

Franz Hildebrandt on the BBC: Wartime Broadcasting to Nazi Germany

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Franz Hildebrandt, a German pastor of Jewish descent, fled Nazi persecution in 1937, making his way to England, where he served as a minister in Cambridge. During the Second World War Hildebrandt worked with the British Broadcasting Corporation as one of a cadre of pastors, mostly refugees of Jewish descent, to preach German-language sermons over the airwaves. This article analyses Hildebrandt's sermons, delivered between 1942 and 1945, to an audience that risked prosecution and even death simply for listening. Within the constraints of a Christian worship service, Hildebrandt offered incisive criticisms of the Nazi regime from a distinctly religious perspective.

The Nazi regime targeted and persecuted German pastors of Jewish descent, a small but significant segment of German society. This persecution resulted in grave personal and professional hardships that prevented them from effectively ministering to their communities of faith. Historians have examined the ministries and forced exiles of many of these pastors, including Franz Hildebrandt, a member and the treasurer of the *Pfarrernotbund* (Pastors' Emergency League), which would become the *Bekennende Kirche* (Confessing Church) in May 1934. Hildebrandt was a colleague of Martin Niemöller at St Anne's Church in Dahlem-Berlin and a close friend of the pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer.¹ The Nazi state, and even some of his fellow Christians, sought to exclude

BBC = British Broadcasting Corporation; GRAC = German Religious Advisory Committee; NLS = National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh

All translations from the original German are by the author.

¹ Amos Cresswell and Maxwell Tow, *Dr Franz Hildebrandt: Mr Valiant-for-the-truth*, Macon, GA 2000; Holger Roggelin, *Franz Hildebrandt: ein lutherischer Dissenter im Kirchenkampf und Exil*, Göttingen 1999; Herbert Strauss and Werner Röder (eds), *International biographical dictionary of central European emigrés, 1933–1945*, New York

Hildebrandt from German public life because of his Jewish ancestry. This culminated in his arrest, imprisonment and subsequent exile upon his release from prison in 1937. Despite this treatment, he found a way to demonstrate publicly not only his great concern for the German Churches, the German people and for Germany itself as a nation, but to criticise the Nazi state and its ideology from the authority of the metaphorical pulpit. As an exile in England during the Second World War, he preached sermons over the airwaves into Nazi Germany *via* the BBC. This chapter of Hildebrandt's remarkable wartime preaching ministry deserves more attention.

This article explores Hildebrandt's role in the German religious broadcasting programme at the BBC, the research involved, as well as the freedom he had and the constraints he experienced. This involved an examination of thirteen sermons that Hildebrandt preached on air, all from the latter years of the Second World War, between 1942 and 1945.² In each of these sermons, he used the Christian Scriptures as a common, authoritative bond to unite Christians who had become divided by war and to provide instruction and edification to German listeners. His messages to Christians in Nazi Germany were shaped and informed by the genre of the sermon, grounded in Scripture and informed by tradition.

Hildebrandt preached with the guiding assumption that Christianity was a life-affirming worldview capable of effectively countering destructive Nazi ideology. While never explicitly or publicly naming Hitler or calling for his removal from office in these broadcast sermons, Hildebrandt criticised him as a leader of a disastrous worldview based on exclusion and the denial of human dignity. Hildebrandt also strongly condemned the Nazi persecution of Christians and the German Churches, and he emphasised the incompatibility of National Socialism and Christianity as competing belief systems. He called on Germans to reevaluate their allegiances to God and country and to Christ and Hitler. Hildebrandt offered specific and incisive opposition to the Nazi regime from a distinctly religious perspective. His comments were grounded in religious principles and values, and formulated in response to scriptural injunctions and lessons. In these ways Hildebrandt's oppositional comments often differed from criticisms of the regime expressed in German beer halls, factory floors or university halls.³

1983, 508; Ronald Webster, 'German "non-Aryan" clergymen and the anguish of exile after 1933', *Journal of Religious History* xxii/1 (1998), 83–103.

² As far as I am aware, these thirteen sermons were all the sermons that he preached with the BBC. The texts of all but one of these are collected at the National Library of Scotland. One sermon, dated July 26, 1944, is in Hildebrandt's personal file in the BBC archives. Unfortunately, I have not been able to locate broadcast recordings of these sermons, and they may not exist at all.

³ See, for example, Ian Kershaw, *Popular opinion and political dissent in the Third Reich: Bavaria, 1933–1945*, New York 1991, and Detlev Peukert, *Inside Nazi Germany: conformity, opposition and racism in everyday life*, New Haven, Ct 1987.

This research into the history of Hildebrandt's wartime preaching on the BBC is significant, first, because it is the only study to treat extensively the broadcast ministry of a German pastor of Jewish descent during the Second World War, and specifically as it pertains to ministry to the German people. This analysis treats seriously the historical record of sermons as a source base to understand how Hildebrandt continued his ministry as a preacher to Germans after his exclusion from German public life, and also how he publicly preached in opposition to the Nazi regime. It provides a new window into the life of a German pastor of Jewish descent who still managed as an exile to oppose the regime and serve the German people.

Second, this research provides a perspective from which the broader contours of dissent and opposition among Confessing Church clergy can be understood. Hildebrandt's sermons reveal a variety of oppositional statements delivered specifically to Christians in Nazi Germany yet expressed by a pastor far from the reach of the Gestapo and the Nazi regime. These sermons reveal what a Confessing pastor chose to say to the German people without the restrictions imposed by the Nazi police apparatus or social expectations in Nazi Germany. He was free to speak his mind, albeit constrained by the genre of the sermon, the context of a worship service on the radio and the wartime BBC censor.

Lastly this research nuances the historiography that asserts that pastors in the German Churches were silent as the Nazi regime persecuted Jews on an unprecedented scale.⁴ While it is true that German pastors did not speak out often or with requisite passion and force, this research contributes to a better understanding of how pastors criticised the anti-Jewish actions of the Nazi regime from the authority of a sermon in the context of a worship service.

Exile and ministry in England

On the eve of Adolf Hitler's rise to power in January 1933, the twenty-three-year-old Hildebrandt was just beginning his career as a Lutheran clergyman in his home town of Berlin. With a doctoral degree in theology from the University of Berlin, Hildebrandt was poised for a fruitful and productive career in service to the Church. Yet within months of the establishment of the Nazi regime, Hildebrandt found himself targeted for

⁴ See my previous articles 'Protests from the pulpit: the Confessing Church and the sermons of World War II', *Sermon Studies* 1/1 (2017), 1–23, and 'Spying in God's house: the Nazi secret police and sermons of opposition', *Church History and Religious Culture* xcvi/3–4 (2018), 425–47. Compare also Wolfgang Gerlach, *And the witnesses were silent: the Confessing Church and the persecution of the Jews*, ed. and trans. Victoria Barnett, Lincoln, NE 1993.

exclusion. The 'Aryan Paragraph' of the Nazi Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service of April 1933 inspired pro-Nazi Christians in the German Protestant Churches to exclude from the pastorate any clergyman of the Jewish race. While Hildebrandt's parents, Edmund and Otilie (*née* Schlesinger), were not religious, his mother was of Jewish ancestry. Nazi sympathisers within the Churches therefore labelled him 'Jewish' and worked towards his exclusion, along with other German pastors of full or partial Jewish descent.⁵

Hildebrandt was thus one of a small group of German pastors singled out and excluded from public life in Nazi Germany for their Jewish ancestry. Over the past thirty years, historians have attempted to identify 'non-Aryan' pastors and to gain a better understanding of the persecution they experienced under the National Socialist state as well as their experiences in exile.⁶ Through an examination of ecclesiastical and Nazi government records, I have identified 117 Protestant pastors whom the Nazi regime targeted as Jews (from a total of around 18,000 Protestant pastors).⁷ National Socialist supporters in the German Churches challenged their Christian identity, imposed a Jewish identity upon them and ultimately sought their exclusion from German public life. Furthermore, they were not only targets of the regime but also often of their own congregations. Though German pastors of Jewish descent were a relatively small group, they deserve our attention as individuals who faced unjust discrimination and as clergy who, in their roles as the leaders of faith communities, may have participated in acts of opposition to the Nazi regime.

In addition to the approximately 500,000 'full' Jews living in Nazi Germany, there was a sizable number of Germans citizens of mixed religious or ethnic ancestry, or, as the Nazis categorised them, 'Mischlinge',

⁵ William Skiles, 'Preaching to Nazi Germany: the Confessing Church on National Socialism, the Jews, and the question of opposition', unpubl. PhD diss. San Diego, CA 2016, 403–8.

