

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Prayerbook of the Bible, and the Reichsschrifttumskammer (RSK): Reassessing the Historical Record

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This article examines Geoffrey B. Kelly's influential argument that, in 1941, the *Reichsschrifttumskammer* (the Reich Chamber of Literature, hereinafter the RSK) prohibited Dietrich Bonhoeffer from publishing because the agency objected to the ostensibly pro-Jewish and anti-Nazi content of Bonhoeffer's brief work, *Prayerbook of the Bible: An Introduction to the Psalms* (hereinafter *Prayerbook*).¹ Kelly's argument appeared first in the journal *Weavings* in 1991, then more prominently in the introduction to the 1996 critical edition of *Prayerbook* in *DBWE 5*. Kelly's argument subsequently influenced scholarship that mirrored, intensified, and even exaggerated his claims.

The interactions between Bonhoeffer and the RSK merit scrutiny, not solely for historical clarity, but also for interreligious interests. If, as Kelly maintains, Bonhoeffer's interpretation of the Psalms so defiantly honored the Jewish Scriptures that Nazi authorities construed his exegetical approach as a pro-Jewish and anti-Nazi protest, then *Prayerbook* might have significant implications for assessing Bonhoeffer's place in post-Holocaust Jewish-Christian conversations. However, a careful examination of the relevant primary sources shows that Kelly's claims are uncorroborated and unsubstantiated by the historical record, as there is no evidence that *Prayerbook* figured into the deliberations of the RSK. Indeed, far from being incensed by the supposedly seditious message of *Prayerbook*, the RSK seems not to have been familiar with the content of this brief work.

After critically assessing Kelly's account, the broader implications of his argument, and its appeal, will be addressed by briefly considering why Kelly's historically insupportable claims have gained acceptance and influence. The article will suggest that Kelly's argument, and its acceptance, may comprise an example of a problematic tendency in the reception of Bonhoeffer: interpreting his life and work, especially in the context of Jewish-Christian relations, through a misleadingly heroic or hagiographical lens.

¹ A leading expert on Bonhoeffer, Kelly (1932-2017) was integral to the development of Bonhoeffer scholarship. In addition to his impressive career in teaching and research, he made significant contributions to The International Bonhoeffer Society (English Language Section), which he served as Secretary and as President.

1. Kelly on *Prayerbook* and the RSK

According to Kelly, the publication of *Prayerbook* was a clear act of anti-Nazi protest. “One should make no mistake about it; in the context of Nazi Germany’s bitter opposition to any honoring of the Old Testament,” Kelly declares, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s little book on the Psalms, first published in 1940, constituted an explosive declaration both politically and theologically.”² For Kelly, the “explosive” implications of “honoring” the Jewish Scriptures in *Prayerbook* are unmistakable within the context of Nazi Germany. “Against the quasi-apocalyptic background of a Europe at war, a church divided, and a nation engaged in a malignant national policy of genocide,” he writes, “Bonhoeffer’s study of the Psalms takes on a new life. This book, coming from one who was representative of that small group of fellow Christians acting at great risk and seemingly in vain to restore true Christianity to Germany, stands in sobering contrast with the blind, flag-waving patriotism and nationalistic sloganeering that cheered on the terroristic violence against innocent peoples.”³ How, then, does Kelly justify this dramatic assessment of the significance of *Prayerbook*?

Kelly does not identify specific anti-Nazi and pro-Jewish content in *Prayerbook*; instead, Kelly describes the ostensible tendentiousness of the book in more general terms. “Bonhoeffer was fully aware that his writings on themes of the Old Testament would be part of the conflict in which theologians debated the value of the Old Testament and the ‘Old Testament people of God’ for the Christian church,” Kelly writes. “This was a conflict aggravated by the anti-Judaism of the ‘German Christians’ in the ‘German Reich Church’ which, in Bonhoeffer’s opinion, had sold its soul to Nazism.”⁴ Faced with this context, “Bonhoeffer was particularly troubled by the clumsy, ideologically based attempt of the ‘German Christians’ to eliminate the Jewish heritage from Christianity,” Kelly adds. “The Nazis and the more extremist among these pseudo-scholars had dismissed the Old Testament as a ‘Jewish book’ already supplanted by the New Testament.”⁵ According to Kelly, moreover, Bonhoeffer’s christological interpretation of the Psalms in *Prayerbook* launched a salvo in the so-called “church struggle”: “In the context of the German Church struggle, therefore, Bonhoeffer desired to retrieve the Psalms as the prayerbook of Jesus Christ himself,”⁶ an approach “congruent with the needs

² Geoffrey B. Kelly, “The Prayerbook of the Bible: Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Introduction to the Psalms,” *Weavings* 6, no. 5 (September/October 1991): 36. See also *DBWE* 5:143.

³ Kelly, “The Prayerbook of the Bible,” 41. See also *DBWE* 5:153, where Kelly claims that “Bonhoeffer’s study of the Psalms offers protest and hope.”

⁴ Kelly, “The Prayerbook of the Bible,” 37. See also *DBWE* 5:143-144.

