

Jehovah's Witnesses, Anti-semitism and the Third Reich: (part 1)

The Watch Tower Society's Attempted Compromise with Nazism

Since the Second World War, the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society has taught Jehovah's Witnesses that while the German churches, both Catholic and Protestant, were guilty of compromise with Hitler and the Nazi Party, their German brethren, then commonly known as "Earnest Bible Students," stood solidly against the principles of the Third Reich. Because of the brave stand taken by most ordinary German Witnesses in the face of a terrible persecution that cost many of them their lives in Hitler's concentration camps, they have rightly been praised by secular historians—a fact which the Watch Tower Society has used to buttress its assertions.

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For example, *The Watchtower* magazine of October 1, 1984 (p. 8), reported the findings of Christine E. King and Michael Kater to the effect that the number of Witness imprisonments and deaths brought about by Nazi persecution had been greatly underestimated. Quoting Dr. King, it stated:

"Theological principles were adhered to; Witnesses remained "neutral," they were honest and completely trustworthy and as such, ironically, often found themselves employed as servants of the S.S."

What has not generally been known either by most Jehovah's Witnesses or many independent scholars, however, is that while ordinary German Witnesses did generally maintain their integrity and commitment to their principles, their leaders—the Watch Tower's second president, Judge Joseph F. Rutherford, and the man who succeeded him in office in 1942, Nathan H. Knorr, plus high German Watch Tower officials—did not.

Furthermore, Rutherford and his lieutenants tried to save the German arm of their movement by scapegoating the Jews and attacking Great Britain, the United States, and the League of Nations.

During the first half of their history, the Bible Student-Jehovah's Witnesses were notable for their sympathy to the Jews. Even more than most late nineteenth- and twentieth-century American Protestant premillennialists, the Watch Tower's first president, Charles T. Russell, was a thoroughgoing supporter of Zionist causes. He refused to attempt the conversion of the Jews, believed in the Jewish resettlement of Palestine, and in 1910, led a New York Jewish audience in singing the Zionist anthem, Hatikva. ^[1]For more than a decade after Russell's death in 1916, Judge Rutherford followed in his footsteps.

In 1925 he produced a small book entitled *Restoration*, based on a series of radio broadcasts he had given, and in 1926 he published a similar volume called *Comfort for the Jews*. In both, he proclaimed himself a friend of the Jewish people and asserted that Jewish migration to the ancient Holy Land was a fulfillment of biblical prophecy. Identical Publisher's Forewords to *Restoration* and *Comfort for the Jews* stated:

THE rebuilding of Palestine is claiming the attention of Jews throughout the earth. Some of the Gentile world powers are outwardly favoring the movement but manifestly for selfish reasons.

JUDGE RUTHERFORD, known throughout the world as a friend of the Hebrew people, is vigorously supporting the claim of the Jews to the Holy Land. He is opposed to proselytizing the Jews, holding that such is not only wrong but contrary to the Scriptures. His lectures to large audiences, which have been broadcast throughout the world, on "JEWS RETURNING TO PALESTINE", have created an intense interest. There is a good demand for them in printed form. He has simplified these lectures and now presents them in book form. This volume will be of profound interest to Jews and Gentiles alike. It is the first unbiased presentation of the subject from the Scriptural viewpoint published.

The Publishers send forth this volume confident that it will do much good.

In 1930 Rutherford produced a larger volume on the same theme called *Life*. But suddenly he repudiated his beliefs respecting the Jews. *Life* was withdrawn from circulation,^[2] and in 1932 Rutherford proclaimed that "fleshly Israel" had no specific role to play in salvation history. He wrote:

The Jews were evicted from Palestine and 'their house left unto them desolate' because they rejected Christ Jesus, the beloved and anointed King of Jehovah. To this day the Jews have not repented of this wrongful act committed by their forefathers. Many of them have been returned to the land of Palestine, but they have been induced to go there because of selfishness and for sentimental reasons.

During the long period elapsing from the time of their expulsion to the present day the Jews have not "borne the shame of the heathen" for Jehovah's sake, nor for the name of Christ. During all this period of time, and particularly during the World War, the true followers of Christ Jesus devoted to God, and to his kingdom, have been bearing the shame of the heathen and have been hated by all the nations for Christ's sake and the sake of Jehovah's name. (Matt. 24: 9; Mark 13: 13)

In contrast to this, during the World War the Jews received recognition of the heathen nations. In 1917 the Balfour Declaration, sponsored by the heathen governments of Satan's organization, came forth, recognized the Jews, and bestowed upon them great favors. In this the seventh world power [the British Empire] took the lead. Now Big Business and other wings of Satan's organization place the Jews alongside of and in the same category as the Gentiles. Heretofore even God's people have overlooked the fact that the affairs of God's kingdom with reference to the things of the earth are of far greater importance than the rehabilitation of that little strip of land on the eastern side of the Mediterranean sea. The Jews have received more attention at their hands than they have really deserved. Therefore this prophecy [of Isaiah] must have its chief fulfillment upon the true people of God's kingdom which are now on earth.