⁶ The most important studies on this subject include Marion Berghahn, *German-Jewish refugees in England*, London 1984; Cynthia Crane, *Divided lives: the untold stories of Jewish-Christian women in Nazi Germany*, New York 2000; Haim Genizi, *American apathy: the plight of Christian refugees from Nazism*, Ramat-Gan 1983; Gerhard Lindemann, 'Typisch jüdisch': die Stellung der Ev.-luth. Landeskirche Hannovers zu Antijudaismus, Judenfeindschaft und Antisemitismus, 1919–1949, Berlin 1998; Lutherhaus Eisenach, *Wider Das Vergessen: Schicksale judenchristlicher Pfarrer in der Zeit von 1933–1945* (Herausgegeben vom Evangelischen Pfarrhausarchiv, 1989); James F. Tent, *In the shadow of the Holocaust: Nazi persecution of Jewish-Christian Germans*, Lawrence, KS 2003; and Webster, 'German "non-Aryan" clergymen'.

⁷ Skiles, 'Preaching to Nazi Germany', 403–8. For the total number of Protestant pastors see Doris Bergen, *Twisted cross: the German Christian movement in the Third Reich*, Chapel Hill, NC 1996, 178.

a derogatory term meaning ‘half-breed’ or ‘mongrel’.⁸ The Nazi regime categorised an estimated 72,000 German citizens as ‘half-Jews’ in 1939, and in addition, there were approximately 40,000 ‘quarter-Jews’.⁹ Another way of gaining perspective on the scope of the number of ‘Mischlinge’ affected by Nazi racial laws is to consider Ursula Büttner’s estimate that ‘apart from the Jews themselves, several hundreds of thousands of people, a number originally perhaps just short of 400,000, suffered as a result of the National Socialist racial lunacy because they were spouses, children or grandchildren of Jews’.¹⁰

In frustration with the lack of strong opposition to the Nazi regime and Hitler’s newly-created unified Protestant Church, the *Reichskirche*, Hildebrandt left Germany for England in November 1933 to serve the German Evangelical Church in Sydenham alongside Bonhoeffer.¹¹ He went to London, as he later recalled, ‘fully expecting to stay ... permanently’.¹² Yet just a few months later, Niemöller asked him to return to Berlin. He offered Hildebrandt a job as treasurer of the oppositional *Pfarrernothbund* and to work alongside him as a pastor at St Anne’s Church in Dahlem-Berlin. Hildebrandt worked with Niemöller in this capacity for over three years, collecting and distributing funds for pastors persecuted by the Nazi regime as well as preaching and serving as a pastor.¹³ On Sunday 18 July 1937 the Gestapo arrested Hildebrandt immediately after the church service for illegally collecting funds to be distributed by the Council of Brethren instead of the regional church consistory.

He was imprisoned for four weeks, and upon his release he went into exile, to England. His short stay in London just a few years earlier had enabled him to make important connections, especially with two men, Bishop George Bell of Chichester and the German Lutheran pastor Julius Rieger, who had served at the German Lutheran church of St George in Aldgate since 1931. These connections helped him tremendously in exile. Through these contacts, Hildebrandt started out as assistant pastor at St George’s and later also became a lecturer in theology at Ridley

⁸ See Doris Bergen, *War and genocide: a concise history of the Holocaust*, New York 2003, 60. Karl Schleunes reports the 1925 German census record of 568,000 Jews, ‘less than one percent of the total German population’. By 1933 the number had dropped to 503,000. See Karl Schleunes, *The twisted road to Auschwitz: Nazi policy toward German Jews, 1933–1939*, Chicago 1990, 37.

⁹ Tent, *In the shadow of the Holocaust*, 2. See also Jeremy Noakes, ‘The development of Nazi policy towards the German-Jewish “Mischlinge”, 1933–1945’, in *Leo Baeck Institute yearbook* xxxiv, New York 1989, 293. Noakes argues for the slightly higher numbers of 52,005 first degree and 32,669 second degree ‘Mischlinge’.

¹⁰ Quoted in Crane, *Divided lives*, 26.

¹¹ See Roggelin, *Franz Hildebrandt*, 57–62.

¹² James P. Kelley, ‘Oral history interview with Franz Hildebrandt’, 1985, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Collection, RG-50.423.0008.

¹³ Webster, ‘German “non-Aryan” clergymen’, 91.

Hall, Cambridge, in 1939, where he taught Church of England ordination candidates. At the same time, he became the pastor of a new German congregation that he founded at Ridley, and which later moved to Holy Trinity Church in Cambridge.¹⁴

In September 1939, when Germany invaded Poland, and Great Britain declared war on Germany, Hildebrandt found himself an enemy alien. After a brief period of internment on the Isle of Man with thousands of other German aliens, he returned to Cambridge and resumed his ministry. It was at this time that Bishop Bell worked with Hildebrandt along with other German pastors of Jewish descent to convey the seriousness of the German struggle and the work of the Confessing Church to Anglican pastors, thereby initiating the Christian Fellowship in Wartime.¹⁵ In short, by the time war broke out Hildebrandt was a well-connected and well-respected pastor in England who had first-hand experience of the Nazi persecutions of the Confessing Church in Germany, as well as of Nazi anti-Jewish measures. In England he had earned a reputation for exceptional preaching, excellent English-language skills and moral courage, indeed, as ‘one of the strongest opponents of the Nazi Regime before the war’, as one BBC official would later write.¹⁶ Hildebrandt was therefore in many ways a logical choice to preach over the BBC airwaves to Christians in Nazi Germany.

Hildebrandt established himself in England and began to put down roots. He earned a second doctorate in theology at the University of Cambridge in 1941, as the British did not recognise his German doctorate. This academic work indicates that Hildebrandt had a desire to remain in England after the war rather than return to Germany.¹⁷ In 1943 he married Nancy Wright, beginning a long marriage that would produce three children. Thus, Hildebrandt adapted in England and demonstrated his abilities and talents as a pastor, preacher and teacher.

As it happened, the BBC had need of men like Hildebrandt when the war broke out.¹⁸ The BBC began German programming in 1938, and by 1939 a secret government office, the Department of Propaganda in Enemy Countries, operating under the auspices of the Ministry of Information, had been established to help develop foreign-language

¹⁴ Cresswell and Tow, *Dr Franz Hildebrandt*, 85–7.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 102.

¹⁶ G. W. Welch, internal memo, 9 Jan. 1943, Hildebrandt personal file, BBC. Welch was trying to gain approval for Hildebrandt to extend his broadcast schedule.

¹⁷ Webster, ‘German “non-Aryan” clergymen’, 92.

¹⁸ Sheer Ganor has argued that Jewish refugees’ experiences in Nazi Germany made them particularly valuable to the BBC: ‘Forbidden words, banished voices: Jewish refugees at the service of BBC propaganda to wartime Germany’, *Journal of Contemporary History* lv/1 (2020), 97–119. While Ganor discusses the work of journalists, authors, actors and various other professions with the BBC, she does not treat the German pastors of Jewish descent who broadcast sermons into Nazi Germany.

programmes.¹⁹ Its purpose was to coordinate psychological warfare, particularly over the radio. The BBC developed ‘white’ and ‘black’ propaganda in the Overseas Service to influence the German people.²⁰ ‘White’ propaganda refers to the source (the BBC in this case) openly identifying itself without the aim of misleading the audience.²¹ This approach is in contrast to ‘black’ propaganda, which seeks to convince the audience that its programming is from a target it wishes to discredit, such as the BBC pretending to be a German government-sponsored radio station that disseminates false information or rumours to the public.²² In 1940 the BBC began developing both Catholic and Protestant religious broadcasting as part of a ‘white’ propaganda programme. However, its Overseas Section affirmed that the broadcasts should be transparent and true Christian services; they should be developed as a way for the British to demonstrate love and care for the spiritual needs of their brothers and sisters in Nazi Germany.²³ The BBC leadership took the view that worship services broadcast as an obvious form of propaganda would be appalling to the German public, an unconscionable form of hypocrisy.²⁴

The first record of contact between the BBC and Hildebrandt was just before Christmas 1940. R. H. Miall, the overseas news editor, contacted Hildebrandt to enquire whether he would be willing to send a Christmas greeting to the German population. Communication delays prevented this collaboration, but Miall pursued new opportunities with Hildebrandt. In a letter dated 16 January 1941 Miall asked him to give a talk as part of a series called *Heute und Morgen* (‘Today and Tomorrow’) on the state of the Churches in Germany, preferably on or near the anniversary of Martin Niemöller’s trial in March 1938. Hildebrandt responded within two days affirming that he was ‘anxious to help’, and the two collaborated on the broadcast.²⁵ Throughout 1941 the BBC put together plans to utilise Bishop George Bell and Hildebrandt in this early and sporadic stage of religious wartime broadcasts.²⁶

There appeared to be only one concern about using Hildebrandt as a preacher with the BBC. The Revd Hugh Martin of the Religious Division at the Ministry of Information responded directly to the Revd J. W.

¹⁹ Roggelin, *Franz Hildebrandt*, 218. Hildebrandt met church leaders and BBC representatives in July 1939 about conducting religious services in German, but the outbreak of war put the plans on hold until after his release.