⁵ Kelly, “The Prayerbook of the Bible,” 37. See also *DBWE* 5:144. For more on this, see Doris L. Bergen, *Twisted Cross: The German Christian Movement in the Third Reich* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), and Susannah Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008). For an overview of the context, with additional bibliography, see David A. R. Clark, “Antisemitism, Violence, and Invective against the Old Testament: Reinhold Krause’s *Sportpalast* Speech, 1933,” *Canadian-American Theological Review* 7, no. 1 (2018): 124-137.

⁶ Kelly, “The Prayerbook of the Bible,” 37. See also *DBWE* 5:144.

of people in Nazi Germany.”⁷ In this sense, Kelly maintains, *Prayerbook* addressed “the anguish of Christians” in Nazi Germany, which Kelly interprets partly as a coded reference to Jews.⁸

However, beyond these broad assertions that the christological interpretation in *Prayerbook* somehow championed the church struggle, Christians, and Jews, Kelly does not support his claim that *Prayerbook* was “explosive” by analyzing specific texts from the work.⁹ Instead, Kelly substantiates his claim that publishing *Prayerbook* was “explosive” with reference to its reception by the Nazi regime. That is, in Kelly’s argument, the claim that *Prayerbook* constituted an anti-Nazi protest is evidenced by its ostensibly harsh reception by Nazi authorities, as Kelly asserts that the seditiousness of *Prayerbook* instigated a repressive response from the RSK:

It was not surprising, therefore, that its appearance led to an unpleasant exchange of letters between Bonhoeffer and the “Reich Board for the Regulation of Literature” which had seen fit to fine him 30 Reichsmarks for violating the obligation already imposed on him to report his writing activity to the proper authorities. The board added a prohibition against any further publications. Bonhoeffer appealed this punishment on the grounds that he was only doing

⁷ Kelly, “The Prayerbook of the Bible,” 38. See also *DBWE* 5:144.

⁸ Kelly claims, somewhat enigmatically, that Bonhoeffer’s concern for Christians implicitly refers also to Jews: “It is obvious here that Bonhoeffer is alluding to the anguish of Christians. It is equally obvious that Bonhoeffer felt that there could be no specific mention of the Jews, given the rigorous censorship to which his book was submitted. To sympathize with the plight of the Jewish people in any public way could only have brought down the wrath of the Gestapo on the Confessing Church and on those with whom Bonhoeffer was involved in 1940. But it is equally clear that even when he speaks openly only of the suffering of Christians, he is likewise describing the crucifixion of the Jews of Europe to whom he was viscerally bound during the church struggle.” *DBWE* 5:151-152. Kelly’s contention that Bonhoeffer’s concern for Christians functions as a cipher for concern for Jews is by no means “clear,” yet Kelly offers no evidence that any such code operates in *Prayerbook*.

⁹ Kelly’s most specific reference to material from *Prayerbook* is his claim that Bonhoeffer’s discussion of “psalms of suffering, guilt, the imprecation of enemies, and the hope of resurrection” had special significance in the context of Nazi Germany. “The meaning of these prayers for a people living under the heartlessness and militaristic nationalism of Nazi rule is not to be missed,” Kelly writes. Yet aside from some general observations about Bonhoeffer’s commentary on these psalms, Kelly leaves this “meaning” unexplained. Moreover, the supposedly anti-Nazi interpretations Kelly discerns in this context might easily have been perceived as pro-Nazi exegesis by a reader in the period unfamiliar with Bonhoeffer’s political allegiances. For instance, Kelly observes that, in Bonhoeffer’s exegesis, “psalms relive the experience of Jesus’ passion in which good people suffer misfortune while the godless seem to be free to do their evil with impunity.” Kelly, “The Prayerbook of the Bible,” 40; see also *DBWE* 5:151. However, since Nazi propaganda exploited the antisemitic charge of deicide by portraying Jews as crucifying Germans, this reading of the Psalms would hardly appear seditious to readers in Nazi Germany. The cover illustration of a January 1939 issue of *Der Stürmer*, for instance, depicted Herschel Grynszpan crucifying Ernst vom Rath, above the perennial banner of that antisemitic publication: “Die Juden sind unser Unglück!” (The Jews are our misfortune!). If, as Kelly suggests, Bonhoeffer’s interpretation of the Psalms connected the crucifixion of Jesus with those who cause “good people [to] suffer misfortune,” then—far from signaling anti-Nazi protest—this interpretation could have been viewed by a casual reader in Nazi Germany as consonant with antisemitic propaganda that imputed *Unglück* to supposedly deicidal Jews.

