

First they came ...

"**First they came ...**" is the poetic form of a post-war confessional prose by the German Lutheran pastor Martin Niemöller (1892–1984). It is about the cowardice of German intellectuals and certain clergy—including, by his own admission, Niemöller himself—following the Nazis' rise to power and subsequent incremental purging of their chosen targets, group after group. Many variations and adaptations in the spirit of the original have been published in the English language. It deals with themes of persecution, guilt, repentance, and personal responsibility.

Contents

Text

Author

Origin

Role in Nazi Germany

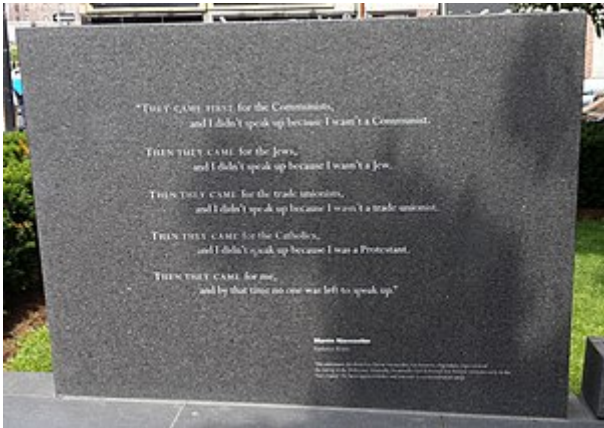
Usage

See also

References

Further reading

External links



Engraving of the confession in poetic form presented at the New England Holocaust Memorial in Boston, Massachusetts

Text

The best-known versions of the confession in English are the edited versions in poetic form that began circulating by the 1950s.^[1] The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum quotes the following text as one of the many poetic versions of the speech:^{[2][3]}

First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a socialist.

Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a trade unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.

A longer version by the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust, a charity established by the British government, is as follows:^[4]

First they came for the Communists
And I did not speak out
Because I was not a Communist

Then they came for the Socialists
And I did not speak out
Because I was not a Socialist

Then they came for the trade unionists
And I did not speak out
Because I was not a trade unionist

Then they came for the Jews
And I did not speak out
Because I was not a Jew

Then they came for me
And there was no one left
To speak out for me

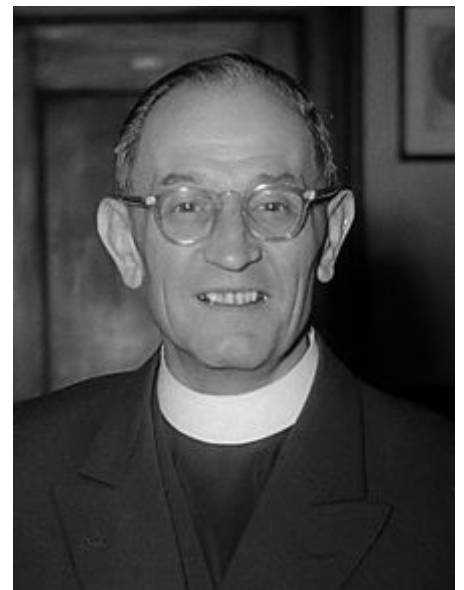
Author

Martin Niemöller was a German Lutheran pastor and theologian born in Lippstadt, Germany, in 1892. Niemöller was an anti-Communist and supported Adolf Hitler's rise to power. But when, after he came to power, Hitler insisted on the supremacy of the state over religion, Niemöller became disillusioned. He became the leader of a group of German clergymen opposed to Hitler. In 1937 he was arrested and eventually confined in Sachsenhausen and Dachau. He was released in 1945 by the Allies. He continued his career in Germany as a clergyman and as a leading voice of penance and reconciliation for the German people after World War II.

Origin

Niemöller made confession in his speech for the Confessing Church in Frankfurt on 6 January 1946, of which this is a partial translation:^[1]

... the people who were put in the camps then were Communists. Who cared about them? We knew it, it was printed in the newspapers. Who raised their voice, maybe the Confessing Church? We thought: Communists, those opponents of religion, those enemies of Christians —"should I be my brother's keeper?"



