Johannes Schröder in the Resistance Against Hitler

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Abstract

After joining the National Committee for a Free Germany, Military Chaplain Johannes Schröder, taken prisoner by the Soviets in Stalingrad, was able to address listeners in Germany over Radio Moscow from the fall of 1943 until the fall of 1945. More than eighty of his sermons and speeches have been preserved and published as a book in 2021. In this article, two of these pieces are published in an English translation, supplemented by an introduction that explains the historical context. Schröder openly demanded the overthrow of Hitler and the Nazi Regime in Germany. For Schröder, confessing German guilt was a precondition for the creation of a new Germany. While leaders of the Confessing Church like Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Niemöller had been silenced by the Nazis, Schröder was able to explain the fundamental theological tenets that had been formulated at Barmen in 1934. Schröder's speeches and sermons therefore offer an exciting new view of the resistance against Hitler.

Wehrmacht Chaplain Johannes Schröder became a Soviet prisoner of war on January 31, 1943. He was given the chance to appeal directly to listeners in Germany over Radio Moscow from autumn of 1943 to autumn of 1945 as a member of the National Committee for a Free Germany. His estate has passed down more than eighty addresses and sermons, which were published in 2021 by the Wallstein Verlag in Göttingen.[1] Who was Chaplain Johannes Schröder? Why did he decide as a prisoner of war to become politically active in this unusual way? Could he speak completely freely, or was he a tool of communist propaganda? What risks did he take through his involvement? The volume containing his addresses and sermons is supplemented with essays that pursue these questions. Here, in necessary brevity, is the most important information.

Johannes Schröder was born in Kiel in 1909 and raised there. His father died when he was eleven years old. After his *Abitur*,[2] he studied Protestant Theology at the Theological School in Bethel and at

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the universities of Erlangen, Göttingen, and Kiel, where he passed his first theological examination in 1932. He had the good fortune that his first pastoral experience was as Curate to the Rendsburg Pastor Johann Bielfeldt (1886–1981), a determined opponent of National Socialism and the "German Christians." In autumn of 1933, along with Bielfeldt he joined the "Emergency Consortium of Schleswig-Holstein Pastors," which a few months later became the "Confessing Church" within the Schleswig-Holstein State Church. After his second theological examination in 1934, Schröder married and was installed in his first parish, Osterhever in Eiderstedt. In 1935, he was transferred to Albersdorf in Dithmarschen. In both places, he came into conflict with National Socialists and German Christians. As the disputes escalated, the young Pastor Schröder looked for a way out. In order to avoid the local controversy, he signed up for military training in 1936 and 1937, and in 1938 he officially applied for a place in the military chaplaincy. The leader of the Protestant Military Chaplaincy, Field Bishop Franz Dohrmann (1881–1969), welcomed not only German Christians but also members of the Confessing Church, and accepted Schröder's application. In the summer of 1940, after positions in Neumünster and Münster, Johannes Schröder asked the military bishop to transfer him to the front. As a military chaplain he needed to be present there as well, "where the wounded and bloodied are." Additionally, he wanted to have a Catholic colleague by his side, with whom a successful collaboration would be possible. Field Bishop Dohrmann fulfilled both his wishes.

On September 8, 1940, Johannes Schröder was named the Protestant Chaplain of the 8th Infantry Division. The 8th Division was first deployed to France and then, in June 1941, to the Eastern Front. The front moved quickly in the East, he wrote in his reports, making his field worship services barely possible. He spent much of his time in field hospitals and first aid stations. Obviously, he wanted to show in these reports how important his service could be even in the middle of a meaningless and brutal war led by Hitler. Because of kidney disease, Schröder spent December 1941 through February 1942 in a military hospital in Hamburg. Barely back on his feet, he was next transferred to the 712th Infantry Division and, in May 1942

Johannes Schröder 1942, courtesy of his family.

to the 371st Infantry Division. There he got to know the Catholic chaplain Karl Doiwa, and together they experienced the advance of the German Army in the East toward Stalingrad in 1942.

From autumn of 1942, the position of the 371st Infantry Division became increasingly difficult. The attack on the strategically important city of Stalingrad foundered. Already by November of 1942, there was a shortage of rations and munitions. Many of the soldiers

were sick, many wounded. Thousands had lost their lives. In a letter to his wife from the end of October 1942, Schröder wrote: "today I spent the whole day burying soldiers." Together with Doiwa, he now lived in a burrow. The military situation was hopeless: hunger, lice, mice in the quarters, and daily bombardment. "The Russians attack with greatest force," Schröder wrote in a letter. The Soviet ring around the German positions drew ever tighter. On January 31, 1943, the last resistance of the 6th Army collapsed. Along with Field Marshal Friedrich Paulus, his officers, and the rest of the 6th Army, Schröder and Doiwa entered into Soviet captivity.

