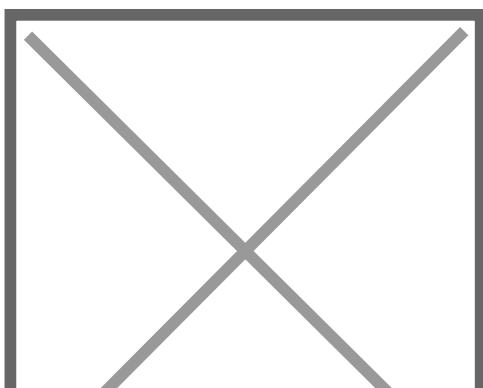
Bonhoeffer's efforts on behalf of the underground seminaries included securing necessary funds. He found a great benefactor in [Ruth von Kleist-Retzow](#). In times of trouble, Bonhoeffer's former students and their wives would take refuge in von Kleist-Retzow's Pomeranian estate, and Bonhoeffer was a frequent guest. Later he fell in love with Kleist-Retzow's granddaughter, [Maria von Wedemeyer](#),^[25] to whom he became engaged three months before his arrest in 1943. By August 1937, [SS](#) leader [Heinrich Himmler](#) had decreed the education and examination of Confessing Church ministry candidates illegal. In September 1937, the [Gestapo](#) closed the seminary at Finkenwalde, and by November twenty-seven pastors and former students were arrested. It was around this time that Bonhoeffer published his best-known book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, a study on the [Sermon on the Mount](#) in which he attacked "cheap grace" as a cover for ethical laxity against the virtues of "costly grace".

Bonhoeffer spent the next two years secretly traveling from one eastern German village to another to conduct a "seminary on the run," supervising the continuing education and work of his students, most of whom were working illegally in small parishes within the old-Prussian [Ecclesiastical Province of Pomerania](#). The [von Blumenthal](#) family hosted the underground seminary on its estate of [Groß Schlönwitz](#). The pastors of Groß Schlönwitz and neighbouring villages supported the education of young men who voluntarily housed these seminarians (among whom was [Eberhard Bethge](#), who later became his best friend and edited Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison*) and employing them as [vicars](#) in their congregations.^[26]

In 1938, the Gestapo banned Bonhoeffer from Berlin. In the summer of 1939, the seminary was able to move to Sigurdshof, an outlying estate ([Vorwerk](#)) of the [von Kleist](#) family in [Wendisch Tychow](#). In March 1940, the Gestapo shut down the underground seminary there following the outbreak of [World War II](#).^[26] Bonhoeffer's semi-monastic communal life and teaching at the underground Finkenwalde seminary formed the basis of his books, *The Cost of Discipleship* and *Life Together*.

Bonhoeffer's sister Sabine, along with her Jewish-classified husband [Gerhard Leibholz](#) ^[de] and their two daughters, escaped to England by way of Switzerland in 1938.^[27]

Abwehr agent



Bonhoeffer's study

Back in Germany, Bonhoeffer was further harassed by the Nazi authorities, as he was forbidden to speak in public and was required regularly to report his activities to the police. In 1941, he was forbidden to print or to publish anything. In the meantime, Bonhoeffer had joined the Abwehr. Dohnányi, already part of the Abwehr, brought him into the organization on the claim that his wide ecumenical contacts would be of use to Germany, thus protecting him from conscription to active service.^[30] Bonhoeffer presumably knew about [various 1943 plots](#) against Hitler through Dohnányi, who was actively involved in the planning.^[30] In the face of Nazi atrocities against the Jews and other minorities, the full scale of which Bonhoeffer learned through the Abwehr, he concluded that "the ultimate question for a responsible man to ask is not how he is to extricate himself from this whole affair, but how the coming generation shall continue to survive and live for Truth."^[31] He did not justify his action but wrote, "When a man takes guilt upon himself in responsibility, he imputes his guilt to himself and no one else. He answers for it... Before other men he is justified by dire necessity; before himself he is acquitted by his conscience, but before God he hopes only for grace."^[32] (In a 1932 sermon, Bonhoeffer said, "The blood of martyrs might once again be demanded, but this blood, if we really have the courage and loyalty to shed it, will not be innocent, shining like that of the first witnesses for the faith. On our blood lies heavy with guilt, the guilt of the unprofitable servant who is cast into outer darkness."^[33])

Under cover of the Abwehr, Bonhoeffer served as a courier for the German resistance movement to reveal its existence and intentions to the Western [Allies](#) in hope of garnering their support. Through his ecumenical contacts abroad, he hoped to secure possible peace terms with the Allies for a post-Hitler government. In May 1942, he met Anglican [Bishop George Bell](#) of [Chichester](#), a member of the [House of Lords](#) and an ally of the Confessing Church, contacted by Bonhoeffer's exiled brother-in-law Leibholz; through him feelers were sent to British Foreign Secretary [Anthony Eden](#). However, the British government ignored these, as it had all other approaches from the German resistance, considering all Germans to be the enemy.^[34] In addition, British war policy was to conduct area bombing of civilian cities, [which Bell opposed](#), a view that had become unpopular in Britain. Dohnányi and Bonhoeffer were also involved in Abwehr operations to help German Jews escape to Switzerland. During this time, Bonhoeffer worked on his book [Ethics](#) and wrote letters to keep up the spirits of his former students. He intended *Ethics* as his [magnum opus](#), but it remained unfinished when he was arrested. On 5 April 1943 Bonhoeffer and Dohnányi were arrested and imprisoned.

