

## A Time to Kill Tyrants:

### Review of the movie "Bonhoeffer" (2024)

by Kevin Annett



*Religion is always on the side of the biggest battalions.* – Napoleon

Dietrich Bonhoeffer has always been a cult figure among Christians, at least since his hanging in April 1945 for plotting to kill Adolf Hitler. Desperate to sanitize their own sordid record of complicity with the Nazis, Protestant and Catholic churches blithely venerate the Lutheran pastor as a Just War Christian Soldier who swallowed his pacifism to overthrow a dictator.

Tyrannicide is a hot topic these days, as King Donald the First prepares to be crowned. Coincidence or not, the recent global release of the film *Bonhoeffer* raises again the thorny issue of whether it is just and lawful to kill a tyrant; and if doing so is a cure for an entire nation's complicity in the crimes that bred that ruler.

*Bonhoeffer* might have explored those matters if its producers had portrayed the man as he was, rather than a Christ-like figure mouthing trite pieties, even on the gallows.

The complexity of Bonhoeffer's journey to armed resistance against Hitler, his incisive writings, and the dissident Confessing Church which he helped lead is nowhere to be found in the film. Frankly, I could have carved a more accurate script out of a banana. But that's what comes from handing the screen writing to someone whose previous creations were banal, low-grade flicks like "Elf" and "Sully". Dietrich Bonhoeffer and his memory deserve better.

That said, even with its thin, corny script, *Bonhoeffer* does manage to briefly touch on the heart of the matter: namely, how criminally complicit Christians deal with a tyranny they've helped to create; and whether redemption can be found by snuffing out the tyrant. It's an issue very close to home.

"The thing we've feared is here and it's unstoppable," says Bonhoeffer's sister Sabine early in the film, soon after Hitler takes power. "How *can* you stop a thing that comes from us?"

How, indeed? Many Americans might be wondering the same thing nowadays. As for Bonhoeffer, he replies to his sister that Hitler can and must be stopped. And so, in a comic-book, super-hero manner, the resolute pastor sets out to take down the Nazis singlehandedly, especially after watching brownshirts load Jewish families onto trucks at gunpoint.

All that is fanciful, of course. In real life, Dietrich Bonhoeffer only cautiously dipped his toe into the river of anti-Nazi resistance, and not because of any outrage at Jewish pogroms. Similarly, the Confessing Church had nothing to say at first about the Nazis' Jew killing and mass imprisonment of political oppositionists. With typical Christian self-interest, it limited its work to opposing Hitler's Nazification of church rituals. Only later did Bonhoeffer make contact with broader oppositional circles, after the Confessing Church had collapsed. But that bigger Resistance, including the Communist-led underground and the German army's attempt to kill Hitler in July 1944, is never portrayed and barely mentioned in the film.

With such glaring deficiencies, *Bonhoeffer* doesn't shed much light on the essential dilemma of how tyranny can be stopped by the very people - and Christians - who caused it.

The scene depicting a failed attempt to blow up Hitler by a Bonhoeffer-backed conspirator personifies the problem of tyrannicide: namely, that tyranny has one figurehead but many roots, and killing a dictator doesn't stop dictatorship when most people want it.

The vast majority of German Christians supported Hitler to the end, especially after the early, rapid endorsement of him by the Vatican and the German Protestant Union. The romanticized myth of a "Christian resistance" to Nazism is as false and deceitful as the claim that today's churches regret and wish to "heal" their centuries-long extermination of indigenous people. The World Council of Churches, which fervently propagates the Bonhoeffer cult, has with equal duplicity denied and buried the hard evidence of Christian genocide in Canada.

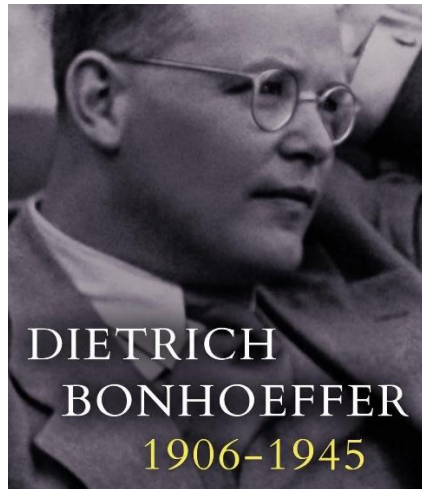
Is it ever just and lawful to kill a tyrant? *Bonhoeffer* says yes, but only because of Dietrich's personal moral outrage at Hitler. In competent hands, the film could have cited the rich Biblical and common law tradition that requires and authorizes the overthrow of dictators.

*"Wicked kings and tyrants ought to be put to death. Resistance to tyranny is obedience to God,"* wrote the father of the Scottish Reformation, John Knox, in 1566. Echoing him, the legal scholar and inspirer of America's Revolution, George Buchanan, said in 1579, *"Authority is given by God to all the people, not to a single ruler. The people thereby have the right and obligation to overthrow and kill any despot who threatens their God-given natural liberty."*

Tyrants take heed.

Probably the best aspect of *Bonhoeffer* is its reminder to us that genuine change always happens through a violent separation from the status quo rather than by trying to resuscitate a dead body politic. *"All genuine Christians must leave the German Reich Church and its allegiance to the Nazi State,"* declares Dietrich Bonhoeffer from his pulpit. *"For us there is now only Christ without the Church, Christ without religion."*

That's as revolutionary and disruptive a message today as it was in 1933, and a threat to tyrant-serving Christians in any age.



*"To not act against Hitler is to act for him. To not overthrow him is to participate in the violence of the Nazis. The Lord Jesus did not shun violence in his attack on a corrupted Temple; nor should we."* – Dietrich Bonhoeffer, June 1934

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**More on the right and duty of Tyrannicide:**

*A tyrant has declared war against the people by being a tyrant, and therefore the people have the natural right of self-defense to oppose and kill that enemy. For us, there can be no fellowship with tyrants; on the contrary there is complete estrangement. The whole pestilential and irreverent class ought to be expelled from the community of mankind.*  
– Cicero, Roman Senate, 58 BC

*It is Lawful, and has been held so through all Ages, for any person to call to account a Tyrant or wicked KING, and after due conviction, to depose and put him to death if the ordinary MAGISTRATE has neglected or refused to do it.* – John Milton, *Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, 1649

*The jus gladii, the right of the sword, is conferred by God not upon the ruler but all the people, who have the power to execute the law of nature.* – John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, 1690