²⁰ Michael Balfour, *Propaganda in war, 1939–1945: organizations, policies and publics in Britain and Germany*, London 1979, 97.

²¹ *Ibid.* 96–9.

²² Alternatively, ‘grey’ propaganda does not provide information about its sources.

²³ Roggelin, *Franz Hildebrandt*, 226–7.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Franz Hildebrandt to R. H. Miall, 18 Jan. 1941, Hildebrandt personal file.

²⁶ On at least one occasion, during a Christmas service in 1941, Bishop Bell wrote the sermon and Hildebrandt translated it and delivered it in German over the BBC:

Roggelin, *Franz Hildebrandt*, 229.

Welch, the BBC's Director of Religious Broadcasting, on 13 January 1942, voicing concern about the BBC's plans to ask Hildebrandt to preach in the upcoming Good Friday Protestant service. Martin said, 'I confess I have some hesitation about the choice of Hildebrandt as preacher... I do think it is difficult to use for this kind of purpose a man who holds pacifist convictions.'²⁷ This seems to have been the only mention of any concern about Hildebrandt's pacifism; Welch apparently resolved the issue, and it was not mentioned again in Hildebrandt's personal file at the BBC.²⁸ But the question is, why would Martin, as an agent of the Ministry of Information, have concerns about a pacifist preaching to Christians in Nazi Germany? Perhaps this apprehension simply reflects prejudice against pacifists in government service during wartime.²⁹ It appears that Martin was concerned that Hildebrandt would take a principled stand against the use of preaching in service of war aims. However, there is no indication in the archival record that Hildebrandt felt in any way conflicted about his work broadcasting sermons with the BBC, and the transcripts of the sermons reveal that he faithfully preached the gospel message without crossing the line of enemy propaganda.

In the meantime, plans for more consistent religious broadcasts took shape in autumn 1941, under Welch's leadership. The idea was to provide half-hour religious services in the forthcoming Christmas season for the religious instruction and edification of the German people.³⁰ After Christmas, services would range from fifteen to thirty minutes. The programmes would include sermons, hymns, prayers and scripture reading.³¹ Englishmen such as Professor Nathaniel Micklem and George Bell were nominated to deliver the first Protestant sermons, but highly respected native German-speakers were sought after for the long term.³² Even such renowned figures as Karl Barth at the University of Basel and Paul Tillich at Union Theological Seminary in New York were approached, though it appears that geographical distance from England and logistical

²⁷ Hugh Martin to J. W. Welch, 13 Jan. 1942, Hildebrandt personal file.

²⁸ Martin's concern did not alter Hildebrandt's scheduled broadcasts. Indeed, he broadcast just days after Martin sent Welch the letter.

²⁹ Richard Rempel has argued that because Nazi aggression in the Second World War 'made many pacifist convictions untenable', especially after the invasion of France, the majority of remaining pacifists were Christians who espoused non-violent resistance: 'The dilemmas of British pacifists during World War II', *Journal of Modern History* 1/4 (1978), D1213. In addition, Balfour noted one case in which the BBC banned a conductor in 1940 because he was a pacifist. A member of parliament attempted to discuss this matter on the floor of parliament but was refused because he had 'no responsibility for ordinary programmes': *Propaganda in war, 1939-1945*, 83.

³⁰ J. W. Welch, internal BBC memo to the European news editor, London, 13 Nov. 1941, BBC, GRAC.

³¹ *Ibid.*
³² Welch to N. F. Newsom, 13 Nov. 1941, and to William Paton, 14 Nov. 1941, BBC, GRAC.

issues prevented their participation.³³ On 14 November 1941 Welch contacted the Revd William Paton, General Secretary on the Provisional Committee of the nascent World Council of Churches (WCC), in an effort to recruit ‘well-known German Christian leaders in this and other countries’.³⁴ Paton responded to Welch on 20 November 1941 and recommended Hildebrandt and Hans Ehrenberg, both in England at the time.³⁵ Paton then referred Welch to Bell for more candidates.³⁶ In the course of the Second World War the BBC enlisted the help of around thirty Protestant preachers, most of whom were German pastors of Jewish descent who found themselves in exile in Great Britain.³⁷ Hildebrandt quickly became a leading member of the growing cadre of preachers, serving with pastors Julius Rieger and Wolfgang Büsing on the BBC’s Advisory Committee on Broadcasts to plan the service schedules and topics, under the direction of the Revd Francis House of the Religious Broadcasting Department in the Overseas Service.³⁸

Most often Hildebrandt broadcast live or *via* recording from the BBC studios in London, specifically at Bush House on Aldwych Street or Broadcasting House at Langham Place. He sometimes recorded one sermon at a time, and sometimes multiple sermons in a row, such as his recordings of three sermons for 13, 20 and 27 December 1944, which he completed on 4 December, taking an hour, from 11:00 am to 12:00 p.m. His own preferred location for delivering the broadcasts was at the BBC’s designated locations in Cambridge. Hildebrandt lived at 38 Hartington Grove in Cambridge, and he worked at the university and at Holy Trinity Church. It was much more convenient for Hildebrandt to deliver the sermons in Cambridge, especially as trains could be ‘scarce

³³ Welch to Paton, 14 Nov. 1941, and Paton to Welch, 20 Nov. 1941, *ibid.* Tillich would go on to work with the US organisation, ‘Voice of America’, and broadcast 112 addresses in German into the Third Reich from March 1942 to May 1944. Fifty-five of these addresses are collected and translated in *Against the Third Reich: Paul Tillich’s wartime addresses to Nazi Germany*, ed. Ronald H. Stone and Matthew Lon Weaver, trans. Matthew Lon Weaver, Louisville, Ky 1998.

³⁴ Welch to Paton, 14 Nov. 1941, BBC, GRAC. It should be noted that the WCC was not formally instituted until 1948. Paton’s letterhead reads ‘World Council of Churches’, in large block letters, and just below the title is a statement in much smaller font ‘(In process of formation)’.

³⁵ Paton to Welch, 20 Nov. 1941, BBC, GRAC.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ The list includes pastors Ludwig Horlbog, Willi Oelsner, Ernst Gordon, Wolfgang Büsing and Hans Ehrenberg, among others. Two of the pastors were English: W. A. Whitehouse and C. H. Dodd. There was also a Swedish pastor on the roster, Carl Söderberg. See also Roggelin, *Franz Hildebrandt*, 231. I have compiled this list by comparing the names listed in Hildebrandt’s BBC personal file (as a member of GRAC that set the broadcast schedules) to a list of German pastors of Jewish descent that I compiled for ‘Preaching to Nazi Germany’, 403–8.

³⁸ Francis House to Hildebrandt, 3 Jan. 1943 (*recte* 1944), Hildebrandt personal file.

and crowded', as he commented to House in a letter of 23 June 1944.³⁹ He even asked House if the BBC could set up a 'permanent studio' because there were 'so many Cambridge people broadcasting in these days'.⁴⁰ Hildebrandt had to manage his schedule as a pastor and lecturer and also work with House and Eric Fenn to schedule recordings and broadcasts. Finding the time to broadcast was not always easy given his hectic schedule in Cambridge, especially if it required travel.⁴¹

The sermons were broadcast as part of a worship service for German listeners, which would last between approximately fifteen and thirty minutes, depending on the date and season.⁴² The programme would generally open with an announcement of the service, and then a German hymn would be played, such as *Wie soll ich dich empfangen* or *Das alte Jahr vergangen ist*, usually from a recording on file at the BBC.⁴³ A prayer was offered, and then the Scripture for the day was read.⁴⁴ A recitation of the creed followed, which again would likely be from a recording on file.⁴⁵ The sermon would then be delivered, either live or from a recording. The Lord's Prayer would be said, then a blessing, and finally a closing hymn, such as *Fröhlich soll mein Herze* or *Lobe den Herren, den mächtigen König der Ehren* (again, often from a recording).⁴⁶ The religious programme would end with a live closing announcement advertising the next scheduled religious programme. The pastor would play one part of many in this complex and high-tech religious service, where various parts could be live or recorded, yet blended all together for an edifying time of worship and religious reflection for German listeners.

The BBC paid Hildebrandt 2 guineas (£2 2s.) for each broadcast, plus travel and hotel costs if needed. The payment was simply called a 'courtesy

³⁹ Hildebrandt to House, 23 June 1944, *ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ For example, see Hildebrandt to House, 1 May 1944, *ibid.*, in which he had to cancel a broadcast and find a replacement because he had a talk in Cheltenham on 6 June and could not travel to London in time for a broadcast. Hildebrandt humorously told House, 'I shall make up for my sins in July', when he was scheduled to deliver sermons again.

⁴² Services could also be cut short due to breaking news. See Welch to Hildebrandt, 12 Jan. 1942, *ibid.* See also Cresswell and Tow, *Dr Franz Hildebrandt*, 105.