“scientific exegesis.” Moreover, he argued that the prohibitions against his religious writings were so vague that he was unable to discern whether this particular work should have been submitted to the board or not. The head of the censorship board was not fully taken in by Bonhoeffer’s disingenuous contention. Although he repealed the fine, he strengthened the prohibition against any further publishing on Bonhoeffer’s part, adding that there were enough dangerous dogmatic and spiritual connections in the book to make it impossible for the board to accept Bonhoeffer’s reasoning.¹⁰

Thus, according to Kelly, the anti-Nazi message of *Prayerbook* is demonstrated by the agitation it caused Nazi officials; that is, the evidence of the “explosive” message of this book is the punitive reaction of the RSK that *Prayerbook* elicited. Kelly claims that, despite Bonhoeffer’s protestations, the Nazi authorities recognized *Prayerbook* as a diatribe against the Nazi regime: “The Nazi censor was not deceived,” Kelly claims, for “he saw the political implications of this book and its exposé of the suffering inflicted by Nazism on so many.”¹¹ Kelly asserts that *Prayerbook*, far from being merely a short work of christological exegesis, constituted nothing less than a dramatic “exposé” of Nazi criminality.

2. Acceptance and Slippage: Kelly’s Claims in the Scholarly Discourse

Kelly’s account is prominently situated in Bonhoeffer scholarship, appearing at the outset of the “Editor’s Introduction to the English Edition” of *Prayerbook*, in *DBWE* 5. Indeed, any scholar who consults this standard scholarly edition of *Prayerbook* encounters Kelly’s account from the first sentences of the introduction: “One should make no mistake about it; in the context of Nazi Germany’s bitter opposition to any manner of honoring of the Old Testament,” the introduction begins, “this book, at the time of its publication, constituted an explosive declaration both politically and theologically. It came as no surprise, therefore, that its appearance led to an unpleasant exchange of letters between Bonhoeffer and the Reich Board for the Regulation of Literature....”¹² From its prominent place in the scholarly apparatus on *Prayerbook*, Kelly’s argument has been mirrored in scholarly contexts.¹³ Scholarly accounts that mirror Kelly’s argument have, however, featured blurring of details and even problematic intensification. Some of this slippage has been relatively minor. Martin Rumscheidt, for instance, cites the Gestapo rather than the RSK, inadvertently conflating the action of the Gestapo to prohibit Bonhoeffer from public speaking (imposed August 22, 1940) and the decision of the

¹⁰ Kelly, “The *Prayerbook of the Bible*,” 36. See also *DBWE* 5:143.

¹¹ *DBWE* 5:153.

¹² *DBWE* 5:143.

¹³ Kelly’s argument has also appeared in a popularized form. In a mass-market biography, Eric Metaxas quotes Kelly’s account, then labels *Prayerbook* “a bold and scholarly rebuke to Nazi efforts to undermine anything of Jewish origin” that featured “offensively pro-Jewish content.” Eric Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy: A Righteous Gentile vs. the Third Reich* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010), 367 and 378.

RSK to prohibit Bonhoeffer from publishing (imposed March 19, 1941).¹⁴ “Bonhoeffer published a little book on the Psalms called *Prayerbook of the Bible*. Not coincidentally,” Rumscheidt writes, mirroring Kelly’s reasoning, “the Gestapo’s banning him from publishing and speaking in public (apart from preaching in worship services) occurred shortly after that book had appeared.”¹⁵ Similarly, Lisa E. Dahill mistakenly substitutes the Gestapo for the RSK as the agency involved: “for Bonhoeffer to publish in 1940 a book on the Psalms, entitled ‘Prayerbook of the Bible,’ was a defiant attempt to counter such propaganda by asserting the supreme christological significance of the Psalms. Not coincidentally,” Dahill adds, “the Gestapo’s ban on his writing appeared shortly after this book was published.”¹⁶ Substituting the Gestapo for the RSK is perhaps understandable slippage, since the activities of the two agencies sometimes overlapped.¹⁷ These examples suggest not only the influence of Kelly’s argument in the scholarly discourse, but also a tendency toward minor slippage in how the argument has been replicated. More recently, however, Kelly’s argument appears to have been intensified to the point of misrepresentation in Brad Pribbenow’s assessment of the drastic consequences of Bonhoeffer’s biblical interpretation. Whereas Kelly claims that Bonhoeffer’s biblical interpretation in *Prayerbook* resulted in being banned from publishing, Pribbenow suggests that Bonhoeffer’s biblical interpretation was somehow a causal factor in Bonhoeffer’s arrest and imprisonment, describing “the Nazi detractors who would soon seek [Bonhoeffer’s] arrest, in part, on account of his particular reading of the Old Testament.”¹⁸ Pribbenow does not explain how Bonhoeffer’s

¹⁴ The Gestapo issued a decree addressed to “All State Police Headquarters” and dated August 22, 1940: “Because of his activity subverting the people, I impose on Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer of Schlawa/Pomerania a ban on public speaking within the entire German Reich.” *DBWE* 16:71. This decree was issued by Office IV A 4 of the Reich Central Security Office (*Reichssicherheitshauptamt*), the department of Office IV (the Gestapo) directed at “Church Political Matters.” *DBWE* 16:71n1. The decree was signed by Erich Roth, an attorney and SS officer who headed Department IV A 4. *DBWE* 16:71n4. Bonhoeffer promptly protested this decree. In a draft letter to the Reich Central Security Office, dated September 15, 1940, Bonhoeffer responded: “On September 9, 1940, the state police headquarters in Köslin notified me of the decree of the Reich Central Security Office IV A 4 b 776/40, which has forbidden me to speak publicly throughout the Reich. The reason for this ban is stated as ‘activity subverting the people.’ I reject this charge.” In his letter, which received no reply, Bonhoeffer argues that his family “has rendered outstanding service to the German people and nation for generations” and that his “personal work consists overwhelmingly of scholarly research.” *DBWE* 16:75. See also *DBWE* 16:187-188.

