

In what ways were European Jehovah's Witnesses persecuted during the Nazi period and how did the actions of the Witnesses exemplify their teachings?

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### **Abstract**

In what ways were European Jehovah's Witnesses persecuted during the Nazi period and how did the actions of the Witnesses exemplify their teachings? This essay begins by introducing the general conditions of post-World War II Germany and Hitler's subsequent plans to eradicate anyone who stood in his way of an ideal Germany. Jews were the main target of the Holocaust movement, with other victimized groups including Gypsies, people with disabilities, homosexuals, political enemies, Jehovah's Witnesses and other Christian minorities. The essay then details in what ways Jehovah's Witnesses differed from other victims of the Holocaust, particularly Jews.

The next segment of the essay established who Jehovah's Witnesses are, or Bible Students as they were then called, and how the Witnesses proved to be a threat to the ruling Nazi government. The Bible students were not favored in most of the places nations they occupied, but when the Nazi Party came into power, persecution intensified. Details of the persecution inside and outside of the concentration camps are chronicled in this portion of the essay. The Witnesses' response to the ban of their preaching work and their gatherings together and later, and in some cases, imprisonment, were a distinguishing factor of the zeal of this Christian minority.

The conclusion that can be drawn from this research question is that although Jehovah's Witnesses faced intense persecution under the reign of the Nazi government, they took a firm and decidedly united stand for their Bible beliefs. The Witnesses imitated the examples of people recorded in the Bible who maintained their faith to their God while enduring trials and even

considered it a joy to be experiencing such intense persecution at the hands of the Nazis in behalf of God's Kingdom.

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## Introduction

During the years leading up to World War II, most world powers were experiencing an economic crisis due to the effects of the Great Depression (“World War I”). This was especially true of Germany, a country that was reeling off of paying war reparations imposed on them by the Treaty of Versailles and looking for a way to reclaim its dominance as a world power (“World War I”). The Chancellor of Germany at the time, Adolf Hitler, desired for Germany to rise from the ashes of economic distress and the humiliating defeat of the First World War by reestablishing the wealth and strong reputation of the nation (“Timeline”). However, in order to reach his dream of an ideal nation, Hitler felt that he had to oppress any group of people who stood in his way of German supremacy (Victims). Adolf Hitler was convinced that Jews and their lineage were responsible for economic distress experienced as a result of the First World War (“Genocide”). He believed that the Jewish race as a whole was tainted and impure (“Anti-Semitism”). Moreover, Adolph Hitler and the National Socialist German Workers’ Party, or Nazi Party, ascribed to the concept of anti-Semitism and the promotion of the Master Race (“The Nazi”). The ones most prominently affected by Hitler’s ideology were anyone who had any traces of Jewish ancestry. As Chancellor of Germany and leader of the Nazi Regime, Adolf Hitler also harshly oppressed anybody whom he felt directly contradicted his Aryan-supremacy ideology (Victims). These groups included, but were not limited to Gypsies, people with disabilities, homosexuals, political enemies, Jehovah’s Witnesses and other Christian minorities (“Victims”). In this essay, I will examine ways in which Jehovah’s Witnesses were persecuted during the reign of the Nazi Regime and how the actions of the majority of the Witnesses during

this time exemplified the beliefs of the Witnesses. This is a worthy research topic because the persecution of the Witnesses as group, however small, was unique compared to the persecution of other, more evident victims of the Holocaust, such as the Jews. This subject is also captivating because as one of Jehovah's Witnesses, I would like to gain insight into how my brothers and sisters in the faith responded to such an arduous point in history. I can use their examples of courage and resilience to strengthen my determination to remain loyal to my beliefs when "critical times hard to deal with" assails me (*New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures*, 2 Tim. 3.1)