⁴³ See A. C. F. Beales, 'Order of Service', 22, 24 Dec. 1944, Hildebrandt personal file.

⁴⁴ While the name of the scripture translation is not provided in the sermon notes, Hildebrandt's scripture quotations are consistently from the Luther Bible translation of 1912, the most commonly used version in German Protestant churches at the time. The Scripture for the day could be determined by the liturgical reading for that particular week or it could be based on the pastor's choice of sermon topic.

⁴⁵ Presumably the creed referred to is the Apostles' Creed or possibly the Nicene Creed. Which creed was not stated in the order of service records. See, for example, Beales, 'Order of Service,' 22, 24 Dec. 1944, Hildebrandt personal file.

⁴⁶ See *ibid.*

fee', not a salary, stipend or contract fee.⁴⁷ Indeed, it appears that BBC officials and Hildebrandt did not agree on a fee to write or deliver the broadcasts. Two guineas paid in the early to mid-1940s would be approximately £74 or \$101.20 in the currency of today, a decent return on the time to study, reflect and write the sermon, as well as to travel to the recording or broadcasting location.⁴⁸ Hildebrandt was also expected to prepare a written prayer and select pre-recorded hymns for the service that would align in theme with the sermon. The BBC offered Hildebrandt the option of delivering the sermons anonymously so as not to tarnish his reputation at home as a traitor, but he declined and seems to have delivered all his sermons openly.⁴⁹

On the one hand, Hildebrandt had considerable freedom to compose and broadcast his sermons. Clearly the BBC leadership trusted Hildebrandt as a pastor and expert in the German Churches to know how to appeal to German listeners. House and Fenn (who succeeded House in July 1944) asked for and took Hildebrandt's advice about programming, appointed him to the Advisory Committee and sought more broadcasts from him than he could commit to, given his pastoral and teaching commitments.⁵⁰ But on the other hand, Hildebrandt was required to submit all his German-language sermons and prayers as transcripts to the BBC censor ten days prior to the scheduled broadcast or recording for approval. Hildebrandt's BBC personal file indicates that he took this measure as a matter of course during the war, and there is no suggestion that he was ever offended over being improperly censored. Yet this arrangement complicates the nature of Hildebrandt's sermon broadcasts. Based on the sermons themselves, they were meant to instruct, edify and convert adults to mainstream Protestant Christianity, to bind Christians together (as we will see); and yet they were funded, censored and facilitated by the British government as part of a programme aimed specifically to influence an enemy population during wartime.

⁴⁷ See, for example, E. M. Punchard's 'Record of Service', 7 Apr. 1943, *ibid.*

⁴⁸ The figures are approximate, gathered from the British National Archives website: Currency Converter: 1270–2017, <<https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/currency-converter/#currency-result>>, accessed 6 October 2021.

⁴⁹ Cresswell and Tow argue that Hildebrandt delivered these sermons anonymously, yet Hildebrandt responded to Welch's offer of anonymity for himself and the other pastors, saying, 'I cannot speak for them [the other pastors] as regards anonymity; I certainly do not mind my name being mentioned': *Dr Franz Hildebrandt*, 105. Moreover, the BBC correspondence on recruiting pastors indicates that it was important that they bring well-known Germans to influence the German people more effectively: Welch to Hildebrandt, 12 Jan. 1942, and Hildebrandt to Welch, 14 Jan. 1942, Hildebrandt personal file.

⁵⁰ See Hildebrandt personal file.

Preaching to Nazi Germany in exile

Hildebrandt's sermons reveal that his sense of Christian unity transcended the national boundaries of Great Britain and Germany. He aimed to convince his fellow Christians to overcome national boundaries: together they must turn against Hitler and the National Socialist regime to hasten the end of the war. But what is most remarkable about Hildebrandt's wartime sermons is that he and the BBC counted on Germans to break the law just to listen to the radio. As the historian Richard Evans points out, Germans listened to foreign radio programming at great risk to themselves and their families:

The moment the war broke out, tuning in to foreign stations was made a criminal offence punishable by death. It was all too easy, in apartment blocks poorly insulated for sound, for listeners to face denunciation to the authorities by fanatical or ill-intentioned neighbours who overheard the sonorous tones of BBC news-readers coming through the walls. Some 4,000 people were arrested and prosecuted for 'radio crime' in the first year of the law's operation, and the first execution of an offender came in 1941.⁵¹

For a German to risk such a consequence for himself and his family obviously meant that he or she considered the content of the broadcasts exceedingly important.⁵² In the case of Hildebrandt's work, this information was not national news or updates on the war's progress. And it was not entertainment. It was the gospel message, the 'good news', meant to instruct and edify Germans weary of war. As religious programming was censored by the Nazi state in April 1939, the BBC was providing German listeners with a new opportunity to listen to German pastors preach, outside the narrow limits of Nazi radio.⁵³

The number of Germans who listened to the BBC broadcasts is difficult to measure, but one Gestapo report written in 1941 places the number at one million people, which increased as the war waged on, reaching perhaps 10 million.⁵⁴ Michael Balfour argues that the best measure of the BBC's success is not simply the records of Germans arrested for listening in but

⁵¹ Richard Evans, *The Third Reich at war*, New York 2009, 576–7.

⁵² Robert Gellately argues that Germans listened to the BBC and later Radio Moscow to learn of the progress of the war and hear the names of captured soldiers: *Backing Hitler: consent and coercion in Nazi Germany*, Oxford–New York 2001, 186–96.

⁵³ On Nazi control of radio broadcasts see Carolyn Birdsall, *Nazi soundscapes: sound, technology and urban space in Germany, 1933–1945*, Amsterdam 2012, 54–9, 75–82, 135–6. See also Horst J. P. Bergmeier and Rainer E. Lotz, *Hitler's airwaves: the inside story of Nazi radio broadcasting and propaganda swing*, New Haven, CT 1997, 4–9, and Roger Tidy, *Hitler's radio war*, London 2011.

⁵⁴ Balfour, *Propaganda in war, 1939–1945*, 96.

the extent to which the German broadcasters devoted themselves to answering the BBC's arguments, usually but by no means always without saying where they came from. What the service succeeded in doing was to break [the Reich Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda's] virtual monopoly over German ears and force it into the continual rational dialogue to which it had never before been effectively subjected.⁵⁵

Hildebrandt's sermons provided a opportunity to undermine the Nazi conception of the *Volksgemeinschaft*, 'the national community', by offering an alternative voice about who belonged in it and about the Nazi system that controlled it.⁵⁶ Elsewhere I have shown that the Nazi secret police apparatus spied on churches within the confines of the sanctuary and reported pastors who voiced opposition to Nazi ideology, leadership and persecution of the Churches.⁵⁷ The BBC German religious broadcasts opened a new avenue, and one nearly impossible to effectively police, for the expression of opposition to the Nazi state.

It is important to note that preaching from the safety and security of the BBC in London did not compare to preaching under the watchful eye of the Nazi police state. In preaching sermons over the radio, Hildebrandt did not need to worry about his listeners informing on him for anti-Nazi or pro-Jewish statements. Thus, one may argue that such statements required less courage and determination than those given on Nazi German soil. But at the same time, Hildebrandt understood that in making such comments he was speaking against his home nation – even in wartime – and thus risked not only social and professional ostracisation if he ever returned home but also prosecution for aiding an enemy nation.

Furthermore, the interaction between the preacher and congregant (or listener) is also quite different over the radio compared to a church setting. The listener cannot see the physical cues that indicate or emphasise meaning, such as hand gestures, facial features and body movements that indicate ranges of emotion from compassion, anger and sadness, for example. All the information the listener has is what is conveyed through the voice, and thus the message may not be as clear, unambiguous or even persuasive as one conveyed in person. In addition, the preacher cannot look out at his congregation and gauge their receptiveness, altering his voice, tenor or message as he proceeds. Thus, while the medium of radio was a convenient means to spread the gospel message, much will have been lost along the way.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Carolyn Birdwell argues that the Nazi regime used various forms of sound, including radio, to unite the 'Volk community': *Nazi soundscapes*, 136. Hildebrandt's sermons over the BBC contributed to 'hardening divisions' between the wartime 'Volk community' and 'community aliens'.

⁵⁷ Skiles, 'Spying in God's house'.