^[3]

Perhaps the judge was simply anxious to assert that Jehovah's Witnesses were the "true Israel of God," but it seems that he had other reasons for making such a dramatic doctrinal switch without any more detailed explanation. While he may formerly have proclaimed himself a pro-Zionist "friend of the Hebrew people" in the tradition of his predecessor, he occasionally manifested a streak of deep-seated anti-semitism.

For example, while giving a talk on biblical prophecies respecting the return of the Jews to Palestine at a Canadian Bible Student convention in Winnipeg, Manitoba, in the early 1920s, he interjected:

"I'm speaking of the Palestine Jew, not the hooked-nosed, stooped-shouldered little individual who stands on the street corner trying to gyp you out of every nickel you've got."

^[4]

But there were no doubt other factors in 1932 which impelled him to abandon the Bible Students' long tradition of philo-Judaism besides simple personal bias. During the late 1920s and early 1930s anti-semitism was becoming rampant in the United States and Canada with the rise of a variety of movements both religious and political. ^[5] And with the start of the Depression in 1929, it began to appear possible that the violently anti-Jewish Nazis could come to power in Germany - something

which happened on January 30, 1933. So it seems clear that Rutherford and the Witnesses were short-sighted as to what they could do during the first year of the Third Reich. Yet these facts can in no way excuse what he and his aids were shortly to do during the first year of the Third Reich.

Early in April 1933 the Nazis moved against Jehovah's Witnesses. Their branch headquarters at Magdeburg were seized, and their religious activities were temporarily stopped. But on April 28, German authorities returned the properties to the Watch Tower Society to their American owners, no doubt to keep from offending the United States. [6] However, Witness leaders and Jehovah's Witnesses in general knew that they were not popular with the Nazis. So according to an official Witness account, Judge Rutherford and the German Witness community decided to take a bold stand against the Hitler dictatorship.

The book *Jehovah's Witnesses in The Divine Purpose*, published by the Watch Tower Society in 1957, states:

Judge Rutherford had been watching the German situation closely and was well acquainted with its development as it affected the witness work. With this serious turn of events he lost no time in going to Germany, accompanied by N. H. Knorr, to see what could be done. On June 25..., a convention was called in Berlin. There a Declaration of Facts was presented to the 7,000 in attendance in protest against the Hitler government for their highhanded interference with the witness work of the Society, and was unanimously adopted. The declaration was mailed to every high officer of the government from the president down to the members of the council, and 2,500,000 copies were given public distribution. Retaliation came quickly. Three days later, on June 28, for the second time the Society's property was seized and occupied, and by government decree its printing plant was closed.

[7] But was the seizure of Watch Tower property by the German government on June 28, 1933 really because the Declaration of Facts was a bold protest against Nazi actions? No, quite the contrary. In a tape-recorded account of the history of Jehovah's Witnesses in Germany, former Watch Tower Society "branch servant" or "overseer" Konrad Franke tells that when he and another Jehovah's Witness arrived at the Berlin Sporthalle Wilmersdorf where the 1933 Witness convention was being held, they were shocked. The building was bedecked with Swastika flags - evidently to please the Nazis. Then during the convention itself, the Witness faithful were called on to sing a hymn that they had not sung in Germany for years. While they had no objection to the words, the music was the same as that of the German national anthem, "*Deutschland, Deutschland über alles.*" [8]

As for the Declaration and an accompanying letter sent to Adolf Hitler personally, they were nothing short of self-serving statements which attempted to ingratiate Jehovah's Witnesses with the Nazis. Under a sub-section entitled "Jews," the Declaration reads:

It is falsely charged by our enemies that we have received financial support for our work from the Jews. Nothing is farther from the truth. Up to this moment there never has been the slightest bit of money contributed to our work by Jews. We are the faithful followers of Christ Jesus and believe upon Him as the Savior of the world, whereas the Jews entirely reject Jesus Christ and emphatically deny that he is the Savior of the world sent of God for man's good. This of itself should be sufficient proof to show that we receive no support from Jews and therefore the charges against us are maliciously false and could only proceed from Satan, our great enemy.