Niemöller at The Hague's Grote of Sint-Jacobskerk in May 1952

Then they got rid of the sick, the so-called incurables. I remember a conversation I had with a person who claimed to be a Christian. He said: Perhaps it's right, these incurably sick people just cost the state money, they are just a burden to themselves and to others. Isn't it best for all concerned if they are taken out of the middle [of society]? Only then did the church as such take note.

Then we started talking, until our voices were again silenced in public. Can we say, we aren't guilty/responsible?

The persecution of the Jews, the way we treated the occupied countries, or the things in Greece, in Poland, in Czechoslovakia or in Holland, that were written in the newspapers. ... I believe, we Confessing-Church-Christians have every reason to say: mea culpa, mea culpa! We can talk ourselves out of it with the excuse that it would have cost me my head if I had spoken out.

We preferred to keep silent. We are certainly not without guilt/fault, and I ask myself again and again, what would have happened, if in the year 1933 or 1934—there must have been a possibility—14,000 Protestant pastors and all Protestant communities in Germany had defended the truth until their deaths? If we had said back then, it is not right when Hermann Göring simply puts 100,000 Communists in the concentration camps, in order to let them die. I can imagine that perhaps 30,000 to 40,000 Protestant Christians would have had their heads cut off, but I can also imagine that we would have rescued 30–40,000 million [sic] people, because that is what it is costing us now.

This speech was translated and published in English in 1947, but was later retracted when it was alleged that Niemöller was an early supporter of the Nazis.^[5] The "sick, the so-called incurables" were killed in the euthanasia programme "Aktion T4". A 1955 version of the speech, mentioned in an interview of a German professor quoting Niemöller, lists Communists, socialists, schools, Jews, the press, and the Church. An American version delivered by a congressman in 1968 includes industrialists, who were only persecuted by the Nazis on an individual basis, and omits Communists.

Niemöller is quoted as having used many versions of the text during his career, but evidence identified by professor Harold Marcuse at the University of California Santa Barbara indicates that the Holocaust Memorial Museum version is inaccurate because Niemöller frequently used the word "communists" and not "socialists."^[1] The substitution of "socialists" for "communists" is an effect of anti-communism, and most common in the version that has proliferated in the United States. According to Harold Marcuse, "Niemöller's original argument was premised on naming groups he and his audience would instinctively not care about. The omission of Communists in Washington, and of Jews in Germany, distorts that meaning and should be corrected."^[1]

In 1976, Niemöller gave the following answer in response to an interview question asking about the origins of the poem.^[1] The *Martin-Niemöller-Stiftung* ("Martin Niemöller Foundation") considers this the "classical" version of the speech:

There were no minutes or copy of what I said, and it may be that I formulated it differently. But the idea was anyhow: The Communists, we still let that happen calmly; and the trade unions, we also let that happen; and we even let the Social Democrats happen. All of that was not our affair.^[6]

Role in Nazi Germany

Like most Protestant pastors, Niemöller was a national conservative, and openly supported the conservative opponents of the Weimar Republic. He thus welcomed Hitler's accession to power in 1933, believing that it would bring a national revival. By the autumn of 1934, Niemöller joined other Lutheran and Protestant churchmen such as Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer in founding the Confessional Church, a Protestant group that opposed the Nazification of the German Protestant churches.

Still 1935, Niemöller made pejorative remarks about Jews of faith while protecting—in his own church—those of Jewish descent who had been baptised but were persecuted by the Nazis due to their racial heritage. In one sermon in 1935, he remarked: "What is the reason for [their] obvious punishment, which has lasted for thousands of years? Dear brethren, the reason is easily given: the Jews brought the Christ of God to the cross!"^[7]

1936, however, he decidedly opposed the Nazis' "Aryan Paragraph". Niemöller signed the petition of a group of Protestant churchmen which sharply criticized Nazi policies and declared the Aryan Paragraph incompatible with the Christian virtue of charity. The Nazi regime reacted with mass arrests and charges against almost 800 pastors and ecclesiastical lawyers.^[8]

Author and Nobel Prize laureate Thomas Mann published Niemöller's sermons in the United States and praised his bravery.