Like all prisoners of war captured in Stalingrad, Schröder and Doiwa were first taken to the processing camp in Beketovka, from which they were sent to the camp in Frolovo. There was hunger every day and disease everywhere. Many prisoners of war did not survive this period. Schröder and Doiwa made it through because they mutually assisted one another whenever possible: ecumenical brotherhood in hard times. In the summer of 1943, they were transferred to the officers' camp in Yelabuga. There they received the news that imprisoned German officers and soldiers, together with German communists living in exile in the Soviet Union, had formed the National Committee for a Free Germany on the 12th and 13th of July 1943. They did so with the goal of ending Hitler's rule in Germany as soon as possible. "My work in the anti-fascist movement should serve the goal," Schröder wrote at the initiation of the National Committee for a Free Germany, "that out of the wreckage of the war, a new Germany will rise in which faith and justice, freedom and loyalty have their immutable place and that thereby it will win the respect and trust of its neighboring nations, and move towards a happy, peaceful future."[3]

What he had experienced and suffered in Stalingrad became, as this passage shows, a turning point in Schröder's life. Henceforth, he could no longer be silent, nor did he want to be. What he saw in Stalingrad in the weeks before and after the total defeat—vileness, cruelty, meaningless death—should never be repeated. Schröder feared that all of Germany, if it did not succeed in ending the Nazi rule as soon as possible, would suffer the fate of the 6th Army. The "Stalingrad experience" traumatized Schröder for the rest of his life.

In the autumn of 1943, when he received the offer to address listeners in Germany over the airwaves of Radio Moscow, he therefore knew that he had been given a unique opportunity to campaign with his own words for the overthrow of Hitler.

The decision that Schröder made in the summer of 1943 was not, as he himself knew, without risks. "We ventured on an unusual path full of great responsibility," he said in a sermon on August 26 of 1945: "We remember our wives and children back home and fear that the unscrupulous brutality of a Himmler will not spare the defenseless, as indeed it has not." For him as a pastor, "the grave question concerning the relationship between a Christian and politics" arrived. "Into this struggle around clarity and insight," suddenly "the light of a completely simple, plain answer dropped, as it thrust itself into the story of the good Samaritan, on the decisive questions." The questions rang out: "What must I do?" "Who then is my neighbor?" To him it seemed, as Schröder explained further in this sermon from the summer of 1945, that "through this story it has become completely clear: our nation followed our seducer (*Verführer*) Hitler in blind obedience, unto the edge of the abyss. Millions of brothers and sisters were lost, when their eyes were not opened at the last minute with a warning 'Stop!' " For him, therefore, "to be a neighbor" clearly meant taking action, "being active, interacting with one's fellow men, helping, understanding, becoming very close!" Therefore, in contrast to many other prisoners (and even many other chaplains in Soviet captivity), Johannes Schröder did not wait to see what would happen to him but joined the National Committee for a Free Germany in the hope of being able to contribute to the liberation of the Germans from Hitler.

In retrospect, the question still remains whether he was actually free to say on the radio what he wanted to say, or if he was influenced by the communist side. In order to answer this question, one must strike out somewhat further. When Hitler and Stalin made a pact in the summer of 1939, it shocked all antifascists. How could National Socialism be defeated when Moscow made common cause with Berlin? When Hitler attacked the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941, the situation completely changed once again for the German communists living in Soviet exile. As Czar Alexander, in his time,

had mobilized all elements of society in the struggle against Napoleon, now Stalin, in the "Great Patriotic War," strove for the widest possible coalition of all societal and political powers, even including the Russian Orthodox Church. Almost from one day to the next, the anti-religious polemics and destructive measures directed against the Russian church in the 1930s ended. Once again worship could be celebrated without obstruction in the churches which had not been destroyed after the October Revolution. In September of 1943, Stalin welcomed the most senior Metropolitans for a long dialogue. A delegation of Anglicans was also allowed to visit their Orthodox brothers in the faith in Moscow. The first council of the Russian Orthodox Church since 1917 came to pass. One must know all of this in order to understand why Johannes Schröder, who remembered the chicanery of the National Socialists and the German Christians in the mid-1930s, was impressed by the unexpectedly constructive and apparently tolerant church-political climate in the Soviet Union. One must take into account all of these circumstances in order to explain why the Soviet side urged the German communists living in exile to respect and support the captive German chaplains as equal partners in the struggle against Hitler. That after the end of the war, the communists' politics in relation to the church changed once again was something that Schröder certainly realized in the 1950s. In a letter from 1954 to a historian who was researching the National Committee for a Free Germany, Schröder noted that they never had difficulties with redactions to their radio sermons. The chaplains' status, as men of the church, was powerful. They would not have spoken if someone had told them what to say.