The greatest and most oppressive empire on earth is the Anglo-American empire. By this is meant the British Empire, of which the United States of America forms a part. It has been the commercial Jews of the British-American Empire that have built up and carried on Big Business as a means of exploiting and oppressing the peoples of many nations. This fact particularly applies to the cities of London and New York, the stronghold of Big Business. This fact is so manifest in America that there is a proverb concerning the city of New York which says: "the Jews own it, the Irish Catholics rule it, and the Americans pay the bills." We have no fight with any of these persons mentioned but, as witnesses for Jehovah and in obedience to his commandment set forth in the Scriptures, we are compelled to call attention to the truth concerning the same in order that the people may be enlightened concerning God and his purpose.

[9] **That was not all.** Besides damning the League of Nations, the Declaration said:

"The present government of Germany has declared against Big Business oppressors and in opposition to the wrongful religious influence in the political affairs of the nation. Such is exactly our position...." [10]

Then it proclaimed:

"Instead of being against the principles advocated by the government of Germany, we stand squarely for such principles, and point out that Jehovah God through Christ Jesus will bring about the full realization of these principles."

[11] The letter sent to Hitler was equally compromising in nature. To ingratiate the Witnesses with the Nazi Führer, it claimed that the Watch Tower Society had been and was "outstandingly friendly to Germany." But more than that, it falsely asserted that Rutherford and seven members of the Board of Directors of the Watch Tower Society had been sentenced to eighty years in prison "because the [Watch Tower] president refused to use two magazines published by him in the United States for war propaganda against Germany." [12]

As Jehovah's Witnesses were soon to discover, the Nazis were not impressed by either their Declaration or the Society's letter to Hitler.

Many Germans were thoroughly aware that they had long been pro-Zionist, and Nazis officials were hardly so stupid as not to know that in many ways they stood in direct opposition to what the Hitler and his associates proclaimed and demanded. The Witnesses were internationalists in a religious sense and were generally quite tolerant of persons of other races; they regarded secular authority as of the devil; and, above all, they were openly anti-militaristic [13] - all factors which caused the nationalistic, racist, and militaristic Nazis to despise them. Thus the German government unleashed a wave of persecution against the Witnesses almost immediately.

On June 27, 1933, one day after they begin sending copies of the Declaration by registered mail to German officials, the Prussian Land or state banned them, and the police began to carry out widespread raids on their homes and places of business. As has been noted above, the Society's Magdeburg offices were seized again on June 28.

Ultimately, between two and three million marks worth of Watch Tower property was confiscated and destroyed by the Nazis. [14] But it was then, and only then, that Rutherford and the Watch Tower Society decided to oppose Nazi policies in an uncompromising fashion. For some time thereafter, German Witnesses were divided over what they should do. [15]

Although after the Second World War most Jehovah's Witnesses and others were unaware of the compromising actions of Witness leaders in the Germany of 1933, there were some who still remembered the Berlin convention.

Furthermore, copies of both the Declaration and the Watch Tower letter to Hitler remained extant. So when the Watch Tower Society published a history of Jehovah's Witnesses in Germany in the *1974 Yearbook of Jehovah's Witnesses*, it was necessary to deal with what were very embarrassing data in a way which would not make the Society's Brooklyn leaders look guilty of violating their own teachings. Thus the full responsibility for the attempted compromise with Hitler and the Nazis was placed on the shoulders of Paul Balzereit, the Society's German branch servant at the time.

Because of the importance of the Society's present official position on this matter, the *1974 Yearbook* account of the 1933 Berlin convention is given in full. It reads:

By the summer of 1933 the work of Jehovah's Witnesses had been banned in the majority of German states. the brothers' homes were being searched regularly and many brothers had been arrested. The flow of spiritual food was partially hampered, although only for a time; still many brothers were asking how long it would be possible to continue the work. In this situation the congregations were invited on very short notice to a convention to be held in Berlin on June 25. Since it was expected that many would be unable to attend because of the various bans, the congregations were encouraged to send at

least one or several delegates. But, as it turned out, 7,000 brothers got there. For many of them it took three days, some riding bicycles the entire distance, whereas others went by truck, since the bus companies refused to rent buses to a banned organization.

Brother Rutherford, who, together with Brother Knorr, had come to Germany just a few days before in order to see what could be done to ensure the safety of the Society's property, had prepared a declaration with Brother Balzereit to be presented to the convention delegates for adoption. It was a protest against the meddling of the Hitler government into the preaching work we were doing. All high government officials, from the Reich's president on down, were to receive a copy of the declaration, if possible, by registered mail. Several days before the convention started Brother Rutherford returned to America.