Jews, with nearly six million victims, are the most widely known group of people who were severely oppressed during the period of the Nazi Regime ("The Final"). These ones are said to have had easily recognizable genetic traits and facial features, such as stereotypically large, downward-curved noses, "weak chins," "sloped foreheads," and "'pinched' facial appearances" ("What"). No person who was inherently Jewish could escape the persecution of the Third Reich, or Nazi government. Jews were not persecuted solely because of religious beliefs or practices, but because of ancestry. Jehovah's Witnesses, also known as International Bible Students until the 1930's, differed from the Jews in that they could escape being opposed by the Nazi government if they agreed to no longer be identified as one of Jehovah's Witnesses or as an International Bible Student ("Jehovah's Witnesses in Germany"). Someone who was one of Jehovah's Witnesses could not be identified by physical features, but by activities associated with the worldwide organization of Jehovah's Witnesses, such as preaching, attending religious meetings, or even being in possession of their Bible-based literature published by the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society. Also noteworthy is the fact that many of the Witnesses

possessed physical Aryan traits that Hitler and his constituents considered desirable, meaning that if they decided to renounce their faith, they would have been accepted by the Nazi Regime. This is because the Witnesses were, in fact, ethnic Germans. Their ancestors had resided in German-speaking regions of Central Europe for centuries. The Witnesses were Germans who happened to have joined a religious organization which was distinctly different one from more mainstream German Protestants and Catholics. They were culturally, racially, and physically no different from any other ethnic German, even those Germans who joined the Nazi party and became oppressors of the Witnesses.

### **What were conditions for the Witnesses like before the reign of the Nazi Regime?**

Jehovah's Witnesses, also known as International Bible Students during the years leading up to the Holocaust, were group of earnest Bible scholars whose goal was and is to advertize the things they learn about God's Kingdom and other fundamental Bible teachings on a global scale ("Who"). In order to carry out their preaching work, the Witnesses would engage in one of their most widely known forms of teaching, the door-to-door ministry ("How"). The preaching work of the Witnesses however, was not limited to the door-to-door ministry. Furthermore, these zealous Bible proclaimers could often be seen distributing their Bible-based publications -such as *The Watchtower and Herald of Christ's Presence* and *The Golden Age*, now known as *The Watchtower Announcing Jehovah's Kingdom* and *The Awake!*, respectively- in public streets and informally ("Watchtower") ("Awake"). The Witnesses also took very seriously the admonition in the scriptures to gather with one another regularly for their Christian meetings so that they might build up their faith in fundamental Bible teachings ("How Does"). These meetings were also an incitement "to love and fine works and to encourage one another" (Heb. 10. 24, 25). Unknown to

the Witnesses at the time was the fact that their faith would soon be seriously tested, and that some would sacrifice their freedom and their lives for the sake of God's Kingdom. Thus, the meetings would strengthen the faith of those who would later undergo the intense persecution of the Nazi Regime.

Even before the Nazis came to power in Germany, Jehovah's Witnesses had been considered "heretics by other Christian denominations and individual German states sought to limit their activities" ("Jehovah's"). Even in the non-German-speaking nations of Europe, Witnesses faced significant discrimination. In nations as seemingly democratic and participatory as France, Belgium, and the Netherlands, there were laws and unofficial social practices which limited the influence of this small group of Bible-teachers ("Jehovah's"). As small as the movement was, it offered a "rival ideology" and a "rival center of loyalty" to the Nazi government. ("Jehovah's") By providing an alternative hierarchy, Witness lifestyle and belief proved to be completely inconsistent with the Nazi ideology of adherence to a fascist center of government. Consequently, the Witnesses relied on a power higher and more authorities than Germany's secular government, and firmly believed they should "obey God as ruler rather than men" (Acts 5. 29). Because of the Witnesses' firm determination to remain loyal to their God, the Witnesses refused to Heil Hitler, participate in the German war effort and were overall politically neutral ("Nazi"). In Germany specifically, the Witnesses experienced an opposition of their Bible education work in the form of dissolution of their Bible study meetings, and even the physical assault of individual witnesses ("Jehovah's"). Later the Bible study meetings and preaching work were put under an official ban by law ("Jehovah's"). Those who continued their normal Witness activities of public preaching faced further discrimination once individual

German states and local authorities fully limited the group's preaching activities with charges of illegal peddling ("Nazi").