Unity despite persecution

Turning to Hildebrandt's sermons, one of the most common themes upon which he preached was the disunity among the Churches caused by the aggression of National Socialists. From a BBC studio in London, he broadcast on the theme of Christian unity for a Whit Sunday service on 24 May 1942.⁵⁸ The biblical text for his sermon was the well-known Pentecost passage of Acts ii.1–13. The scene is of the gathered Christian community in Jerusalem: 'All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.'⁵⁹ In the Church's liturgical calendar, Pentecost is a celebration of the unity of the Church. Hildebrandt was concerned that Christians had turned in war against each other, caught up in the struggle of nations against nations. Instead, he argued, Christians ought to enjoy harmony together. He reminded his German audience that Christians in Germany and England were members of the same Church, regardless of confessional or national differences. The implications of this assertion are profound: their relationship should be characterised by love, mercy and forgiveness, and not enmity. Hildebrandt reflected,

It [Pentecost] is the exact counterpart to the scene of Babel: what the human spirit has divided in its arrogance, God's Spirit, which descends to us, has united and reconciled ... We think of our brothers in the persecuted Churches, in Germany, Holland and Norway who are not silent, but have opened their mouths, and we know how difficult it is that they began to preach as the Spirit gave them utterance.⁶⁰

The German listening to this sermon was confronted with a reality contrary to that propagated by the Nazi regime. According to Hildebrandt, the bond between a people is not based upon race, ethnicity, class or geography but upon God. Yet as in war and even peace, the Nazi regime wished to divide.

By the spring of 1942 the German pastors who had stepped out of line and challenged Nazi racial ideology or protested at the regime's treatment

⁵⁸ Hildebrandt, sermon on Acts ii.1–13, 24 May 1942, papers of Franz Hildebrandt, NLS, 9251.53/54.

⁵⁹ While the original German was from the Luther Bible translation of 1912, this English translation is from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). All Bible translations are from the NRSV unless otherwise indicated.

⁶⁰ 'Es ist das genaue Gegenstück zur Szene von Babel: was der Menschegeist in seiner Überhebung entzweit hat, hat Gottes Geist, der zu uns herabsteigt, vereinigt und versöhnt ... Wir denken an unsere Brüder in den verfolgten Kirchen, in Deutschland, Holland und Norwegen, die nicht geschwiegen, sondern ihren Mund aufgetan haben, und wir wissen, wie schwer die Tatsache wiegt, dass sie anfangen zu predigen, nachdem der Geist ihnen gab auszusprechen': Franz Hildebrandt, sermon on Acts ii.1–13, NLS, 9251.53/54.

of the Churches had been harassed and persecuted. The Nazi regime arrested and imprisoned clergymen, closed Confessing Church seminaries and drafted clergymen into the war effort. Hildebrandt informed his listeners of similar persecutions of Churches in Holland and Norway experienced in the two years since the invasions by Nazi Germany.

Hildebrandt revisited the theme of unity a few months later on Wednesday, 4 November 1942, in celebration of Reformation Day on 31 October. He based his sermon on 2 Timothy iii.10–iv.2, a passage in which the author encourages Timothy to endure persecution and, most important, to preach the gospel message in good times and in bad. The author's major theme is that Christians in all lands are bound together as disciples of Christ and, as such, are charged with the common task of preaching the good news of God. For the Christian, the Scriptures provide the answers in times of trial, in times of suffering and persecution. Thus, persecution compels Christians to affirm their identity as Christians and to stand fast and preach the Gospel to the world.⁶¹

Hildebrandt appealed directly to the German people – or at least to those who were breaking Nazi law in simply listening to his sermon over the BBC airwaves – to unite, persevere and grow stronger day by day that they might become a bulwark against the powers that oppose the Gospel:

We give you the message back, we strengthen you with our prayer, we cry out to you: Preach the word, persist, be it at the right time or at the wrong time! That is the intention of the short divine services that we will be holding every week from today at this hour over the radio, and from which we want to create a bond between all Protestant German-speaking Christians, wherever they are in the world ... [W]herever we are and whoever we are, preacher or hearer, German or English, the same exhortation and promise binds us all as Christians: Preach the word, persist, be it at the right time or the wrong time. Amen.⁶²

⁶¹ See Hughes Oliphant Old, *The reading and preaching of the Scriptures in the worship of the Christian Church*, Grand Rapids, MI 2010, vi. 759.

⁶² 'Wir geben Euch die Botschaft zurueck, wir staerken Euch mit unserm Gebet, wir rufen Euch zu: Predigt das Wort, halte an, es sei zu rechter Zeit oder zur Unzeit! Das ist die Absicht bei den kurzen Gottesdiensten, die wir von heute ab jede Woche zu dieser Stunde ueber das Radio halten werden, und die ein Band herstellen wollen zwischen allen evangelischen Christen deutscher Spracher, wo immer in der Welt sie sind ... Aber das aendert nichts daran, dass wo immer wir stehen und wer immer wir sind, Prediger oder Hoerer, Deutsche oder Englaender, uns alle als Christen die gleiche Mahnung und Verheissung bindet: predige das Wort, halte an, es sei zu rechter Zeit oder zur Unzeit. Amen': Hildebrandt, sermon on 2 Timothy iii.10–iv.2, NLS, 9251.53/54. It should be mentioned that the BBC gave equal air time to Catholic and Protestant German-language services. Thus, Hildebrandt's concern here is to foster a bond between Protestants specifically. Note the Anglicisation of the umlauts in the original German.

In a world at war, Hildebrandt sought to find a common ground, not only in terms of belief and devotion, but also in purpose. Though preaching from the safety of London, Hildebrandt's call for unity directly conflicted with Nazi racial and imperial practice, and thus constituted a form of opposition to the Nazi regime.⁶³

Preaching on Nazism as false ideology

The most common theme in Hildebrandt's sermons was the condemnation of National Socialism as a false ideology. In one BBC sermon, delivered on 1 March 1944, Hildebrandt preached not only solidarity with the persecuted and imprisoned in Nazi Germany, but at the same time condemned the 'heresy' of National Socialism. In this particular sermon, he focused special attention on his friend and colleague, Pastor Martin Niemöller, who since 1937 had been imprisoned by the regime. On this Wednesday afternoon Hildebrandt preached on Hebrews vi.6: 'on their own they are crucifying again the Son of God and are holding him up to contempt'. The text argues that the work of Christian apostates is a grievous sin against Christ, and this, Hildebrandt argued, is the sin that many in Nazi Germany were committing.

The sermon is not just a condemnation of certain Christians who have embraced National Socialism, but a condemnation of the German Churches themselves, Protestant and Catholic alike. Hildebrandt argued that 'A book by a contemporary writer deals with the betrayal of Christ through the Churches; none among us is innocent of this betrayal, no one who has not a hundred times, knowing or unknowing, crucified the Son of God again and held him up to ridicule.'⁶⁴ While he does not name this 'book by a contemporary writer', his point is clear: the Church's betrayal of Christ is widespread.⁶⁵ Hildebrandt preached that Jesus carried the sins of humanity on the cross; as God's Son he bore

⁶³ See Ian Kershaw, *The Nazi dictatorship: problems and perspectives of interpretation*, 3rd edn, New York 1999, 170.

⁶⁴ 'Vom Verrat des Christus durch die Kirchen handelt ein Buch eines zeitgenössischen Schriftstellers; keiner unter uns ist an diesem Verrat schuldlos, keiner, der nicht hundertmal, wissend oder unwissend, den Sohn Gottes wiederum gekreuzigt und zum Spott gehalten hat': Hildebrandt, sermon on Hebrews vi.6, NLS, 9251.53/54.

⁶⁵ It is possible that Hildebrandt is referring to his own book on the Nazi persecution of his friend and colleague Martin Niemöller, published anonymously, and entitled, *Martin Niemöller und sein Bekenntnis* (Zollikon 1938), which was translated and published in English as *Pastor Niemoeller and his creed*, London 1939. He could also be referring to a book he himself published in January 1944, *This is the message: a continental reply to Charles Raven* (London 1944), which examines the problems of the German Protestant Churches.

humanity's burden of sin to make possible humanity's salvation. Hildebrandt underscored how ironic it was for Christians to betray the Christ who gave them salvation. He asked his German listeners to evaluate their own actions and ideals, and to consider where they have fallen short. In this sermon, Hildebrandt confronted his German audience with the spiritual reality of a compromised faith.

Hildebrandt also attacked the Nazi pride in race and 'chosen-ness'. He took to the airwaves on Wednesday 12 July 1944 to preach on 1 Peter ii.6–10, a text that had particular resonance in Nazi Germany. 1 Peter is a pastoral letter that was circulated to the churches of Asia Minor in the late first century, and it discusses how Christians ought to live as a marginalised and persecuted people.⁶⁶ The author writes, 'But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light' (verse 9). Hildebrandt delivered a sermon that juxtaposes Christian chosen-ness and Nazi racial exclusion. He argued:

In fact there is an element in the gospel that to the untrained ear sounds like nothing but mere arrogance; and therefore, it is necessary to immediately avert the misunderstanding, as if it were here a new form of the old myth of the master race, of a race, caste or sect, that arrogantly makes itself the crown of creation.