Imprisonment

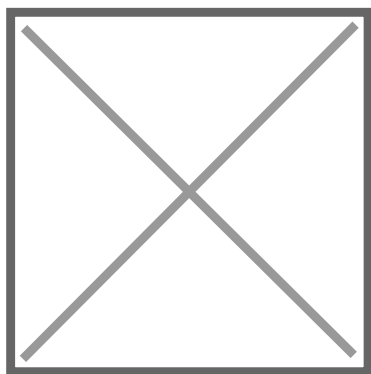
On 13 January 1943 Bonhoeffer had become engaged to Maria von Wedemeyer, the granddaughter of his close friend and Finkenwalde seminary supporter, Ruth von Kleist Retzow. Ruth had campaigned for this marriage for several years, although up until late October 1942, Bonhoeffer remained a reluctant suitor despite Ruth being part of his innermost circle. He considered that his responsibilities during wartime made it the wrong time to marry.^[35] A large age gap loomed between Bonhoeffer and Maria: he was 36 to her 18. Bonhoeffer had first met her when she was his

confirmation student at age 11.^[36] As was considered proper at the time, the two had spent almost no time together alone prior to the engagement and did not see each other between becoming engaged and Bonhoeffer's 5 April arrest. Once he was in prison, however, Maria's status as his fiancée became invaluable, as it meant she could visit Bonhoeffer and correspond with him. While their relationship was troubled,^[37] she was a source of food and smuggled messages.^[38] Bonhoeffer made Eberhard Bethge his heir, but Maria, in allowing her correspondence with Bonhoeffer to be published after her death, provided an invaluable addition to this scholarship.

For a year and a half, Bonhoeffer was imprisoned at [Tegel Prison](#) awaiting trial. There he continued his work in religious outreach among his fellow prisoners and guards. Sympathetic guards helped smuggle his letters out of prison to Bethge and others, and these uncensored letters were posthumously published in *Letters and Papers from Prison*. One of those guards, a corporal named Knobloch, even offered to help him escape from the prison and "disappear" with him, and plans were made for that end; eventually Bonhoeffer declined it, fearing Nazi retribution against his family, especially his brother Klaus and brother-in-law Dohnányi, who was also imprisoned.^[39]

On 4 April 1945, the bulk of the diaries of Admiral [Wilhelm Canaris](#), head of the Abwehr, were discovered, and in a rage upon reading them, Hitler ordered that the other Abwehr members be executed.^[40] Bonhoeffer was led away just as he concluded his final Sunday service and asked an English prisoner, [Payne Best](#), to remember him to Bell if Best should ever reach his home: "This is the end—but for me it is the beginning of Life!"^[41]

Execution



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

Bonhoeffer was sentenced to death on 8 April 1945 by SS judge [Otto Thorbeck](#) at a [drumhead court-martial](#) without witnesses, without any evidence against him, with no records of the proceedings or a defense.^[42] He was executed in [Flossenbürg concentration camp](#) by hanging at dawn on 9 April 1945. Bonhoeffer was stripped of his clothing and led naked into the execution yard where he was hanged with five others: Canaris; General [Hans Oster](#), Canaris's deputy; General

[Karl Sack](#), a military jurist; lawyer [Theodor Strünck](#); and German resistance fighter [Ludwig Gehre](#).

Eberhard Bethge, a student and close friend of Bonhoeffer, writes of a man who saw the execution:

“ I saw Pastor Bonhoeffer... kneeling on the floor praying fervently to God. I was most deeply moved by the way this lovable man prayed, so devout and so certain that God heard his prayer. At the place of execution, he again said a short prayer and then climbed the few steps to the gallows, brave and composed. His death ensued after a few seconds. In the almost fifty years that I worked as a doctor, I have hardly ever seen a man die so entirely submissive to the will of God.^[41]

This is the historical account of Bonhoeffer's death, which over the decades went unchallenged;^[4] however, some recent biographers see problems with the story because Bethge's witness, Hermann Fischer-Hüllstrung, was a doctor at Flossenbürg concentration camp.^[43] J.L.F. Mogensen, a former prisoner at Flossenbürg, cited the length of time it took for the execution to be completed (almost six hours), plus departures from camp procedure that may not have been allowed to prisoners so late in the war, as jarring inconsistencies. Considering that the sentences had been confirmed at the highest levels of Nazi government, by individuals with a pattern of torturing prisoners who dared to challenge the regime, Craig J. Slane posits that "the physical details of Bonhoeffer's death may have been much more difficult than we earlier had imagined."^[44]

Other recent critics of the traditional account are more caustic. It also appears in some instances that "Fischer-Hüllstrung had been given the job of reviving political prisoners after they had been hanged until they were almost dead, in order to prolong the agony of their dying."^[45] Another critic charges that Fischer-Hüllstrung's "subsequent statement about Bonhoeffer as kneeling in wordy prayer ... belongs to the realm of legend," although without evidence to the contrary.^[46]

The disposition of Bonhoeffer's remains is not known.^[47] His body may have been cremated outside the camp along with hundreds of other recently executed or dead prisoners,^[48] or American troops may have placed his body in one of several mass graves in which they interred the unburied dead of the camp.^[47]

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dietrich_Bonhoeffer

Revision #1

Created 2026-03-28 20:50:57 UTC by Dara

Updated 2026-03-28 20:56:39 UTC by Dara