In the two years between August 1943 and August 1945, in which Schröder projected his voice from Moscow to listeners in Germany, he did not act as an expert on specific topics (such as matters of church politics), but instead dealt with a wide spectrum of issues. He spoke especially often about the life of Christians in a dictatorship. As he repeatedly elaborated, he saw the Christians in Germany as victims of Hitler. However, at the same time, he saw them as those people who, more than any other group, provided resistance against Hitler, and from whom an important contribution towards the rebuilding of Germany after Hitler's fall was to be expected.

Time and again, he discussed the unfortunate situation in Germany created by the war: the suffering of children, the Nazis' seduction of the youth, the Allied bombardments, and most of all, the ruthlessness and cruelty with which the Nazis exploited and subdued the German people. Time and again, Schröder directly addressed women back home. They should save themselves and their children from the hell of aerial bombardment, support their husbands in the struggle against Hitler and Himmler, and make their contribution towards achieving the restoration of peace. On special days like Christmas, Schröder emphatically described the differences between the times of peace and war; he used Easter to awaken new hope, and the day of repentance in November to remind his listeners of the disaster brought to the whole world by the Nazis and thereby also the German people. He always remembered the many victims, far and wide, of the war and the Nazis' reign: those carried off to concentration camps, the civilians murdered in the course of the campaign in Russia, the millions of Jews who were systematically and methodically murdered, the countless foreign laborers in Germany, and those lost in the course of the National Socialists' euthanasia program. Johannes Schröder never failed to point out the incomprehensible destruction throughout all of Europe which took place during the war and would weigh on the German people for a long time thereafter.

There were no fundamental differences between Schröder's sermons and his speeches. On the contrary, in his sermons, it took him very few words to get to political themes. Because he always found completely appropriate biblical passages to underline what was important to him, his sermons sound almost more political and penetrate the heart more than many of his speeches. Words from the prophets especially helped Schröder make the leap from the biblical text into the present. Time and again in his sermons he referred to personal experiences, especially to his time as a young pastor in Dithmarschen. He also consistently mentioned current examples, which demonstrated that he had access to news from Germany while in the prison camp. And several times he described what he had experienced during the Battle of Stalingrad and the defeat of the Sixth Army. That he was speaking as a Lutheran pastor was self-evident

for Johannes Schröder. But it was equally self-evident to him that he stood in a wide and deep ecumenical solidarity with his Roman Catholic colleagues and their church.

Even from a distance of eighty years, Schröder's language sounds clear and fresh. He succeeded in formulating his concerns in few words. Doubts never arose about his political engagement or his determination to fight Hitler's reign. Even before the end of the war, he stressed just as clearly the need for all Germans to confront their guilt. They should never forget how strongly and how long they had supported Hitler. If they would take responsibility for their guilt, then, and only then, could the rebuilding of the nation succeed and Germany again take a place among the nations of the world. Only when Germans, after the period of injustice, professed unambiguously the rule of justice, and after the period of meaningless destruction and killing of degenerate warfare, professed freedom without any reservations, could a new Germany be created.

Amongst the group of Wehrmacht chaplains in Soviet captivity, Johannes Schröder was a remarkable phenomenon. To be sure, he had not been able to take part in the inaugural meeting of the National Committee for a Free Germany, but just like his Catholic friend and colleague Josef Kayser, Schröder decided a little later to work in the National Committee and to accept responsibility. With remarkable industry, he applied himself to the task which had been entrusted to him. As opposed to many other prisoners of war, he did not in any way fear discussions with German communists living in the camps. The tall young man had his own special charisma. Even though he was one of the youngest among the Wehrmacht chaplains, one of the keynote presentations at the National Committee's meeting from the 14th through the 16th of July in 1944 was conferred upon him, along with the closing remarks. Along with five other Wehrmacht chaplains, Schröder was unanimously elected to the board of the newly founded "Church Task Force of the National Committee." With not only his good theological education but also his equally sound humanistic education, and even his musical abilities (he was an excellent organist), he was recognized and respected as an interlocutor by communist writers living in exile in Moscow like Erich Weinert and Friedrich Wolf and even by Theodor Plivier.

So, it is hardly conceivable that any member of the broadcast editing team gave him directives or censored his manuscript with a red pencil. Conversely, it is conceivable that Schröder took up arguments that he heard in discussions. He was deeply convinced that after the terrible defeat in Stalingrad, resistance to Hitler's regime was now the commandment of the moment, especially for Christians. First, it was necessary to bring down the evil monster who had ruled Germany since 1933. Then, society in Germany needed to be reorganized better than before. The resistance against the regime of Hitler, Himmler, and Goebbels was therefore indeed for Schröder a matter of patriotism. However, his resistance arose above all from a decision of personal conscience. Therefore, it is correct to designate his Moscow sermons and speeches not as propaganda but as "testimonies of faith," as "conscientious resistance."

