

# The Absence of Heroism

*German Catholics and Hitler's Wars*, by Gordon Zahn. Sheed & Ward, 232 pp., \$4.75.

by Arthur A. Cohen

I do not anticipate that the war with National Socialism will end in my lifetime. (I should immediately add, lest this sentence be misunderstood, I do not imagine the war with any incarnate evil ends.) One might have thought, however, that the passion and the outrage which the recollection of the historical past evokes might by now have abated.

It would be reasonable to have assumed its abatement, for the capacity of men to succor the memory of disaster is usually limited. We enjoy the first quaff of horror, but refuse generally to repeat the experience: the mangled bodies of a train disaster, the villagers rendered homeless by an earthquake, the myriads lost to monsoon, typhoon, or volcano, the scores to collapsing buildings or grandstands, the half-dozen to a well-armed maniac — these elicit our clucks of sympathy, but are so distant and skeletally precise as to origins and consequence that they are easily dispatched from memory. We do not regard such natural and human aberrations as evil. They are the sports and hybrids of our world, unpredictable and a moral instruction only in their unpredictability.

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But we have come to respond differently to monstrous human evil—to nourish and sustain our diet, to savor and record what has happened to man by the hand of man. I know many (I am not alone in this) who feel impelled

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by unquenched bitterness at this generation of our past to learn all that happened from the rise of National Socialism to 1945: to know what each town of the Jewish Pale of Settlement in Poland and Russia did to maintain dignity and honor before their end; to cherish the heroism of those who elected self-immolation or risked their lives for others; to know the statistics of how many gypsies or Orthodox Croats were slaughtered; to remember how many extermination camps operated and what museums and souvenir stands today recall them; and also to point out to others the number of SS officers and Nazi officials who now hold positions of importance in the new Germany.

At the same time that I succeed in maintaining my war with the past of National Socialism (and, incidentally, as a by-product of this war, a complete and very personal dissociation from Germany as an on-going people, land, and culture), I continue to wish to ask questions of the nations and institutions that sustained and educated the people of the nations who survived and can remember.

I do not imagine this condition of mine is unique. I am no *vox clamantis in deserto*—the desert is full of querulous seekers and penitents, all crying for some word of truth. It is this syndrome of our time (an isolate and apparently self-sustaining nervous disorder, which like a tic or tremor is a noticeable defect without endangering the otherwise efficient functioning of the organism) which explains the enormous success, nearly two decades after the fact, of Hannah Arendt's devastating account of the career of Eichmann; which accounts for the storm already brewing and being

brewed over the forthcoming production and publication of Hochhuth's "Der Stellvertreter," a play which deals with the alleged moral dereliction of Pius XII in the face of the Final Solution; and which establishes the importance of Gordon Zahn's compelling and incisive examination of *German Catholics and Hitler's Wars*.

Unfortunately Professor Zahn did not have *The New Yorker* behind him to disseminate his conscience nor Billy Rose and the editorials of *America* to stir the waters. Gordon Zahn's book was not noticed as it should have been, although it numbers some remarkably famous Catholic clerics and intellectuals (and is undoubtedly known if not by reading, then by hearsay to most readers of *worldview*) among its reticent admirers. It is a book which has been silenced by its importance and by its unnerving proximity to some of the moral suppurations of our time.

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It is the presence of these moral suppurations which account for the endurance of our war with National Socialism, for long after the war has ended, and the victims buried, and the homeless homed once more, we are left with the unsorted debris of conscience which was the failure of a civilization to bring to bear upon evil the counsel of nearly three millennia of moral wisdom.

The contemporaneity and immediacy of Zahn's analysis is that having failed once, it is presumptive that we may fail again. If it was not possible for the German Bishops to declare Hitler's wars to be unjust according to the natural law teaching respecting the "just war"; if it was not possible for American and English clergy to protest terror bombing and

condemn the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki; and if it was not prudent for Pius XII. even at the risk of causing irresponsible reprisals, to have denounced publicly and without qualification Hitler's Final Solution, then can it be expected that the moral suasion of the Church, the Churches, and the Synagogue will serve us any better to instruct the conscience of the future? The Churches either speak the Word of God or they do not—and on certain matters it has always seemed to me that the Word of God is unequivocal.