### **In what ways were Jehovah's Witnesses persecuted during the Nazi period?**

Most of the Witness men were sent to concentration and death camps as either political opponents for their refusal to participate in any war effort, or as spiritual opponents for adhering to their Bible beliefs. Those who were political opponents to the Nazi or Nazi-backed regimes were considered enemies not because they were active politically, but for the opposite reason ("Nazi"). Anyone who would not swear obedience to the Nazi government was an undesirable. Those people who were not politically active but simply wanted to be left alone were also arrested by the Nazis. Witnesses who were spiritual opponents of the Nazi regime continued their normal Bible activities. They did not stop their preaching work, so they were readily identifiable targets for the Nazi police. In the concentration camps, they were identified as political prisoners with a red triangle on their uniform, or as spiritual opponents with a purple triangle and the letters IVF, Internationale Bibelforscher-Vereinigung, meaning International Bible Students Association ("Classification") ("Declaration"). However, not all persecuted Witnesses were forced to stay on the premises of their assigned concentration camps at all times ("Non-Jewish"). Some women who were seen as trustworthy were allowed to shop for the families of the Gestapo, for the Gestapo could trust that these women were not going to try to escape given the degree of freedom they received. Also, some of the male prisoners were given assignments as gardeners at the homes of some S.S officers or served as barbers for the commanding officers who began to feel increasing notions of resentment directed toward them by many of the camps' prisoners ("Non-Jewish"). The S.S officers felt secure in knowing that the Witness prisoners

would not seek revenge on the lives of the men they were grooming. These men and women were among the most fortunate inmates of any camps because they were, at times, persecuted less severely by the commanding officers than other inmates, those who had to remain permanently inside the prisons.

In some of the concentration camps, some male prisoners were treated harshly by other prisoners. There were many prisoners who were angry and frustrated by their imprisonment. Witnesses, ironically, were somewhat “happy” in the camps because they were with one another, and could pray together in secret. The Witnesses were also sure of the fact that they were suffering for the sake of God’s Kingdom. They felt that they could not complain about something that God was enabling them to endure. Often times, when Jehovah’s Witnesses are imprisoned or even exiled because of their political neutrality or religious beliefs, they view this as an opportunity to give a testimony to about their beliefs in a new territory with whoever is willing to listen. Such was likely the case when Witness victims of the Holocaust were sent to concentration camps. While in detainment, some Bible students courageously, yet discerningly shared their beliefs with fellow inmates who were willing to listen and at times, even the S.S officers who were detaining them. Despite their efforts to be peaceable with all whom they encountered during this trialsome period, they were often beaten by other prisoners who resented the Witnesses seeming ability to withstand camp life (The Problem). The Witness prisoners were generally cooperative and followed orders if they did not violate their moral values. They were known to have high morale based on their study of the Bible. As a result of this, some Witnesses held fairly comfortable jobs with a measure of responsibility after demonstrating such a cooperative spirit. Despite the measure of responsibility measured to some of the Witness

inmates of the camps, the Witnesses still were not liberated from the general hardships of camp life. The problem of hunger was present in camps. Most camp meals consisted of turnips alone. Food was present for survival, not for pleasure. Some prisoners starved to death despite eating their daily ration of turnip soup (The Problem). All prisoners were expected to expend ten times more energy into their camp assignments than was allotted them in their daily rations. Many Bible students prayed to endure the pain of hunger. Others filled their mouths with sand so that they would experience the pain of gritty sand in their mouths to distract some of the pain in their empty stomachs (The Problem). There was no consideration of a prisoners' size. Large prisoners were allotted the same portion of food as smaller prisoners, so that ironically, those who began life in the camps larger and healthier often suffered hunger the most, since they were accustomed to so much more food than they were receiving.

Women prisoners at one camp, on the other hand, could not always be as obedient to their assignment as their male counterparts. They refused to wrap bandages which would be used for German soldiers who had participated in combat (Cichy, Teresa). Those who were uncooperative received the same punishment as any other prisoners who refused to follow orders from the camp officials. They had rations of food reduced, work hours extended, and suffered beatings and in some cases execution. None of the Witness prisoners who were musically inclined would lend their talents to the task of playing music that the commanding officers felt would produce a calming atmosphere among the prisoners who were on their way to be executed, as they felt that submitting to this task would ultimately be contributing to the agenda of the Nazi Regime (Cichy, Teresa).