It is tempting to compare these radio addresses and sermons of Johannes Schröder to the addresses that Thomas Mann directed to "German listeners" from 1940 to 1945. It is striking how vigorously and forcefully both men urged the Germans at home to free themselves from Hitler's regime. In their radio broadcasts, both dealt with current political events; both hoped that what they were saying would contribute in some way to the end of the National Socialists' rule and the reestablishment of freedom and justice in Germany. Thomas Mann, in these addresses to "German listeners," referred back frequently to the great cultural tradition of the Germans. Johannes Schröder, on the other hand, oriented himself in his sermons particularly to the tradition of the Confessing Church: to their statements and resistance to Hitler's claim to power even over the church. A great number of Wehrmacht chaplains who were taken prisoner by the Soviets and who became active in the National Committee for a Free Germany had in 1933 and the following years welcomed Hitler's politics and joined the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP). In contrast, Schröder already as a young pastor affiliated himself with the Confessing Church in Schleswig-Holstein immediately after its formation. His dedication in Moscow against the German Christians and Hitler's politics, was, therefore, no late insight that only first matured in him after the defeat of the 6th Army.

As Schröder began to get involved in the National Committee for a Free Germany and to appeal to listeners in Germany over the radio in the summer of 1943, the National Socialists had largely muzzled the Confessing Church. Martin Niemöller had sat in a concentration camp since 1937; Dietrich Bonhoeffer had been imprisoned since April of 1943; other representatives of the Confessing Church had been murdered by the Nazis. Additionally, the Nazis had intimidated the bishops of the so-called "intact churches" (the churches that were not ruled by German Christians). A tactical-diplomatic approach therefore seemed more important to them than open confession. When the Bishop of the Württemberg State Church Theophil Wurm was urgently asked by his church's faithful to take action against the euthanasia program executed by the Nazis, he turned, in a letter, to the Nazi Minister of the Interior Wilhelm Frick. Not even the family members of the euthanasia victims knew anything about his intervention. As opposed to Cardinal Clemens August of Galen in Münster, the Bishop of the Württemberg State Church never stepped into his pulpit in Stuttgart and addressed the wrong that he had heard about. Many pastors of the Confessing Church endured Gestapo spies in the back of the church writing down what they heard. The result: convinced adherents of the Confessing Church did not raise political topics or so hedged their points that only a few members of their congregations understood their hints.

The opposite was the case with Johannes Schröder. He did not need to mince words when he criticized Hitler and the Nazis' criminal politics in his radio sermons and addresses. He could call injustice, injustice and mendacity, mendacity. He could urge and warn and, through the interpretation of Biblical texts, refer directly to the political situation of the present. And most of all, he could demand the end of Hitler's regime without fearing for his life. Schröder's Moscow sermons and addresses are, in this respect, concrete and clear examples of how many pastors of the Confessing Church would probably have preached and spoken if they could have done so without fear for their lives. This confers on the Schröder texts a special quality and a special status. That he took a great personal risk with his sermons and addresses should, of course, not be

underestimated. To be sure, he was not, as were other members of the National Committee for a Free Germany, sentenced *in absentia* to death by a military tribunal for high treason (*Hoch- und Landesverrat*). However, Schröder's family (his wife and their three children) was initially in Kiel held liable for his actions and then sent to the concentration camp in Buchenwald in March of 1945. From there they were sent to the camp in Dachau and then banished to South Tyrol by the *Schutzstaffel* (SS), where they were eventually freed by soldiers of the Wehrmacht and a few days later by the U.S. Army.

In opposition to the traditional understanding of authority and politics of the German Lutheran church, Schröder in his sermons and addresses especially emphasized again and again that authorities who govern as tyrants would lose the loyalty of their subjects. What is more, in such situations the subjects would not be bound by any oath of allegiance, and resistance would be their first and foremost obligation. With almost the same arguments as the Norwegian Bishop Eivind Josef Berggrav, who justified the resistance against the National Socialist occupation of his country since 1940, Schröder explained his position. That even good Lutherans could be commanded to resist in certain situations became accepted in wide circles of German Lutheranism step by step, but only after 1945. Therefore, in retrospect, Schröder's sermons are all the more remarkable on this issue. No less important are Schröder's sermons from the early part and the summer of 1945, in which he dealt with the topic of "guilt" and which expressly discussed (as opposed to the "Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt" of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Germany from the autumn of 1945) the murder of the Jews of Europe, and thus, the Holocaust.