The Churches either form the Christian conscience actively and energetically or they are but custodians of conscience, leaving its ultimate fortune to the judgment of God (and history and the Kingdom of God be damned). Friedrich Heer once observed in a conversation with M. D. Chenu ("Is the Modern World Atheist?" *Cross Currents*, Winter, 1961, pp. 5-24) that the sacrament of confession was administered rather too often for the sins of mediocrity and not enough for the derelictions of conscience which evidence the collapse of the Christian man.

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The point is, as Professor Zahn has so patiently and undramatically affirmed, that the Christian man can be expected to behave unheroically if the sources of authority and teaching which might normally be expected to issue the call to heroism are silenced by cowardice or choice. The average German Catholic, even if he genuinely recognized the tyranny of National Socialism and the injustice of its cause, could not be expected to be exceptional, if those who were his spiritual leaders had, in great measure, accommodated their public power to support of Hitler's war effort.

The same Bishops, who early in the Hitler regime had protested the emerging racism of Na-

tional Socialism, had by 1939 limited their public protest to criticism of the expropriation of Church property and violations of the Vatican Concordat. With the possible exception of the Bishops' distribution and support of the Papal condemnation of euthanasia, no issue affecting the moral character of National Socialism elicited the public judgment of the German Bishops after the start of the war.

In fact, on the specific issue of the justice or injustice of Hitler's wars, Zahn's study shows conclusively that the Bishops, whose pastorals, sermons, public letters, and diocesan press he examines, were wholeheartedly and often uncritically nationalistic in their support not only of the defensive aspects of Hitler's wars (the protection of German homes and the German people), but even (noticeably in the case of the German military Bishop, Rarkowski) ardently pro-Hitler.

The German Bishops (and the German Catholic press which Zahn examined in an equally trenchant and convincing essay "The German Catholic Press and Hitler's Wars," (*Cross Currents*, Fall, 1960, pp. 337-351) employed the moral controls embodied in their spiritual authority to lend support to the secular, temporal authority of the German state in support of wars that can only be regarded as "unjust" in the light of Catholic teaching. And if the Bishop's availing of support to Hitler's wars was active in the commission, then their failure to speak at all in protest against the racialism and extermination program can only be regarded (my conclusion, not explicitly Professor Zahn's) as morally contemptible.

But having passed this judgment, I am obliged to check myself with the equally compelling recognition—a recognition forced upon me by Hannah Arendt and naively polemicized by Bruno Bettelheim (albeit stated in the

context of Jewish opposition to their own extermination) — that heroism is infrequently expressed unless man (and, in this case, his culture) is educated to regard it as the epitome of courage. Indeed, in National Socialist Germany any act of courage easily became an occasion for heroism, for all protest, however trivial and insignificant it might have been in a rational and unhysterical society, became conspiratorial opposition. All courage courted heroic death.

If there had been no German Christian martyrs, we might be inclined to think that the capacity for heroism had disappeared (if such had really been the case our rhetoric would have been hollow, for we would be free to regard the German conscience as infantile and retarded, to be pitied more than to be judged), but there were, after all, Father Metzger, Franz Jaegerstaetter, and many other later conspirators who sought their death by standing firm on principles for which there could be no punishment but death.

This is for me the biding significance of Professor Zahn's charitable, circumspect, and extremely moving concluding chapter, "Sociotheological Implications." Professor Zahn can judge the German Bishops, German Catholics, and German Christians of all persuasions, for his categories judge us all.

Ours has been an unheroic time. When the record is completed it will perhaps be found that the victims of Hitler's massacres, helpless and supine as they often were, were heroes, for at least they died; but when the record is completed it will surely be found that the principalities and powers of the Western world were, indeed, as St. Paul understood them, principalities and powers which had covered the light of truth with darkness—and there were precious few to protest unto death against the night.

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CONTENTS

The Alternatives in Vietnam ..... 1  
*Editorial*

In the Magazines ..... 2

Modern War and the Just War ..... 3  
*James W. Douglass*

Other Voices ..... 8

BOOKS

The Absence of Heroism ..... 10  
*Arthur A. Cohen*

Current Reading ..... 12

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