Children of Bible Students did not salute flag and refused to “Heil Hitler,” which was a commonplace, daily activity in school (“Jehovah’s Witnesses”). By refusing to participate in the Heil Hitler the Fuhrer, meaning dictator or leader salute, children refused to show allegiance to the German state. Those were expelled from school for this refusal (“Jehovah’s Witnesses”). Those who refused to enroll in the Hitler Youth or the League of German Girls or refused to cooperate with Nazi laws were removed from their homes (“Jehovah’s Witnesses”). They were then sent to reformatory schools, far from their homes, where they were indoctrinated with endless Nazi propaganda. Others were surrendered by the government to Nazi families where they received round-the-clock Nazi indoctrinations (“Jehovah’s Witnesses”). These students remained with the Nazi families for the duration of the war (“Jehovah’s Witnesses”). Often times, these children worked long hours at the reformatory schools and were treated as the juvenile delinquents for which these schools were designed. These children likely longed to see their parents again, some of whom they would later learn had been arrested by the Gestapo and sentenced to concentration or death camps. Some children, however, were so resistant to the Nazi indoctrination that they were sent home as unteachable in Nazi beliefs. Nonetheless, when these young Bible Students returned home in cases where both of his or her parents had not been taken into custody by the Gestapo, living at home again likely required some adjustment. The psychological effects inflicted on these children after having been separated from their parents for perhaps years at a time could not have yielded positive results. Like their parents, these children were intensely persecuted and in a sense, spiritually exiled for standing up for what they believed to be the truth. This type of treatment is difficult for anyone to endure, let alone impressionable minds such as these young Bible Students.

**How did affected Witnesses respond to the persecution?**

Jehovah's Witnesses, collectively, remained loyal to their God and maintained a united front against the opposing forces of the government during the time of the Holocaust. The Witnesses relied on the pillar on which their beliefs are based to provide them with the fortitude they needed to endure such a trying point in history. Their faith lied heavily in many Bible texts which they used to carry them through each day under trial. Under no circumstances did any of the Witnesses attempt to retaliate or avenge themselves against the actions of the Gestapo. This is because the Witnesses felt that if they were going to be followers of their exemplar, Jesus Christ that they would have to be persecuted in one way or another, just as Jesus was. For confidence, they likely looked at the experiences recorded in the Bible of Paul and his preaching companion Barnabas when they were beaten nearly to death and imprisoned without trial. Perhaps they kept in mind the recorded account of the three Hebrew boys, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who refused to bow down to any other God than Jehovah, even though the law during their time period dictated that they bow down to King Nebuchadnezzar. Moreover, how faith-strengthening it must have been for the Witnesses to think of how the Israelites, God's chosen people, were delivered out of the hands of Pharaoh by means of God's direction. The Witnesses believed that these historical events were recorded in the Bible to provide them with the strength they needed to endure any hardships they would undergo for the sake of God's Kingdom. The then imprisoned Bible Students no doubt reflected on and appreciated the times they were able to meet freely with one another to build themselves up and encourage one another.

Since the Bible Students did not have copies of their Bibles and Bible based publications readily available in the concentration camps, the Witnesses had to find other ways to satisfy their

spiritual need. As a result, many printed publications of Jehovah's Witnesses were systematically smuggled into concentration camps. Some literature arrived to the camps by means of the prisoners who held responsibilities away from their assigned camps. These ones would receive literature while at their assignments from nearby Witnesses who had not yet been arrested. The imprisoned Witnesses would then return to the camps with somewhat new publications of the Watchtower Society for the inmates to enjoy. On one occasion, a Witness who was well-prepared for his imminent arrest stuffed Watchtowers and a small Bible into his boots. He then rubbed the soles of his boots with a very poignant smelling tar that was so offensive, the S.S guards did not want to be bothered making him remove his boots when he arrived to the camps, for fear that the strong odor would worsen (The Problem). When he united with fellow Witnesses, he was able to share with them the treasures he brought into the camp, thus ensuring an interchange of encouragement. If no printed copy of the Watchtower was available, some Witnesses would hand-copy an entire Watchtower to be smuggled into the camps (The Problem). The Bible Students were willing to risk their lives if this meant that they would be able to spiritually uplift themselves, as well as others. Consequently, many of the Witnesses who were imprisoned, although starving physically, were thriving spiritually. Their publications instilled in them the admonition to love their neighbor, love those persecuting them, and to not fear what "earthling man" could do to them, among other paramount instructions that helped them endure when they were deprived of food, beaten senselessly, made to walk death marches, worked to death, and even sentenced to execution.