¹⁵ Martin Rumscheidt, “The View from Below: Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Reflections and Actions on Racism,” *Toronto Journal of Theology* 24, suppl. 1 (January 2008): 69.

¹⁶ Lisa E. Dahill, *Reading from the Underside of Selfhood: Bonhoeffer and Spiritual Formation* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2009), 103.

¹⁷ Guenter Lewy describes, as a frequent procedure, the following cooperative efforts of the RSK and the Gestapo: “A local Gestapo office would seize a book deemed to be dangerous and send it to the Gestapo [*Geheimes Staatspolizeiamt*] in Berlin, which would send the book to the RSK. The RSK then forwarded the book to Department VIII of the Ministry of Propaganda for a decision. If the book was found to be objectionable, the RSK would enter the book on the Index and instruct the Gestapo to confiscate the book.” Lewy, *Harmful and Undesirable: Book Censorship in Nazi Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 54.

¹⁸ Brad Pribbenow, *Prayerbook of Christ: Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Christological Interpretation of the Psalms* (Lanham: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2018), 45.

biblical interpretation could be connected to his imprisonment on completely unrelated grounds, but it seems this may be an overextended version of Kelly's argument. Not only then has Kelly's influential account been mirrored, but its replication has involved both misattribution of details and problematic intensification. Considering its prominence and influence, it is therefore important to assess the validity of Kelly's argument.

3. Weighing Kelly's Claims against the Historical Record

A central claim of Kelly's account is that the content of *Prayerbook* presented an anti-Nazi and pro-Jewish "exposé of the suffering inflicted by Nazism on so many." This claim is surprising partly because there is no obvious evidence of anti-Nazi and pro-Jewish content in *Prayerbook*, a brief christological interpretation of the Psalms that never discusses contemporary Jews.¹⁹ Yet Kelly's argument hinges on his contention that, as a direct consequence of the content of *Prayerbook*, the RSK prohibited Bonhoeffer from further publishing. As we will see, however, Kelly's argument is unsupported by the historical record. There is no evidence that the RSK was motivated by the interpretation of the Psalms in *Prayerbook*; to the contrary, the historical record signals that the RSK was either unaware of—or indifferent to—the content of *Prayerbook*, focusing instead on Bonhoeffer's professional status and political reputation.

3.1. Initial Correspondence from the RSK

The exchange began with a letter, dated November 21, 1940, from the RSK to Bonhoeffer. This letter may not be extant; however, it apparently instructed Bonhoeffer to apply for membership or exemption from the RSK, which Bonhoeffer undertook sometime between November 1940 and February 1941. Bonhoeffer then received two letters from the RSK, dated March 17 and 19, 1941. The letter dated March 17, 1941 imposed a fine on Bonhoeffer for publishing books without having secured either membership or exemption from the RSK. This letter was signed "By order of: Ihde," acting director of the RSK:²⁰

With this notice, a fine in the amount of
30 (Thirty) Marks
is hereby levied against you, in accordance with paragraph 28, subparagraph
1, of the First Regulation of the November 1, 1933, Reich Chamber of Culture
Law (*RGBl.* I, page 797).

You have published the following works:

¹⁹ For the author's discussions of Bonhoeffer's christological interpretation of the Psalms in *Prayerbook*, see David A. R. Clark, "Psalm 74:8 and November 1938: Rereading Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Kristallnacht* Annotation in Its Interpretive Context," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 71, no. 3 (August 2018): 259-260, and David A. R. Clark, "Bonhoeffer's Christological Interpretation of the Psalms: Tensions, Subjectivity, and the Voice of Christ," *Pro Ecclesia* 31, no. 2 (May 2022): forthcoming.

²⁰ *DBWE* 16:181n6.

Discipleship, appearing in 1937 from Chr. Kaiser Publishers, Munich; *Year Together*, appearing in 1938 from Chr. Kaiser Publishers, Munich;

Introduction to the Psalms, appearing in 1940 from MBK Publishers, Bad Salzufflen;

Contribution to the anthology *Sermon Letters*, appearing in 1940 from G. Müller Publishers, Wuppertal.

You have therefore taken an action that falls under the jurisdiction of my Chamber. According to paragraph 4, cited in connection with my official notice no. 88 of April 1, 1937, revised November 11, 1938, regarding the registration of those engaged in literary activity with the Reich Chamber of Literature (published in the *Völkischer Beobachter* of July 1, 1937; *Börsenblatt* no. 148/1937, 275/1938; *Der deutsche Schriftsteller*, volume 2, page 157, and volume 3, page 277), you were obligated to gain membership in my Chamber or to apply for exemption from membership.

Only as a result of my request of November 21, 1940, did you seek membership or the procurement of an exemption from my Chamber.