Many in attendance were disappointed in the "declaration," since in many points it failed to be as strong as the brothers had hoped. Brother Mütze from Dreseden, who had worked closely with Brother Balzereit up until that time, accused him later of having weakened the original text. It was not the first time that Brother Balzereit had watered down the clear and unmistakable language of the Society's publications so as to avoid difficulties with governmental agencies.

A large number of brothers refused to adopt it just for this reason. In fact, a former pilgrim brother [traveling evangelist] by the name of Kipper refused to offer it for adoption and another brother substituted. It could not rightfully be said that the declaration was unanimously adopted, even though Brother Balzereit later notified Brother Rutherford that it had been.

The conventioners returned home tired and many were disappointed. They took 2,100,000 copies of the "declaration" home with them, however, and made fast work of distributing them and sending them to numerous persons in positions of responsibility. The copy sent to Hitler was accompanied by a letter that, in part, read:

"The Brooklyn presidency of the Watch Tower Society is and always has been *exceedingly friendly to Germany*. In 1918 the president of the Society and seven members of the Board of Directors in America were sentenced to 80 years' imprisonment for the reason that the *president refused to let two magazines* in America, which he edited, *be used in war propaganda against Germany*."

Even though the declaration had been weakened and many brothers could not wholeheartedly agree to its adoption, yet the government was enraged and started a wave of persecution against those who had distributed it.

[16]

The question now arises, how well does this account stand up?

In the first place, it continues to assert wrongly in the tradition of *Jehovah's Witnesses in the Divine Purpose* that there were 7,000 present at the 1933 Berlin convention. The Declaration is clear in repeatedly asserting that there were only 5,000 delegates there. But that is a small matter.

What is more significant is that the *1974 Yearbook* account assumes - apparently on no more authority than the unsubstantiated beliefs of a "Brother Mütze from Dreseden" - that Paul Balzereit was the one who "weakened" the Declaration.

Balzereit may well have been responsible for having the Declaration translated into German, and he may also have been responsible for drafting the letter to Hitler. Yet there is clear evidence to suggest that he did not tamper with the wording of the Declaration.

1. **First, the Watch Tower Society published the English version of the Declaration - which is virtually identical to the German version - in the 1934 Year Book of Jehovah's Witnesses as its official statement to Hitler, the German government, and German officials, high and low; and this it would not have done without Rutherford's full approval.**
2. **Second, the English version of the Declaration is clearly written in the judge's own bombastic style.**
3. **Third, the statements directed against the Jews in the Declaration are more in keeping with what an American such as Rutherford would have written rather than a German. How, for example, would Balzereit know the "proverb," so called, concerning New York which says: "the Jews own it, the Irish Catholics rule it, and the Americans pay the bills"?** Fourth, Rutherford had been guilty of a similar compromise with secular authority in the United States in 1918 in a vain attempt to escape imprisonment. [17]
4. **Then finally, he was an autocrat supreme who would not have brooked the serious type of insubordination that Balzereit would have been guilty of had he "weakened" the Declaration.**

While it must be admitted that this evidence, although strong, is circumstantial rather than direct, this makes little difference in the long run. Regardless of who wrote the Declaration, *the fact is that it was published as an official document of the Watch Tower Society.*

Thus the American leaders of the Society - and Judge J. F. Rutherford in particular - were directly responsible for what was outright anti-Semitism and a willingness to compromise their loudly trumpeted principle of "Christian neutrality" in order to continue their publishing and preaching work in Germany.

So the leadership of Jehovah's Witnesses, like the those who led almost every other church, sect, and cult in the Third Reich were willing, under the circumstances of the times, to betray their most sacred values.

But that is not all.

The Watch Tower Society is guilty of an ongoing cover-up of its past concerning these matters. While the Society still boasts of the bravery of German Jehovah's Witnesses in their refusal to submit to the dictates of Nazism, it also continues to try to hide its leaders' attempt to compromise with the Nazis in 1933. Although *The Watchtower* of October 1, 1984 quoted from Christine King's *The Nazi State and the New Religions*, its publishers failed to note what Dr. King had written about the Society's 1933 Declaration of Facts.

For example, in a brief evaluation of that document, she makes what, from a Witness standpoint, is a rather damning remark. She says:

"The document is a master of its kind and worthy of the other four sects [the Christian Scientists, the Latter-day Saints, the Seventh-day Adventists and members of the New Apostolic Church] all of whom supported, in one way or another, the Nazi state."

[18] In another paragraph, she remarks:

"Having attempted to assure the authorities by the Declaration of Facts, of their good citizenship, having interpreted and explained their teachings in a way, which given the preoccupations of the regime, was designed to allay fears and offer a hint of compromise, the Witnesses seemed to have expected little further harassment. Had the Declaration not condemned with the Nazis, the League of Nations, had it not described National Socialism as standing out against the injustices Germans had suffered since 1919 and had it not ended with a personal appeal to the Führer?"