Finally, Schröder's consistent ecumenical attitude must be emphasized. Already during the Russian campaign, he had a close and friendly relationship with his Roman Catholic counterpart Karl Doiwa. Just as informal as the relationship between brothers was Schröder's relationship with the Catholic Wehrmacht chaplains who were taken captive with him, and with whom he collaborated on the board of the Ecclesiastical Task Force of the National Committee for a Free Germany. In a similar non-sectarian manner during the Second World War, the Lutheran Pastor Karl Friedrich Stellbrink

of Lübeck joined three young Catholic chaplains: Hermann Lange, Eduard Müller, and Johannes Prassek. Just like Schröder and his Catholic colleagues, the four Lübeck clergy became friends. Also like Schröder and his colleagues, the men in Lübeck relied on one another without reservation and mutually committed themselves to the termination of Hitler's criminal regime. After the first devastating bombing of their city, the four Lübeck clergymen distributed copies of sermons from Cardinal von Galen of Münster. After they were betrayed by a spy who infiltrated their circle, they were arrested by the Gestapo in 1942. During their year-long imprisonment, they were systematically tortured before they were executed on a scaffold in Hamburg in 1943 one right after the other, so that their blood—what a moving symbol!—actually flowed together. Schröder's Moscow sermons and addresses do not reveal whether he already knew, at that time, the fate of the Lübeck clergy.

The Germans ended up not being spared from Johannes Schröder's feared "second Stalingrad." He was forced, along with Josef Kayser and his other friends in the prison camp, like all others who took part in the resistance within and outside of Germany, to witness the persistence of Hitler's regime until total defeat. Although probably only a limited number of people in Germany heard Schröder's Moscow sermons and addresses, he was forced to pay a very high price for his involvement. First, his family felt the wrath of Hitler's regime. They were, as mentioned, held liable for his actions. But Schröder himself also paid a high price. After his return to Schleswig-Holstein in the early summer of 1946, defamation and the hatred of diehards plagued him for decades. In vain he attempted to convey some of what he had learned during the catastrophe of Stalingrad and his time in Soviet captivity to those in his Schleswig-Holstein homeland and his home church. He was quickly forced to realize that his message met with little attention and hardly found any interest. On the contrary, in Schleswig-Holstein, where many former German Christians continued to serve in the church, and where countless former National Socialists found refuge and reestablished themselves professionally after the war, no one wanted to be reminded of the war and the crimes of the Nazi period.

Disillusioned, in a certain way even excluded, but still full of energy, Johannes Schröder turned to social work in the following years and decades—just as he took care of the ordinary soldiers during the war and his imprisonment—and assumed the newly created position of Lead Pastor with a special portfolio for social concerns for the whole Schleswig-Holstein church in 1955. His Moscow sermons and speeches, even eighty years after the end of the Second World War, have not lost any of their political-analytical clarity, or their theological-moral force—indeed, nor any of their heavy timelessness. The voice, which we hear in his Moscow sermons and addresses from 1943 to 1945, bears witness to his will to resist the evil that was made real through Hitler's criminal politics. Johannes Schröder died in 1990 at the age of 81 in his place of birth, Kiel, where he is buried.

Translated by Nicholas Hopman

Johannes Schröder, Speeches and Sermons

Nr. 54
We are all responsible[4]

I know: I'm touching a hot iron, when I speak this sentence. But if we want to work the iron, we shouldn't fear its glow!

We are all responsible for Hitler, responsible for the horrors of war, for the *unspeakable* crimes that have been committed during this war at Hitler's command? Is this not a suicidal admission? Does it not mean the annihilation of the last moral worth that the German people want to have in the eyes of the world?—No, absolutely not! *Hitler*, in front of the German people, stomped the last bit of respect into the dust, not us! We, instead, through relentless self-examination and struggle want to free ourselves from shame and night into truth, justice, and freedom, into a new day in German history!

What do we mean by our shared responsibility? Not what Goebbels' propaganda threateningly proclaimed to the German people daily, namely, that the German people as a whole would meet with

avenging retaliation for the unspeakable atrocities of Krasnodar and Kharkiv, of Kiev and Lublin.[5] *The Hitler-free world has demonstrated many times, that it abhors the subhuman laws of barbarism.* When we speak of our shared responsibility, this means more than the criminal guilt of an individual criminal or of a gang of criminals among our people. It even seems obvious to us, that every decent German agrees with our demand: "Deserved, merciless judgment for the war criminals" (Manifesto of the National Committee for a Free Germany[6]). But the recognition of our shared responsibility begins when we realize that the apocalyptic crimes, before which the world shudders in bewilderment, are only symptoms of an ideology whose poisonous shoots have infected *us all*!—A bitter truth, but nonetheless the truth!