In order to preclude disciplinary measures, this fine is to be paid to the Reich Chamber of Literature, Berlin postal account no. 80915, within a week of your being served with this notice.²¹

Concerning Kelly's claim that the RSK responded to the "explosive" anti-Nazi protest of *Prayerbook*, it should first be noted that *Prayerbook* is not at all highlighted in this letter, but merely appears in a list of four works published by Bonhoeffer between 1937 and 1940. Indeed, *Prayerbook* is not even correctly cited in that list. One would expect that, if the actions of the RSK resulted from the politically "explosive" contents of *Prayerbook of the Bible: An Introduction to the Psalms*, the RSK would be familiar with its full title; instead, as with most titles listed in the letter, the RSK incorrectly cites *Prayerbook*.²² In this letter, the RSK did not emphasize or discuss *Prayerbook*; the RSK seems not even to have known its correct title.

The RSK soon sent a second letter, again issued by Ihde's authority, dated March 19, 1941. In this letter, the RSK rejected Bonhoeffer's application for membership or exemption, explaining its rationale as follows:

²¹ DBWE 16:180-181.

²² Mark S. Brocker notes: "the titles of three of the four works mentioned by the Chamber are inaccurate. *Year Together* is actually *Life Together*. *Introduction to the Psalms* is the subtitle of *Prayerbook of the Bible*. Bonhoeffer contributed to a volume titled *Eine Predigthilfe* (A sermon aid), not *Predigtbriefe* (Sermon letters), that was published by E. Müller-Verlag..., not G. Müller Verlag." DBWE 16:180-181n3.

In accordance with paragraph 10 of the implementation order of the November 1, 1933, Reich Chamber of Culture Law (*RGBl. I*, page 797), I hereby reject your application for admission to the Reich Chamber of Literature, Author Group, as well as for procurement of a certificate of exemption, due to the lack of the requisite political reliability [*Zuverlässigkeit*].

I have determined that on August 22, 1940, the state police [Gestapo] imposed on you a ban on public speaking as a result of your activity subverting the people.

This fact sufficiently demonstrates the deficiency in reliability [*Zuverlässigkeit*] as noted in the sense of paragraph 10 above.²³

On the basis of the present decision, you are forbidden every activity as a writer. In the case of a violation, the penal provisions set forth in paragraph 28 of the implementation order cited above would necessarily be initiated against you.²⁴

In explaining the reasons for its decision, the RSK is blunt: Bonhoeffer, having already been forbidden by the Gestapo from public speaking, lacked “political reliability” and was thus inadmissible to the Chamber. The RSK does not mention *Prayerbook*; rather, the RSK cites Bonhoeffer’s political record, in particular the restrictions already imposed on him by the Gestapo, as grounds for denying his application.

Jan-Pieter Barbian’s archival research provides insight into the deliberative process of the RSK prior to its March 19, 1941 letter, further corroborating that Bonhoeffer’s political reputation—and not the contents of *Prayerbook*—motivated the decision of the RSK.²⁵ Bonhoeffer applied for a “certificate of exemption,” Barbian reports, but the RSK soon ascertained the details of Bonhoeffer’s political record. “During the resulting checks,” Barbian notes, “it was found that Bonhoeffer was an ‘open proponent’ of the oppositional Confessing Church” who had already been prohibited from public speaking “‘due to his corrosive activities.’”²⁶ Barbian reports that the Reich Church Ministry influenced the RSK by requesting that the Chamber deny Bonhoeffer’s request for a membership exemption. “On 25 February 1941,” Barbian reports, “the Church Ministry therefore asked the Chamber to

²³ “Before accepting a new member,” Lewy explains, “the RSK inquired at the appropriate party leadership (Gauleitung) and the Gestapo about the political reliability of the candidate.” Lewy, *Harmful and Undesirable*, 32. Any routine inquiries to the Gestapo would quickly have revealed that, on August 22, 1940, the Gestapo had banned Bonhoeffer from public speaking.

²⁴ *DBWE* 16:181-182; *DBW* 16:171.

²⁵ Barbian’s observations are based on a file that I have not been able to locate in the archives. I suspect that the file, formerly referenced as BArch BDC/Reichskulturkammer/Reichsschrifttumskammer/Besondere Kulturangelegenheiten/Bonhoeffer, D., may have been relocated or relabeled since the 1980s. Until this file is located, Barbian’s published reports provide access to this primary source.

²⁶ Jan-Pieter Barbian, *The Politics of Literature in Nazi Germany: Books in the Media Dictatorship*, trans. Kate Sturge (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 165.

reject Bonhoeffer's application "because, as a leading member of an illegal organization not recognized by the state, he cannot be considered to show the necessary reliability [*Zuverlässigkeit*]."²⁷ The RSK thus heeded the recommendation of the Reich Church Ministry, supported by the record of prior action by the Gestapo. Notably, the wording of the Reich Church Ministry in its request to the RSK appears also in the letter from the RSK to Bonhoeffer: the Reich Church Ministry informed the RSK that Bonhoeffer lacked *Zuverlässigkeit*, and the RSK subsequently notified Bonhoeffer that his inadequate *Zuverlässigkeit* warranted the rejection of his application. Reports on this process do not reference the content of Bonhoeffer's writings, including *Prayerbook*.