No – we are the stones in God's building, not builders ... That is, if one may use the word, the specific weight [*Gewicht*] of the Church: to form a people not from the unity of race and blood, history and culture, and also not from the opposition against a common enemy, but from the election and grace of God.⁶⁷

This understanding follows the Protestant principle of faith through grace and not works: what matters for salvation is not the activity of the individual, or his ancestry, life's production or personal characteristics, whether inherent or developed. What matters is God's grace freely given to the individual. This emphasis precludes any boasting in one's 'chosen-ness'. Hildebrandt offers a clear and unambiguous challenge to the National Socialist ideology of human worth and dignity dependent upon race.

⁶⁶ *The new Oxford annotated Bible*, 3rd edn, Oxford 2001, *New Testament*, 395.

⁶⁷ 'In der Tat gibt es ein Element im Evangelium, das dem ungebübten Ohr als nichts den blosse Arroganz klingt; und darum ist es notwendig, sofort das Missverständnis abzuwehren, als handele es sich heur um eine neue Form des alten Mythos vom Herrenvolk, von einer Rasse, Kaste oder Sekte, die hochmütig sich selbst als die Krone der Schöpfung ausgibt ... Nein—wir sind Steine im Gebäude Gottes und nicht Baumeister ... Das ist, wenn man das Wort gebrauchen darf, das spezifische Gewicht der Kirche: ein Volk zu bilden nicht aus der Einheit von Rasse und Blut, Geschichte und Kulture, und auch nicht aus dem Gegensatz gegen einen gemeinsamen Feind, sondern aus der Wahl und Gnade Gottes': Hildebrandt, sermon on 1 Peter ii.6–10, NLS, 9251.53/54.

All Christians, Hildebrandt argued, are ‘to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ’, in the words of 1 Peter.⁶⁸ This means serving God and others in a spirit of loving self-sacrifice. For Hildebrandt, Christianity, like National Socialism, asked for the commitment of the whole person.⁶⁹ Thus, at least for pastors critical of Nazi intrusions into the German Churches, there is a necessary contradiction between the two belief systems.⁷⁰ According to Hildebrandt, the individual must make a choice between two systems. Wherever Christians are and whatever they are doing, Hildebrandt argued, Christians ‘can make it known who our king is. We can call and shout his name; we can confess him before men’.⁷¹ He continues:

In Germany one knows better than anywhere else in the world what that means today. And when the free Word is denied, when speaking bans are issued, when confession with the mouth becomes impossible, then silence, exile, and prison must still bear witness to the virtues of him who had called us out of the darkness into his wonderful light.⁷²

Christians have a duty to bear witness before men, even when Nazis force them to be silent, to flee their homeland – as Hildebrandt himself had done only years before – or to be imprisoned or worse. Whatever the circumstance, Hildebrandt encouraged his Christian listeners to serve as priests in a world that desperately needed acts of mercy and grace.

⁶⁸ ‘[Z]u opfern geistliche Opfer, die Gott angenehm sind durch Jesum Christum’: Hildebrandt, sermon on 1 Peter ii. 6–10, *ibid.*

⁶⁹ Burleigh, *The Third Reich*, 253–5. See also Emilio Gentile, ‘Fascism, totalitarianism and political religion: definitions and critical reflections on criticism of an interpretation’, trans. Natalia Belozentseva, *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* v/3 (Winter 2004), 362.

⁷⁰ Franklin H. Littell, *The German phoenix: men and movements in the Church in Germany*, Lanham, Md 1960, 3; John S. Conway, ‘The German church struggle: its making and meaning’, in Hubert Locke (ed.), *The Church confronts the Nazis: Barmen then and now*, New York 1984, 135; Siegfried Hermle, ‘Predigt an der Front: zur Tätigkeit der Kriegspfarrer im Zweiten Weltkrieg’, in *Blätter für württembergische Kirchengeschichte*, Stuttgart 2002, 145, 155; Robertson, *Christians against Hitler*, 118.

⁷¹ ‘Wir können es kund machen, wer unser König ist. Wir können seinen Namen anrufen und ausrufen, wir können ihn bekennen vor den Menschen’: Hildebrandt, sermon on 1 Peter ii.6–10, NLS, 9251.53/54.

⁷² ‘In Deutschland weiss man es besser als irgendwoanders in der Welt, was das heute bedeutet. Und wenn das freie Wort gesperrt wird, wenn Redeverbote ergehen, wenn das Bekenntnis mit dem Mund unmöglich wird, dann muss doch das Schweigen, die Verbannung, das Gefängnis noch Zeugnis ablegen von den Tugenden des, der uns berufen hat aus der Finsternis zu seinem wunderbaren Licht’: *ibid.*

Preaching on the re-evaluation of allegiances

Another recurring theme in Hildebrandt's Nazi-era sermons is the need for Christians to reprioritise their allegiances to God and country. In a BBC radio sermon delivered in German on Wednesday morning, 19 July 1944, Hildebrandt addressed a burning question of the day: How is our faith in Jesus Christ prioritised in the hustle and bustle of our daily lives? Hildebrandt continued his discussion of 1 Peter from the previous week, this time addressing ii.11–17. The biblical text reads in part, 'As servants of God, live as free people; yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil. Honour everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God. Honour the emperor.' Hildebrandt contended that the Scriptures could help to orient Christians struggling in a period in which the Church and State seem at odds. Christians cannot simply avoid the world or hide from persecution.

More to the point, Hildebrandt was concerned with how Christians in his day understood the admonition to 'Honour the emperor', and he challenged his listeners to remember that their primary identity was not as citizens or as members of an ethnic group but as members in the body of Christ. As such, the Christian must 'Fear God, and honour the King—and not the other way around!'⁷³ Hildebrandt invoked a key scripture passage on one's relation to governing authorities and clarified what it meant for the Christian living in Germany. The obvious question is, what happens when one's obligations to the state and God contradict each other? Hildebrandt helped the Christian solve this dilemma by underscoring the importance of Christian love, a self-sacrificing love that seeks the best for others, not oneself. It is no coincidence that the same German word is used to refer to how one should treat everyone and how one should treat the emperor: the key verb is *ehren*, 'to honour'. Hildebrandt admitted that the consequences for this kind of love would be suffering, but this must be expected and endured, as Jesus modelled.

In addition, Hildebrandt pointed out a certain absurdity that Christians too often accept uncritically, that they can proclaim Christ and fellowship in the Christian community of faith, but then at the same time consider themselves first and foremost citizens of our respective nations: 'we want to be first German, English, French, and then Christians'.⁷⁴ If Christians

⁷³ 'Fürchtet Gott, ehret den König—und nicht etwa umgekehrt!': Hildebrandt, sermon on 1 Peter ii.11–17, *ibid.*

⁷⁴ 'Die Gefahr ist in der Tat riesengross und die Erfahrung bestätigt es mit jede Tag, dass dieser Text in Vergessenheit gerät und dass wir im Ernstfall immer die himmlische Berufung hintansetzen und den weltlichen Bindungen erliegen; dass wir zuerst Deutsche, Engländer, Franzosen und dann Christen sein wollen' (complete sentence), *ibid.*

wish to live first as Germans or English, then it should come as no shock when their nations go to war and Christians kill each other on the battlefield. For Hildebrandt, this was a scandal.

Perhaps surprisingly, Hildebrandt did not mention Hitler or the Nazis by name as the perpetrators of human suffering. One reason may be found in the ‘new school’ of homiletics that emerged after the First World War. Confessing Church pastors sought to base their sermons on the Christian Scriptures and not their own political and social convictions. They trusted the gospel message—not their personal opinions—to change hearts and minds in Nazi Germany. ‘One of the reasons without doubt that caused the Church to be so reluctant to protest’, writes Richard Gutteridge, ‘was the anxiety not to impair the purity and strength of witness to scriptural and doctrinal truth by running the risk of her becoming entangled in what could be regarded as secular as opposed to specific religious issues.’⁷⁵ At the same time, open criticism or condemnation of Hitler and the Nazis in a time of war could have been interpreted by many people in Germany as treasonous, as well as inappropriate for a worship service, as the focus should be on God. Thus, this approach could have been counter-productive at the least. Nevertheless, it is clear by implication that Hildebrandt meant to be critical of the regime. He was speaking in the German language to his fellow Germans about ongoing persecution, even at the hands of an ‘emperor’ whom Christians are bound to honour. These sermons were thus not only attempts at encouraging Christians in Germany but also implicit criticisms of Hitler and the National Socialist regime for their persecution of Christians.

Hildebrandt challenged his listeners to re-align their values according to the Kingdom of God and Christ as saviour, not to the values of Nazi Germany and Hitler. In a sermon broadcast on 20 December 1944, based on Mark i.14–20, he asked his listeners to consider the meaning of the word *Reich* (kingdom or empire). It is significant that this text is not an Advent text, as one might expect just five days before Christmas Day, but rather it describes the beginning of Jesus’ ministry when he calls his disciples to make them fishers of men. Instead of drawing the imagination of the listener to the stable, the wise men and shepherds, Mary and Joseph, or the baby Jesus, Hildebrandt dwelt upon the meaning of Jesus’ coming revealed in his famous declaration: ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news’ (Mark i.15). Though Germans lived in the time of *das Dritte Reich*, the Third Reich, Hildebrandt reminded his German listeners that Christmas is a time to reflect on how Jesus came to inaugurate the kingdom of

⁷⁵ Richard Gutteridge. *The German Evangelical Church and the Jews, 1879–1950*, New York 1976, 129.