We go once again back to our thoughts in the year 1933: We heard for the first time of so-called concentration camps. These were camps in which German people, without a judicial warrant, without a legal judgment, and without the protection of legal remedy, disappeared. *This was unprecedented under the German justice system—but it was to be considered simply a "re-education," and it surely involved merely a temporary measure in the revolutionary breakthrough of this "bloodless" revolution.* And—the German people were silent! Then followed the liquidation of the Jews in Germany, and not only did we keep silent about it, but *among the German people it was—although there were various opinions about the methods—largely popular*! The first crippling horrors seized us, when on the 30th of June 1934, without legal proceedings, German men, on the orders of the Reich Chancellor [Hitler], were shot[7]—but we ducked and kept quiet! But thereby the dress rehearsal succeeded, as far as what one could expect from the German people. Thus Hitler, by the bending *of independent law*, dared to cynically proclaim the slogan: "The law is, whatever is useful for the people." That meant *carte blanche* for despotism and murder: *The sanatoriums and care homes in Germany were emptied, and the relatives of the mentally ill victims of this mass murder received urns containing the ashes of patients "who died of pneumonia."*—I know of brave men, who, in the pulpit or in a judge's robe, in a doctor's smock or in worker's overalls, dared to speak an unfettered word for God's commandment and human rights. They paid for their courage in most cases with

their freedom, often with their lives. And you, my German people—we all, you and I, what did we do?—You bow your head,—yes, we *all* kept quiet. Then *finally* the war came. And whoever still wanted to believe in 1939 that it was necessary to break the chains of Versailles, must have been confused on June 22, 1941, when the quiet of a Sunday morning was ripped apart by the crashing of German shells onto Russian soil—despite the existence of a friendship- and non-aggression pact. But we had learned for eight years how to keep quiet and in these eight years our national character had been so fundamentally altered that we took success for justice and plunder for blessing. When a German sailor who was saved from his sunken destroyer out of the Baltic Sea by Russian seamen was asked what he actually thought about this war against Russia, he responded: "Yeah, because we couldn't get the Ukraine through negotiations, we just had to nab it by force of arms!" Thus Hitler, completely according to plan, built level after level, and Lublin is nothing other than the *top level*, built upon all the lower levels, without which it would not at all have been possible! And the mortar between the building blocks of all of these levels is *our silence*!

This is a bitter confession, and it does not come—God knows—easily to our lips. And this confession is also a confession to our *people*! To our people in their deepest shame. *As proud as we are to be the people of Dürer and Luther, Bach, Goethe or Yorck*,[8] *so much do we refuse to separate ourselves from our people today, when the demonic shadows of a Hitler or Himmler darken its noble traits*. No, we are not ashamed of our mother Germany, not even now, when criminals have thrust her into excrement on the street. *But*: We also do not want her to *remain lying* in the excrement in the street. This is the deepest, *positive* purpose, when we *reflect on our shared responsibility*!

Do you now understand, my comrade, why we cannot continue to silently pass over the disgraceful criminal atrocities that German men committed, that, merely through reading about them, turn *my face exactly as yours*, red with shame? We are not actually writing about them in order to pour buckets of dirt on ourselves before all nations or in order to increase the amount of German guilt before all the world—the entire, *wide* world *knew* all of this evidence much more accurately and earlier than we did. *It does not need our disclosure.*

No, when we write about these things, we do it so that even the last deluded Germans will be forced to fix their eyes on the true face of the men who promised us a new, thousand-year Reich. We write of these things, because it is the only way available for us today to condemn them. Tomorrow, when the uniting forces of the war have ended and the perpetrators will be judged, then it will not cost anything to say with everyone, "guilty." But we want already today to shout to the whole world: No, this is not Germany, what you all see murdering, gassing, and burning. Germany is something else, which wants to and will rise up out of shame and disgrace, in order to judge our desecrators and destroy them ourselves.

Our hearts nearly break when we speak of Germany's shame. But: The word of confession becomes the *liberating* word! *The painful breaking inside of us will become a resolute breakthrough to a new way! Of this new way, the great Scandinavian theologian and philosopher Søren Kierkegaard said, "a repentant man, who feels remorse but is too proud to make amends for what he has done wrong, when it could still be made right—then only God knows what such remorse is." This is the new way, which we see ahead of us, rocky and steep—but: it leads uphill.* We want as Germans, for what was committed in the name of Germany and by German hands—as far as it is in our power—*to make amends, not* because of our conquerors' dictates, but for the sake of *German honor.*

A difficult, rocky way is the only way that leads us to *freedom. Here I must now ask my audience for a completely sober consideration: the Allied forces, through their politicians in charge, have repeatedly declared, that they strive not to take the German people's life and freedom, but that a democratically free Germany can only first come into existence and grow to the extent that the German people turn away from the criminal delusion of National Socialist doctrine and deliver visible proof of a new, humane, peaceful ethos. This means: Without first self-examination and confession of our responsibility for the German way of the last ten years, without resolute change and visible proof of a new ethos, no nation in the world will trust us again. Without new trust from the nations in us and without their help, we will never be able to rebuild the rubble that this war has left behind. Thus, moral self-reflection is the prerequisite for the material reconstruction of our homeland, as well as for the political reconstruction of a new democratic form of government, which is the only way that we can again become masters of our own house.*