3.2. *Correspondence from Albert Lempp*

After receiving the letters of March 17 and 19, 1941, Bonhoeffer contacted Albert Lempp, who owned Chr. Kaiser Verlag.²⁸ Bonhoeffer's initial letter may not be extant; however, Lempp's return correspondence exists, in which he provided Bonhoeffer with guidance that subsequently shaped Bonhoeffer's response to the RSK. Lempp's letter advises Bonhoeffer how to respond to the fine levied by the RSK:

I have received your letter of March 28 regarding the Reich Chamber of Literature and would like to let you know that a great number of theological authors have now received such penalties, not only those who publish here but also those with other publishers. The penalties are generally being handled in such a way that the amount fined is paid with reservations, but then the author protests the penalty to the Reich Chamber of Literature. This protest appeals to the Reich Chamber of Literature's official notice no. 88, paragraph 2, which reads, "Scholars who publish purely academic papers in their discipline do not fall under the jurisdiction of the Reich Chamber of Literature [*Wer als Wissenschaftler auf seinem Fachgebiet rein wissenschaftliche Arbeiten veröffentlicht, gehört nicht in den Zuständigkeitsbereich der Reichsschrifttumskammer*]," and it appeals also to the statement of the Reich Minister of the Interior on November 14, 1934, based on this paragraph, which reads, "Officials, scholars, clergy, physicians, and attorneys are for this reason not included within the Reich Chamber of Literature when they write in the areas of their professional expertise." It is on the basis of these pronouncements that you then seek the rescinding of the penalty and the repayment of the fine.²⁹

²⁷ Barbian, *Politics of Literature*, 165. See also, Barbian, "Die Arbeits- und Lebensbedingungen der Schriftsteller," in *Geschichte des deutschen Buchhandels im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, vol. 3, pt. 1, *Drittes Reich*, ed. Ernst Fischer and Reinhard Wittmann with Jan-Pieter Barbian (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2015), 40.

²⁸ *DBWE* 17:405.

²⁹ *DBWE* 16:184; *DBW* 16:175.

Kelly presents the measures of the RSK against Bonhoeffer as an extraordinary reaction to an extraordinary protest; however, Lempp informed Bonhoeffer that “a great number of theological authors” had been subjected to similar actions by the RSK, suggesting that Bonhoeffer’s exchange with the RSK was not remarkable but routine. Furthermore, there is again no mention of the content of any of Bonhoeffer’s books, including *Prayerbook*. Lempp did not discuss the content of Bonhoeffer’s writings, including any potential insinuations of anti-Nazi protest; rather, Lempp addressed the academic category of Bonhoeffer and his writings, as an academic publishing specifically academic books, believing that—since the RSK did not wield authority over scholarly works—this distinction would benefit Bonhoeffer’s case.

Lempp’s letter then addresses the decision of the RSK to reject Bonhoeffer’s request for membership or exemption, which thereby precluded any further publishing:

You write that you simultaneously received a letter of March 19, 1941, that prohibited you from engaging in any writing. If this letter is also from the Reich Chamber of Literature, then I believe that you can protest it, since you are working not as a writer but as a scholar [*da Sie sich ja nicht als Schriftsteller, sondern als Wissenschaftler betätigen*] who does not fall under the Reich Chamber of Literature’s jurisdiction, and request that they confirm with you explicitly that this interpretation of yours is correct....

When your situation is presented as an infraction to me, presumably very soon, then needless to say I shall testify as well on your behalf to the effect that these are scholarly books [*wissenschaftliche Bücher*].³⁰

In this context, there is no specific reference to the content of Bonhoeffer’s books, including *Prayerbook*. Lempp remains focused on Bonhoeffer’s *wissenschaftlich* status as an academic publishing academic works, seeking to position Bonhoeffer outside the purview of the RSK. There is no hint that Bonhoeffer or Lempp anticipated any need to defend the content of Bonhoeffer’s books against accusations of anti-Nazi sedition. Indeed, when Lempp assures Bonhoeffer of his willingness to support Bonhoeffer’s case before the RSK, he alludes only to the status of Bonhoeffer’s writings as “scholarly books.”

3.3. Correspondence from MBK

Lempp’s press, Chr. Kaiser Verlag, was not the publisher of *Prayerbook*, which had been published by MBK.³¹ Had Bonhoeffer suspected that the RSK was reacting to the content of *Prayerbook*, then one might expect him at least to have

³⁰ *DBWE* 16:185; *DBW* 16:175.