God, *das Reich Gottes*. In Christ, Hildebrandt argued, it is the end of an era and the beginning of a new one.

The time is fulfilled: here the final line under the Old Testament is drawn and the restless waiting is put to an end forever. Who so speaks, knows what he says; he presents himself in the centre; he tries to be the one upon whom all the promises of God are meant; as in Luke, and he opens the Bible in the Synagogue and explains: ‘today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing’ ... He [God] makes the preparation, not us, and the whole Old Testament describes his divine plan; we can do nothing more for the reorganisation of the world than recognise his kingdom and his Messiah.⁷⁶

Hildebrandt referred here to a crucial theological concept that served as a political criticism of Hitler and the Third Reich. In the Christian tradition, the ministry of Jesus inaugurated the ‘kingdom’ of God, a kingdom that advances principles at odds with the kingdoms of this world, specifically, in Jesus’ context, the Roman Empire. Jesus revealed these principles throughout the Gospels (for example, love your neighbour; leadership means servanthood, and forgiveness is essential to spiritual health). In a sentence, the political meaning of this crucial concept is that it posits a vision of life in this world as if God were the king, and all worldly rulers were sidelined.⁷⁷ Hildebrandt held up this vision and asked his German listeners to compare it with the reality of Nazi Germany. By doing so, his listeners could see just how poorly the Third Reich and its ‘messiah’ measure up.⁷⁸ This Advent sermon was a wake-up call, an admonishment for Germans to ask themselves which kingdom they were serving.

Preaching on Jews and Judaism

Hildebrandt did not often preach specifically about the Jews or their plight as a persecuted people in Nazi Germany. One of the few times in this sermon series that Hildebrandt preached on the Old Testament was on 7 April 1943, when he condemned the injustice of the Nazi persecution of the Jews and its war in Europe. The text was from *Zachariah* xiii.7–10,

⁷⁶ ‘Die Zeit ist erfüllt: hier wird der Schlußstrich unter das Alte Testament gezogen und der Unruhe des Wartens für immer ein Ende gesetzt. Der so redet, Weiss, was er sagt; er stellt sich selbst in den Mittelpunkt er gibt sich aus für den, auf den alle Verheissungen Gottes gemünzt sind; er schlägt, wie bei Lukas, die Bibel in der Synogoge auf und erklärt: “heute ist diese Schrift erfüllt vor euren Ohren” ... Er trifft die Vorbereitung, nicht wir, und das ganze Alte Testament beschreibt seinen göttlichen Plan wir können nichts mehr tun für die Neuordnung der Welt, als sein Reich und seinen Messias anerkennen’: Hildebrandt, sermon on Mark i.14–20, NLS, 9251.53/54.

⁷⁷ Marcus Borg, *The heart of Christianity: rediscovering a life of faith*, New York 2003, 132.

⁷⁸ See Ian Kershaw, *Hitler: 1889–1936, hubris*, New York 1998, 483–6.

a rather enigmatic passage about an attack on a community leader, the trial of the community itself and their later restoration.⁷⁹ Yet Hildebrandt emphasised the deliverance of Israel from its enemies. He assumed a biblically literate audience in that he does not explicitly state that, according to Christian theology, 'Israel' could refer to either the Jewish people or the Church.⁸⁰ The people of Israel will suffer, the prophet says, but then God will defeat their enemies. Hildebrandt began by affirming the value of the Hebrew Scriptures for Christians:

The days are over when we thought we could put the Old Testament aside with a wave of the hand ... Zachariah's prophecy must sound as if it were written in these days ... Extermination [*Ausrottung*] – the word is not a fantasy anymore and no exaggeration; it occurs every day before our eyes and in a degree we never imagined. Millions are dying, and entire countries lay waste: thus the prophet has spoken, and thus it has been fulfilled.⁸¹

The destruction of the Second World War mirrored Zachariah's description, but it is open to debate whether Hildebrandt used the term 'extermination' to refer to the Nazi mass murder of the Jews or simply to point towards the vast numbers of soldiers and citizens killed in the war (including Jews). Significantly, he does not refer to the Jews in this sermon, but the connection with Zachariah's passage about the suffering of Israel and his statement that 'millions are dying' indicates that his concern might indeed have been about the persecution of the Jews in Europe.

Historians have estimated that by 1942 and 1943 perhaps one-half of the adult population in Germany – from all socioeconomic and educational backgrounds – was aware, having been informed in one form or another, of the mass murder of the Jews as the Holocaust was taking place.⁸²

⁷⁹ See the notes for these verses in the *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 1369.

⁸⁰ See John Goldingay's article 'Israel' in Sinclair Ferguson, David Wright and J. I. Packer (eds), *New dictionary of theology*, Downers Grove, IL 1988, 345.

⁸¹ 'Die Zeiten sind vorbei, da wir das Alte Testament mit einer Handbewegung meinten bei Seite legen zu können. Von neuem sind uns die Ohren geöffnet, dass wir seine Botschaft nicht mehr überhören, und die Prophezeiung Sacharjas muss uns klingen, als sei sie eben in diesen Tagen geschrieben: "Es soll geschehen in dem ganzen Lande, spricht der Herr, dass zwei Teile darin sollen ausgerottet werden und untergehen, und der dritte Teil soll darin überbleiben." Ausrottung – das Wort ist keine Phantasie mehr und keine unlaut Übertreibung; es ereignet sich täglich vor unsern Augen und in nie geträumtem Ausmass. Millionen sterben dahin, und ganze Länder liegen verwüstet: so hat es der Prophet gesprochen, und so hat es sich erfüllt': Hildebrandt, sermon on Zachariah xiii.7–10, NLS, 9251.53/54.

⁸² Walter Laqueur, *The terrible secret: an investigation into the suppression of information about Hitler's 'final solution'*, London 1980; Hans Mommsen, 'What did the Germans know about the genocide of the Jews?', in Walter H. Pehle (ed.), *November 1938: from 'Kristallnacht' to genocide*, New York 1991, 187–221; David Bankier, *The Germans and the final solution: public opinion under Nazism*, London 1992; Hans Mommsen and Volker Ullrich, "'Wir haben nichts gewusst': ein deutsches Trauma", 1999: *Zeitschrift*

Hildebrandt kept himself apprised of conditions in Nazi Germany, especially as they pertained to the German Churches. He was well-connected among English clergymen and German refugees, and he worked with the BBC, one of the chief sources of information regarding Nazi massacres of Jews.⁸³ It is clear that Hildebrandt knew of the atrocities and mass murders. He even co-authored an open letter with other German refugee pastors (among them Hans Ehrenberg) to *The Times* of London, published on 2 January 1943, which called for ‘solemn prayer and intercession for the Jewish people in their unparalleled sufferings’.⁸⁴

Given Hildebrandt’s knowledge of the atrocities and mass murders, it is likely that his reference to the Zachariah passage together with his statement that ‘millions are dying’ was a public acknowledgement of Nazi crimes against the Jewish people. But his main point in this sermon was that: ‘There, under fire, a new [people] will be born ... Under the cross of their shepherd they will be gathered again.’⁸⁵ The ambiguity about the identity of this new people, whether Jews or the Church, is difficult to resolve, which Hildebrandt may have indeed intended. Regardless, this is an astounding sermon of trust and hope in the middle of a hellish reality. In short, Hildebrandt wished to reaffirm that God was among his people even amid the destruction of war.

The reception of sermons delivered in Nazi Germany is extraordinarily difficult to judge because most parishioners simply did not leave records to indicate their thoughts on them, such as in diary entries or letters to the editors of local newspapers. The Nazi police apparatus understood the potential of sermons to undermine National Socialist leadership and ideology, which is why they spied on pastors and kept tabs on who expressed oppositional messages from the pulpit.⁸⁶ But more specific to the reception of Hildebrandt’s BBC sermons, the historian Roggelin has found remarkable evidence that his sermons were indeed well received by the German population.⁸⁷ On 31 May 1942 Bonhoeffer met Bishop Bell in the Swedish town of Sigtuna to discuss the German resistance and

für Sozialgeschichte des 20. und 21. Jahrhunderts vi (1991), 11–46; Eric A. Johnson and Karl-Heinz Reuband, *What we knew: terror, mass murder, and everyday life in Nazi Germany, an oral history*, Cambridge, MA 2005; Frank Bajohr and Dieter Pohl, *Der Holocaust als offenes Geheimnis: die Deutschen, die NS-Führung und die Alliierten*, München 2006.