"We are all responsible;" therefore; we looked backwards by contemplating the path of our people which led to the dark present. "We are all responsible," all the more for Germany's path forward into a better *future*: we must learn to see our history from a positive point of view, even today,—like Friedrich Perthes,[9] the son-in-law of Matthias Claudius, who in the distressful days of political oppression during his life wrote: God has delivered the world to the oppressor "not that it submit to him, but in order that even with terrible birth pains the mortal power of good, through the tormenting power of evil, be reborn. For: the most terrible thing of all would be if after this horrific period, the old, dim period with its broken molds should return. *God will lead us to a new order through times of distress and via frightening paths.* The play will not play backwards—so, forward! *What cannot stand, shall fall. Whoever still wants to turn the wheel backwards, wants only rest, comfort, and private happiness.*"[10]

Nr. 58
Sermon on December 10, 1944[11]

Announcement: You now will hear our Christian morning service for our Protestant listeners for the Second Sunday of Advent. The sermon will be delivered by Chaplain Schröder from Neumünster (Holstein), member of the National Committee for a Free Germany. You will first hear the organ play "Tochter Zion, freue dich . . . [Daughter Zion, rejoice], and at the conclusion, "Macht hoch die Tür, die Tore weit . . . [Fling Wide the Door]."

Organ: Tochter Zion, freue dich [Daughter Zion, rejoice] . . .[12]

Reading: "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God [Isa 40:1]." "We want to look to you, O light, that burns eternally, and earnestly we ask, grant us a blessed Advent!"[13]

Hear with believing hearts the words from the Gospel for today, the Second Sunday of Advent, from the 21st chapter of Luke: "There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations and they will be confused . . . , then

they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near . . . Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man [Luke 21:25-36]." Amen.

Advent is a journey between two poles: Advent calls out of the past the coming of God in the wonder of the holy night and evokes from the future his coming at the end of days. The world stands in the shadow of the coming king.—Christ spoke in powerful images: the nations and kingdoms of this world through war, revolutions, and powerful convulsions; the people through love and suffering, the abysses of evil, betrayal, and hate; the whole universe through catastrophes, unexpected natural phenomena, and powerful effects moves towards the last days of all of history, where the last act of world history and the judgment of the world begins and where this last act becomes simultaneously the threshold and entrance to a new world, to the eternal world of divine perfection, where "God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away [Rev 21:4]." And above the dust of a past world sounds the voice of the redeemer and consummator: "See, I am making all things new [Rev 21:5]."

There is no doubt that war between men has taken on an ever more dreadful form, that in the course of history human evil has been ever more nakedly and unrestrainedly revealed. Who is surprised when believing Christians seek to interpret the signs of the times and believe that the last days of human history have arrived? But, as surely as the words of the epistle for the first Sunday of Advent from Romans 13 are true ("the night is far gone, the day is near"), so Christ has rejected all human calculation concerning the last things as an improper and vain interference in the power of divine control of the world: "it is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority (Acts 1:7)."

For the sixth time Advent stands among the signs of war. Dread and horrors are all around. The world has become damp with human blood and life has become cheap. The steeds of the apocalyptic riders,

war, hunger, epidemics, and death, stomp over the earth, "and on the earth distress among nations and they will be confused . . . [Luke 21:25]" And devastation and dread, death and distress preach to our generation: the pointer on the world's clock moves clearly and inexorably towards God's great final hour. *When* this hour will strike, only God knows.

What does this mean *for us*?—From history we know of enthusiasts, who in their times believed the last day was near and, therefore, gave away or abandoned their worldly possessions, left their work and family in the lurch, in order to await the returning Christ in a state of transcendent rapture. They all became fools and beggars. They did not understand what the signs of the times want to tell us. But here is the meaning, and this meaning is a clear signpost in all of the confusion of life in our days: "be alert at all times and pray that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man [Luke 21:36]."

This leaves no room for fleeing the world and enthusiasm (*Schwärmerei*), for fruitless doubt or indifference. Here our life and prayer obtain eternal importance! In *this* circumstance our daily work should become worthy of one day standing amidst the great trial at the end of all things and days! Whether we in the fateful decision of our people make our hands into tools of injustice and evil, out of the fear of men, or, in fear of God, into weapons of peace and justice, will one day decide our worthiness "to stand before the Son of Man!" Therefore we, precisely as Christians, must defy the destructive frenzy of an irresponsible government and desire to win and inherit for our people a new day of life and grace in our story. We stand under the gaze of the coming king; he should find us at work when he comes.

An earnest gospel for Advent—and nevertheless shines the Advent light as bright as ever: "So stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near [Luke 21:28]."