[19] So it is hardly possible that the present-day leadership of the Society can be ignorant of the Declaration and its compromising, anti-Semitic nature.

Despite such statements by Dr. King, however, the June 8, 1985 *Awake!* (p. 10) damned both the Catholic and the Protestant clergy for supporting Nazism and proclaimed: "However, there was one group in Germany that courageously championed Christian principles. That group was Jehovah's Witnesses. Unlike the clergy and their followers, the Witnesses refused to compromise with Hitler and the Nazis. They refused to violate God's commandments. They would not break their Christian neutrality in political affairs. (See Isaiah 2:2-4; John 17:16; James 4:4.) They did not attribute Heil, or salvation, to Hitler, as did the overwhelming majority of their flocks." And more recent issues of both *Awake!* and *The Watchtower* have taken much the same tack.

Awake! published several articles on the Holocaust in its April 8, 1989 issue in which it argued rightly that many others besides Jews had died as a result of Nazi extermination policies. Dealing with the persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses from 1933 to the collapse of the Third Reich in 1945, one of these articles, "The Holocaust: Victims or Martyrs?", states on page 12:

"They [Jehovah's Witnesses] were of many nationalities but were misconstrued as a pacifist threat to Germany's National Socialist regime because of their Christian stand of neutrality and refusal to be incorporated into the war effort of any nation. Hitler called them a `brood to be exterminated.'"

Significantly, this article also quotes Christine King, but it makes no mention of either the Declaration of Facts or the Society's 1933 letter to Hitler.

Then, just after the publication of the April 8, 1989 *Awake!*, a series of articles appeared in the April 1 and 15 and May 1 and 15, 1989 issues of *The Watchtower* on the subject of "Babylon the Great." Referring to the great "whore" or "harlot" described at Revelation 17, these articles identified her as the world-wide empire of false religion which has "committed fornication with the kings of the earth." Accordingly, *The Watchtower* censured both Catholicism and Protestantism - which they regard as parts of Babylon the Great - in the harshest terms for having supported various European secular governments in past centuries and, especially, for having been in league with Nazism during the Second World War. But not once in these articles does the anonymous author admit that, from the standpoint of their own teachings, Watch Tower leaders were also were willing to commit "fornication" with the rulers of the Third Reich had the Nazis been willing to let them get into bed with them.

What is even more serious is that when confronted with the facts relating to the Watch Tower German Declaration of 1933, the Society's spokesmen have denied them categorically. In 1985, when I published a brief synopsis of the nature of the Declaration in my book *Apocalypse Delayed*,^[20] Watch Tower officials attacked me in the strongest terms, practically calling me a liar.

The Society's public relations officer for Canada, Walter Graham, claimed "the declaration was neither to placate Hitler nor anti-Semitic," and he said respecting me:

"Penton does have an axe to grind. He has been trying to discredit the Jehovah's Witnesses ever since he was removed from the society."

Yet curiously, he admitted that he had not read the evidence that I had presented. He said: We aren't interested in reading it. We're not interested in what James Penton does, writes or thinks, because he has chosen not to be one of us."^[21] In a similar vein, Eugene Rosam, a senior Watch Tower official of Jewish ancestry, refused to comment on *Apocalypse Delayed*. "We have no comment on the publication," said Rosam. "Anybody can write a book and get it published. It's just surprising some people refer to it as if it were Gospel."^[22]

It is not surprising that Jehovah's Witness leaders are reluctant to discuss the nature of the Declaration, the Watch Tower letter to Hitler, or the Berlin convention of June 1933 any more than is necessary. After all, no religious organization is anxious to broadcast its past sins. Yet the cover-up surrounding the nature of those events is hypocritical, especially since the Watch Tower Society is so uncharitable towards other religions over their collaboration with Nazism. None the less, the Watch Tower Society has no other real option than to attempt to continue that cover-up. Jehovah's Witnesses claim that the collective body of persons who have governed them since 1919 have been and are the "anointed footstep followers Jesus Christ, described as `the remaining ones of her [God's heavenly organization's] seed, who observe the commandments of God and have the work of bearing witness to Jesus.'"^[23]

Thus to admit that they had compromised with a regime such as that of Hitler would be contradictory to this claim. On the basis of their own teachings, it would make them just another part of Babylon the Great! So in order to demonstrate clearly that the account given in this article is historically accurate and that the basic facts presented are irrefutable, we reprint full documentation in the pages that follow.