Usage

At the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., the quotation is on display, the museum website has a discussion of the history of the quotation.^[9]

A version of the poem is on display at the Holocaust memorial Yad Vashem in Jerusalem. The poem is also presented at the Virginia Holocaust Museum in Richmond, Virginia, the New England Holocaust Memorial in Boston, Massachusetts, the Florida Holocaust Museum in St. Petersburg, Florida, and the Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education Center in Skokie, Illinois.

See also

- *And Then They Came for Me*
- Boiling frog
- Creeping normality
- Democratic backsliding
- *The Hangman*
- *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie*

- Foot-in-the-door technique
- Night of the Long Knives
- Not My Business
- Political apathy
- Slippery slope
- Sorites paradox
- Then They Came for Me: A Family's Story of Love, Captivity, and Survival

References

Notes

1. Marcuse, Harold. "Martin Niemöller's famous confession: "First they came for the Communists ... "" (<http://www.history.ucsb.edu/faculty/marcuse/niem.htm>). *University of California at Santa Barbara*.
2. "Martin Niemöller: "First they came for the Socialists..." ". *Holocaust Encyclopedia* (<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/martin-niemoeller-first-they-came-for-the-socialists>). United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Retrieved 25 July 2018.
3. "Martin Niemöller: "First they came for the Socialists..." ". *Holocaust Encyclopedia* (<https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007392>). United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Archived (<https://web.archive.org/web/20180723135844/https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007392>) from the original on 23 July 2018. Retrieved 25 July 2018. This is a different and older article which contains more complete photographs than the new version.
4. First they came - By Pastor Martin Niemoller (<https://www.hmd.org.uk/resource/first-they-came-by-pastor-martin-niemoller/>), *Holocaust Memorial Day Trust*
5. Marcuse, Harold; Niemöller, Martin. "Of Guilt and Hope" (<http://www.history.ucsb.edu/faculty/marcuse/projects/niem/Niem1946GuiltHope13-16.htm>). *University of California at Santa Barbara*.
6. Niemöller, Martin. "Was sagte Niemöller wirklich?" (<http://martin-niemoeller-stiftung.de/martin-niemoeller/was-sagte-niemoeller-wirklich>). *Martin Niemöller Foundation*.
7. The text of this sermon, in English, is found in Martin Niemöller, *First Commandment*, London, 1937, pp. 243–250.
8. LeMO. "Die Bekennende Kirche" (<http://www.dhm.de/lemo/html/nazi/innenpolitik/bekennende/index.html>). Dhm.de. Retrieved 19 June 2014.
9. Niemöller, Martin. "First they came for the Socialists..." (<http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007392>). *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*. Retrieved 5 February 2011.





A US Navy chaplain reads an excerpt of Niemöller's poem during a Holocaust Days of Remembrance observance service in Pearl Harbor, 27 April 2009

Further reading

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- Davis, Angela Y. (1971). *If They Come in the Morning: Voices of Resistance* (<https://archive.org/details/ifttheycomeinmorn00davi>). The Third Press. ISBN 9780893880224.

- Stein, Leo (2003), *They Came for Niemoeller: The Nazi War Against Religion* (<https://books.google.com/books?id=F42NymDVHs8C&q=martin+niem%C3%B6ller>), Gretna, Louisiana: Pelican Publishing Co, ISBN 1-58980-063-X, retrieved 22 August 2012 First published 1942 by Fleming H. Revell Co.

External links

-  Quotations related to Martin Niemöller at Wikiquote
 -  Media related to First they came ... at Wikimedia Commons
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