Here the circle closes from the coming Advent back to the first Advent on that holy night, about which we worship thankfully: "The world was lost, Christ is born: Rejoice, rejoice, O Christendom!"[14] Advent is *redemption*. *This* world with its love and hate, its crying and laughing, its coming and going, with being born and

dying, is not the end. "We wait for a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness is at home [2 Peter 3:13]."—Thus our Christian faith reaches boldly into the future. When some people believe in "The Decline of the West,"[15]—we do not, because we believe in the one who says to us: "Comfort, O comfort my people [Isa 40:1]." For us Christians, the clear command still holds: Be alert and pray, that you be able to stand before the Son of Man!—Thus we pray in Advent:

> Once as with the dawn
> Into the world of dark needs
> Will break your day of glory!
> For you will fulfill your kingdom,
> And all struggle end,
> Lord, we stand ready for you![16]
> Amen.

Prayer. Come, Lord, our Savior . . .
Our Father . . .
Benediction.
Choir song: Fling Wide the Door, Unbar the Gate…[17]

Sendoff: You heard our evangelical morning service for the Second Sunday of Advent. The sermon was delivered by Chaplain Schröder from Neumünster, member of the National Committee for a Free Germany.

Translated by Nicholas Hopman from Johannes Schröder, Waches Gewissen—Aufruf zum Widerstand: Reden und Predigten eines Wehrmachtpfarrers aus sowjetischer Gefangenschaft 1943–1945*, eds. Christiane Godt, Peter Godt, Hartmut Lehmann, Silke Lehmann, and Jens Holger Schjørring (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2021), 226–230, 238–241, with permission from the Wallstein Verlag.*

NOTES

1. Johannes Schröder, *Waches Gewissen—Aufruf zum Widerstand: Reden und Predigten eines Wehrmachtpfarrers aus sowjetischer Gefangenschaft 1943–1945*, eds. Christiane Godt, Peter Godt, Hartmut Lehmann, Silke Lehmann, and Jens Holger Schjørring (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2021).

2. Awarded upon successful completion of final exams after secondary school in Germany.

3. Schröder, *Waches Gewissen—Aufruf zum Widerstand*, 43. All the quotations within this newly written introduction are from *Waches Gewissen—Aufruf zum Widerstand*.

4. This text appears in the estate of Johannes Schröder in a longer and a somewhat shorter version, both without dates. It finds its place here [in Johannes Schröder, *Waches Gewissen—Aufruf zum Widerstand*] according to the text's concurrent publication in the newspaper "Freies Deutschland [Free Germany]." In the longer version the "reader" is addressed but not in the shorter version. It is unclear whether a third version existed, which was broadcast. This is the longer version of the text. The shorter version was published with a few minor stylistic changes with the title, "Bekenntnis zu unserem Volk [Confession to Our People]" in the newspaper "Freies Deutschland," Year 2, Number 47, 19. November 1944, p. 3. [The original German text is found on pp. 226-230 of the book cited in note 1.]

5. Locations of National Socialist war crimes and massacres.

6. The Manifest of the National Committee for a Free Germany to the Armed Forces and the German People of July 13, 1943. Printed in Klaus Drobisch, *Christen im Nationalkomitee "Freies Deutschland." Eine Dokumentation* (Berlin: Union-Verlag, 1973), 143.

7. This is a reference to the so-called "Röhm-Putsch," "The Night of the Long Knives."

8. The shorter version reads "Gneisenau" instead of Yorck. Ludwig Graf Yorck von Wartenburg (1759–1830) abandoned Prussia's coalition with France and signed the Convention of Tauroggen with Russia.

9. Friedrich Christoph Perthes (1772–1843).

10. Friedrich Perthes, *Leben nach dessen schriftlichen und mündlichen Aufzeichnungen, von Clemens Theodor Perthes*, Bd. 1 (Gotha: Verlag von Friedrich und Andreas Perthes, 1872), 143f.

11. Another example of this text is in the Bundesarchiv Berlin-Lichterfelde, Signature SGY 12/132. The original German text is found on pp. 238–241 of the book.

12. Text: Friedrich Heinrich Ranke, 1826; Melody: Georg Friedrich Händel, 1747.

13. From the poem "Im Winter" by Max von Schenkendorf (1783–1817), sixth verse.

14. From the hymn "O du fröhliche." "Welt ging verloren, Christ ward geboren, Freue, freue dich, o Christenheit!"

15. Oswald Spengler (1880–1936), *The Decline of the West*. The first of numerous editions was published in German in 1918.

16. Text: Elisabeth van Randenborgh, "Sonne glänzt auf deinen Fluren," 1922, sixth verse; Melody: Theophil Stein, 1856.

> Einst wie lauter Morgenröte
> in der Welten dunkle Nöte
> bricht dein Reich [actually "Tag voll Herrlichkeit [day full of glory]" voll
> Herrlichkeit!
> Dann wirst du dein Reich vollenden,
> Alle Kampfesnot beenden,
> Herr, wir stehn für dich bereit!

17. Macht hoch die Tür", 1642, fifth verse; Melody: Halle, 1704. *Lutheran Service Book* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2006), 340 "Lift Up Your Heads, Ye Mighty Gates," stanza 5. *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978), 32 "Fling Wide the Door," stanza 4.