³¹ The full name of the publisher was “Menschen begegnen—Bibel entdecken—Kirche gestalten.”

contacted MBK.³² However, Bonhoeffer appears not to have contacted MBK at all, as the letter Bonhoeffer soon received from MBK offers no hint of any prior correspondence; to the contrary, this letter from MBK recounts the actions of the RSK as though Bonhoeffer were not yet aware of the situation. This letter, dated April 2, 1941, is signed by Elfriede Rättig:

The Leipzig Reich Chamber of Literature has communicated with us in a letter of March 29, 1941, that with our publication of your volume *Prayerbook of the Bible*, we have violated the Chamber decree, since you are not a member of the Chamber nor have you requested a certification of exemption from it.³³

Absent from this letter is any discussion of the content of *Prayerbook*, as MBK gives no indication that the content of the book had been deemed a subversive protest against the Nazi regime. Instead, MBK recites the same rationale that appears elsewhere in these exchanges with the RSK: Bonhoeffer lacked the requisite status within the RSK to publish, as he had been granted neither membership nor exemption.

In its letter to Bonhoeffer, MBK adds: “so that you may be informed about this correspondence [with the RSK], we are enclosing for you...our return correspondence to the Chamber, dated today.”³⁴ MBK accordingly provided Bonhoeffer a copy of its own letter to the RSK in which the publisher justified the publication of *Prayerbook*, not by defending its content but by highlighting its brevity. This unpublished document is held in the archives of the *Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin*:

Re: Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Prayerbook of the Bible*

In reply to your letter, we would like to inform you that prior to the publication of the volume above, the obligations towards the Reich Chamber of Culture legislation were duly verified on our part.

Since the booklet, “Prayerbook of the Bible,” is only a pamphlet of sixteen pages and the only publication of the author in our publishing house, we based our decision on the notification of the Reich Chamber of Literature, Nr. 88, paragraph 3, from April 1, 1937, and November 21, 1938.

From this we infer that the publication of this booklet falls under the category of a minor literary work, which does not require registration.³⁵

In this letter to the RSK, MBK focuses on the categorization of *Prayerbook* as a sixteen-page pamphlet which, according to the publisher’s understanding of the

³² This observation, however, should perhaps not be pressed too far. As an anonymous reader of this article suggested, Bonhoeffer’s initial contact with Lempp could also be explained in terms of Bonhoeffer’s prior familiarity with Lempp or the prominence of Chr. Kaiser Verlag.

³³ *DBWE* 16:185.

³⁴ *DBWE* 16:185.

³⁵ NL 299 (Bonhoeffer), A 61 4 (5).

relevant regulations, meant that the publication was not subject to the oversight of the RSK. When MBK discussed *Prayerbook* with the RSK, then, it was to address not the content of its pages but rather the number of pages. Yet again absent from this correspondence is any discussion of the content of *Prayerbook*.

3.4. Bonhoeffer's Response to the RSK

In a letter dated April 22, 1941,³⁶ Bonhoeffer responded to the RSK by rejecting its actions. "I have paid the fine," Bonhoeffer writes, adhering to Lempp's recommended procedure, "although I cannot thereby acknowledge its legitimacy."³⁷ The remainder of Bonhoeffer's letter offers a detailed refutation of the actions of the RSK. "I object to both the fine and the ban for the following reasons," Bonhoeffer writes, enumerating four specific rebuttals, none of which address the content of *Prayerbook*.

First, he invokes the rationale suggested to him by Lempp: as a scholar writing in his field of expertise, Bonhoeffer argues, he is outside the purview of the RSK. Bonhoeffer quotes, nearly verbatim,³⁸ the regulations cited by Lempp which stipulate that scholars writing in their areas of research are outside the authority of the RSK. "The sum of my publications consists of the results of my scholarly—dogmatic, ethical, and exegetical—research [*meiner wissenschaftlichen... Forschung*]," Bonhoeffer writes. "Therefore," he adds, on the basis of the regulations already cited, "they do not fall under the jurisdiction of the Reich Chamber of Literature; and thus I have no right to apply to the Reich Chamber of Literature."³⁹ This initial argument focuses on his *wissenschaftlich* status—as an academic writing academic works—and not on the specific content of any particular book.

Second, Bonhoeffer specifies that each publication listed by the RSK is academic. "*Discipleship*," he states, "is everywhere acknowledged in theological circles as a purely scholarly work [*wissenschaftliche Arbeit*]," supporting this assertion by citing "the discussion in *Die Theologische Literaturzeitung* and elsewhere."⁴⁰ *Life Together*, Bonhoeffer maintains, has a similarly academic pedigree, having "appeared in the scholarly series [*wissenschaftlichen Reihe*] *Theologische Existenz heute* and is intended for theologians."⁴¹ Bonhoeffer briefly addresses *Prayerbook*, echoing the defence articulated by MBK that the work "comprises only sixteen pages and therefore falls clearly within paragraph 3 of official notice no. 88 regarding documents of 'negligible size.'"⁴² He does not discuss

³⁶ The extant version of this letter is Bonhoeffer's draft. I have not been able to locate in the archives the final version, which was mailed to the RSK; it may not be extant.

³⁷ DBWE 16:187.

³⁸ In one quotation, "Bonhoeffer mistakenly wrote 'conduct research' rather than 'write.'" DBWE 16:187n2.

³⁹ DBWE 16:187; DBW 16:178.

⁴⁰ DBWE 16:187; DBW 16:178.

⁴¹ DBWE 16:187; DBW 16:178.