⁸³ See J. Harris, ‘Broadcasting the massacres: an analysis of the BBC’s contemporary coverage of the Holocaust’, in D. Cesarani (ed.), *Holocaust: critical concepts in historical studies*, v, New York 2004.

⁸⁴ W. Buesing, W. Deutschhausen, H. Ehrenberg, F. Hildebrandt, H. Kramm, J. Rieger and C. Schweitzer, ‘Letter to the Editor’, *The Times*, 2 Jan. 1943; Cresswell and Tow, *Dr Franz Hildebrandt*, 109–10.

⁸⁵ ‘Dort, unter Feuer, wird ein Neues geboren ... Unter dem Kreuz ihres Hirten wird sie von neuem gesammelt’: Hildebrandt, sermon on Zachariah xiii.7–10, NLS, 9251.53/54.

⁸⁷ Roggelin, *Franz Hildebrandt*, 231.

⁸⁶ Skiles, ‘Spying in God’s house’.

the possible support of the British government. Bonhoeffer had been working in Germany with the resistance for over three years at this point. The next day Bell attended a meeting with religious leaders in nearby Stockholm to discuss the BBC's German broadcasts.⁸⁸ His journal entry for that trip includes the following passage: 'BBC Sermons much valued. Hildebrandt's [and] Rieger's both give joy. Services very welcome. Especially among country pastors. Would we have more. Especially Sunday or Saturday evenings – not mornings.'⁸⁹ Bell does not indicate who gave him this information about the reception of BBC sermons, but it is possible, even likely, that it came from Bonhoeffer, who would have been in a position to gather the information. Upon his return to England, Bell wrote directly to Hildebrandt: 'Incidentally, you will be glad to hear that your sermons and Rieger's on the radio were much appreciated in Germany. They want much more such sermons. They are especially heartening to the country pastors.'⁹⁰ This limited information on the positive reception of Hildebrandt's sermons indicates a demand among the German people for quality radio preaching, and also preaching free of Nazi ideology.

Unfortunately, I cannot find any other of Hildebrandt's wartime sermons delivered in his exile in England, in order to compare the nature and consistency of his broadcast messages with his regular parish preaching.⁹¹ His BBC personal file and his personal papers collected at the National Archives of Scotland contain only these thirteen wartime sermons. Likewise, it seems that the sermons of the other BBC pastors in this cohort have not been located or analysed. However, one can compare the messages of Hildebrandt's sermons to those delivered by his fellow Confessing Church clergymen in Nazi Germany.⁹² Hildebrandt's oppositional statements correspond well with oppositional statements found among the sermons of his non-Jewish Confessing Church colleagues. Among sermons delivered in Nazi Germany, one can find expressions that undermine National Socialism as a false belief system, that condemn Nazi persecutions of the Churches and that support Jews and Judaism. Yet there is one theme found in Confessing Church sermons that is not found in Hildebrandt's sermons, that is, the presence of anti-Jewish prejudice.⁹³ One does not find the kind of anti-Judaic tropes in his sermons that had been common throughout

⁸⁸ Ibid. 230.

⁸⁹ Quoted *ibid.* 231.

⁹⁰ Quoted *ibid.*

⁹¹ It is unclear whether he produced or read from manuscripts when delivering sermons in regular worship services. Yet for the BBC he was required to produce and read from the manuscripts.

⁹² Skiles, 'Preaching to Nazi Germany'.

⁹³ W. Skiles, "'The bearers of unholy potential': Confessing Church sermons on the Jews and Judaism', *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* xi/1 (2016), <<https://doi.org/10.6017/scjr.v11i1.9498>>.

Christian Churches (both Protestant and Catholic) for centuries, such as the notion that the Jews are a ‘stubborn’ or ‘wayward’ people, that they killed Christ (thus committing deicide), that God had cursed and punished them ever since to wander stateless as a sign of his judgement and that God has forsaken them as God’s people, replacing them with the Church.⁹⁴ It would only be after the Holocaust that the Churches would come to terms with the destructiveness of this theology.⁹⁵ Though Hildebrandt had the same German theological education as his Confessing Church colleagues, he did not express these anti-Jewish tropes.

Hildebrandt’s sermons offer a unique glimpse into the wartime preaching ministry of a German pastor of Jewish descent. While forced into exile, he still found a way to serve his fellow Germans and oppose the Nazi regime. The historical record reveals Hildebrandt as a man devoted to God and loyal to his German homeland. He expressed grief at how Germans had supported a regime based on an ideology of racial hate and division. But even more than his German identity, Hildebrandt understood himself as a Christian, as one committed to Jesus Christ and devoted to his teachings. Hildebrandt seemingly had no trouble living and working alongside Christians in England, even though he hailed from an ‘enemy’ nation. While he acknowledged his Jewish descent, he did not express sentiments that indicate a deep attachment to his own Jewish identity (at least as expressed in his sermons). This research affirms the findings of Marion Berghan, who has examined German Jewish refugees in England and contends that ‘there are cases, such as those of converts, where the ethnic background is non-existent, but the [Christian] identity is held on to all the more fervently to make up for the missing background’.⁹⁶

Before drawing conclusions about what Hildebrandt preached, it is worth pointing out what he did not preach. He did not explicitly call for Hitler’s removal from office or the overthrow of the National Socialist government. He did not call for Germans to sabotage or otherwise fight against the German military or police state (though he called for Germans and the English to unite as one in the body of Christ). Also, he did not explicitly discuss the systematic mass murder of the Jews. Nor does one find explicit calls for Christians to defy Nazi laws and come to

⁹⁴ See, for example, Léon Poliakov, *The history of anti-semitism*, I: *From the time of Christ to the court of the Jews*, trans. Richard Howard, New York 1965; Gavin Langmuir, *History, religion, and antisemitism*, Berkeley, CA 1990; Robert Michael, *Holy hatred: Christianity, antisemitism, and the Holocaust*, New York 2006; and Dan Cohn-Sherbok, *The crucified Jew: twenty centuries of Christian anti-semitism*, Grand Rapids, MI 1997.

⁹⁵ W. Skiles, ‘Reforming the Church’s theology of the Jews: Christian responses to the Holocaust’, in Sara Brown and Stephen Smith (eds), *Routledge handbook of religion, mass atrocity, and genocide*, New York 2021.

⁹⁶ Berghan, *German Jewish refugees in England*, 17.

the aid of the persecuted Jews. In other words, some may reasonably conclude that Hildebrandt did not go far enough in resisting the Nazi regime because he did not discuss specific and concrete ways to undermine the Nazi regime.⁹⁷ Yet one could also argue that to have done so would have transgressed the proper boundaries of a sermon. Hildebrandt's purpose was to preach the Gospel, not deliver propaganda, and this meant conforming his message to that appropriate to a sermon in the context of a worship service.

Nevertheless, in a language rich in Christian theology and tradition, Hildebrandt preached against Adolf Hitler and National Socialism. Admittedly, he did not explicitly mention Hitler or National Socialism; yet the targets of his criticisms could not be misunderstood. Hildebrandt criticised Hitler as a leader of a disastrous worldview based on exclusion and the debasing of human dignity. He argued that Christians ought to obey the 'emperor', but only when this obedience honours God; after all, he contended, Christians must openly profess who their true king is.⁹⁸ Hildebrandt also condemned National Socialism and the German Christian movement's Nazi-infused theology, which had sown confusion and disunity in the German Churches. Hildebrandt proclaimed that Christians must oppose any leaders or ideology that defines one's neighbour in terms of national, racial or party membership.⁹⁹ He was unequivocal in his condemnation of Nazi racial prejudice and of the fact that it had taken root in the German Churches. Taken together there are eleven references in these thirteen sermons to National Socialism, the Nazi state and its leadership. Hildebrandt witnessed Christians falling away from their faith to serve Hitler and his ideology of exclusion and hate, sowing division and confusion in the German Churches. His concern was to revitalise and reorient Christians in Germany to abandon a false ideology and false messiah, and to return to the Christian faith.

While Hildebrandt offered various criticisms of the Nazi regime and its ideology, his comments were presented in a manner appropriate to a worship service. Without exception, Hildebrandt's sermons focused on exploring the meaning of a biblical text for the enrichment and spiritual nourishment of German listeners. The criticisms expressed were concise, limited in scope, and in keeping with the themes of the biblical texts. In short, it is clear that Hildebrandt's primary purpose was to preach the Gospel above all else. His criticisms of Nazi Germany and its ideology were only made in an effort to connect the biblical text to the challenges of fascism and war in Europe.

⁹⁷ Gerlach, *And the witnesses were silent*, pp. vii–viii.

⁹⁸ See Hildebrandt, sermon on 1 Peter ii.6–10, and sermon on 1 Peter ii. 18–25, NLS, 9251.53/54.

⁹⁹ See Hildebrandt, sermon on Luke x.25–37, *ibid.*