On February 9, 1934, Joseph F. Rutherford, who was at the forefront of the work of World Headquarters of Jehovah's Witnesses at that time, sent Hitler a letter of protest in response

to Nazi intolerance (“Courageous”). On October 7, 1934, Rutherford’s letter was followed by some 20,000 letters and telegrams of protest sent to Hitler by Jehovah’s Witnesses in 50 countries, including Germany (“Courageous”). The actions of the Witnesses worldwide give proof of the Witnesses’ intense love and care for one another which cross national boundaries.

### **How did the actions of the Witnesses exemplify their teachings?**

International Bible Students adhered to the Bible principle to “preach the word, be at it urgently” (2 Tim. 4.2). The Witnesses felt that this Bible command directly applied to their preaching work. Although the laws during the time of the Holocaust prohibited all preaching activities of the Witnesses, deemed as illegal peddling, the Witnesses held the Bible’s direction to “preach the word” to a higher authority than the German state. Jehovah’s Witnesses also took very seriously the command not to take up war. Wolfgang Kusserow, a twenty year-old Witness who was beheaded for his refusal to go to war expressed in his final words to the military tribunal, “‘You shall love your God above all else and your neighbor as yourself.’ Other commandments read: ‘You must not kill.’ Did our Creator have all this written down for the trees?” (“Why Do”). The expressions of this Witness who lost his life defending his beliefs leave no question as to how the Witnesses felt about going to war for Hitler’s army. They refused to murder another person. This was an especially significant command to follow closely because had German Witnesses gone to war against American Witnesses, they would have been killing those related to them in the faith, their brothers. Wolfgang Kusserow was following the scriptural guidance at Mark 12.31, to “love your neighbor as yourself” and Exodus 20.13, which plainly says, “You must not murder” (Mark 12.31; Exodus 20.13). Jehovah’s Witnesses refused to hail Hitler because they believed that pledging allegiance to any other person or object is a

religious act that ascribes salvation, not to God, but to the State or to its leaders. A scripture that supports the Witnesses decision to abstain from saluting to Hitler, who called himself the Fuhrer, or Father, of Germany says, "I am Jehovah, and besides me there is no savior" (Isaiah 43:11). The only authority who the Witnesses viewed as savior was Jehovah. To name any other authority, especially a human government, as savior, was in direct contradiction with what the Witnesses believed from the Bible. The Bible Students accepted such intense persecution at the hands of the Nazi Regime because they accepted that any persecutions they would undergo were for the sake of God's Kingdom. This is one of the reasons why so few Witnesses signed the declaration renouncing their faith. They knew that if they were going to be followers of Christ, that they would be persecuted. Even when Witnesses are under trial today, they look to the words recorded in the Bible at Matthew 10.22, for comfort and reassurance, which say "You will be hated by all people on account of my name, but the one who has endured to the end will be saved". Also, the Witnesses took to heart the words spoken by Jesus at John 15.20, which say, "If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you." The Witnesses beyond a doubt believed that they must enter the Kingdom of God through many tribulations (Acts 14.22). Hitler's actions, they believed, were just a fulfillment of these recorded Bible words. For these reasons, Jehovah's Witnesses refused to seek revenge against their persecutors. The Witnesses who were persecuted feel that they would be showing a lack of faith in their God if they were to take matters into their own hands and repay evil, for the Bible says concerning Jehovah, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay" (Romans 12:9). In full contrast with repaying vengeance, the Bible Students actually loved their enemies, and prayed for those who were insulting them (Luke 6. 27.28).

## Conclusion

Jehovah's Witnesses in Europe were intensely persecuted during the period of the Nazi Regime. Their means of livelihood was made illegal. When the preaching work and the Christian meetings of Jehovah's Witnesses were put under ban, the Witnesses refused to stop doing what they believe they were commanded to do by Jesus Christ. They are often regarded to as the most stubborn targets of Hitler and his constituents. The actions of the Witnesses show that they are loyal to their beliefs, and they hold the Word of God as the ultimate law book. No matter what persecution the Witnesses had to undergo during the period of the Holocaust, they were willing, yes, even joyful to do so if it meant suffering for the sake of God's Kingdom.

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