⁴² DBWE 16:187.

the specific content of *Prayerbook*, except to note: “The paper contains the results of scholarly work [*wissenschaftlicher Arbeit*].”⁴³ Finally, Bonhoeffer asserts that “*Predigthilfe* provides scholarly textual exegesis for sermons” and that “these exegeses are not at all accessible to laypeople.”⁴⁴ After emphasizing that all these works are *wissenschaftlich*, Bonhoeffer concludes: “Not one of my publications, therefore, justifies the imposition of this fine.”⁴⁵ Yet again, this context features no discussion of the specific content of Bonhoeffer’s publications, including *Prayerbook*; instead, Bonhoeffer asserts in general terms that these publications should be categorized as academic and thus fall outside the purview of the RSK.

Third, Bonhoeffer addresses the errors that appeared in the list of titles in the March 17, 1941 letter from the RSK: “I never wrote a book titled *Year Together*,” Bonhoeffer corrects, “but rather *Life Together*. The volume subtitled *Introduction to the Psalms* was missing its title, namely, *Prayerbook of the Bible*. There is no such anthology as *Sermon Letters* [*Predigtbriefe*]; I contributed to the volume titled *An Aid to Preaching* [*Eine Predigthilfe*] that appeared not with G. Müller Publishers but rather with E. Müller Publishers.”⁴⁶ According to Bonhoeffer, these errors indicated that the RSK was so unfamiliar with his works that the Chamber must not even have had ready access to the books in question. “The enumeration of my writings for the purpose of the fine levied on me is so imprecise,” Bonhoeffer reasons, “that I must assume the writings themselves were not even at hand.”⁴⁷ According to Kelly, the RSK reacted to the content of *Prayerbook*; Bonhoeffer, by contrast, accuses the RSK of having failed to consult copies of his books. Whereas Kelly argues that this dispute was prompted by the supposedly anti-Nazi content of *Prayerbook*, Bonhoeffer infers that the RSK did not read, or even acquire, the books that resulted in his fine.

Fourth, Bonhoeffer disputes the recourse of the RSK to the ban on public speaking previously imposed by the Gestapo.⁴⁸ In this context, Bonhoeffer again emphasizes that his writings are academic without defending the content of his books. “Furthermore,” he insists, “anyone who is familiar with my theological writings will realize that they consist of purely inner-theological discussions that have not the slightest to do with the rationale for the ban on public speaking.”⁴⁹ Bonhoeffer does not mention *Prayerbook* in this context, highlighting only the academic nature of his publications.

Since one must expect a measure of circumspection in correspondence with a Nazi agency, this article does not suggest that Bonhoeffer would candidly have disclosed all his concerns or reservations to the RSK. Indeed, there may be much

⁴³ DBWE 16:187; DBW 16:178.

⁴⁴ DBWE 16:187.

⁴⁵ DBWE 16:187.

⁴⁶ DBWE 16:187.

⁴⁷ DBWE 16:187.

⁴⁸ Bonhoeffer was informed of the influence of the Gestapo on the deliberative process of the RSK, but he seems to have remained unaware of the role of the Reich Church Ministry, since this information was not mentioned in the correspondence from the RSK.

⁴⁹ DBWE 16:188.

below the surface of these letters.⁵⁰ Nonetheless, at least for the purposes of assessing Kelly's argument, what Bonhoeffer wrote in this letter is noteworthy; so too is what he did not write. Bonhoeffer did not defend—or even allude to—any specific content of his published works. Bonhoeffer apparently saw no need to defend what he had written in his books, since the RSK likewise never contested the content of these publications. Instead, Bonhoeffer focused on what he believed was relevant to his case before the RSK: his academic status, and the academic status of his books, which he (and Lempp) expected would release him from the oversight of the Chamber. Bonhoeffer gave no attention to the content of *Prayerbook*, only briefly noting its brevity and its *wissenschaftlich* subject matter. Having apparently surmised that the actions of the RSK were unrelated to the content of his published works, Bonhoeffer saw no need to defend content that was evidently not under scrutiny.

3.5. Final Decisions of the RSK

The final letter from the RSK, dated May 22, 1941, and again issued by Ihde, canceled the fine levied against Bonhoeffer. It is perhaps unremarkable that the Chamber rescinded the fine, since Lempp suggested that such reversals were not uncommon. However, what indeed seems remarkable is the admission that the RSK cited as rationale for rescinding the fine: “Taking into consideration your counterproposal of April 22, 1941, to my decision of March 17, 1941, I hereby rescind the fine in the amount of thirty reichsmarks in acknowledgment of the absence of guilt and authorize your reimbursement in this amount.”⁵¹ The fine was rescinded, the RSK explained, as a recognition of Bonhoeffer's “absence of guilt”! According to Kelly, the RSK identified and targeted the pro-Jewish and anti-Nazi protest of *Prayerbook*, recognizing “the political implications of this book and its exposé of the suffering inflicted by Nazism on so many.”⁵² The documents show, however, that the RSK explicitly absolved Bonhoeffer of any culpability. If Kelly's assessment of the RSK were accurate, it is utterly implausible that the Chamber would have rescinded the fine, let alone exculpate Bonhoeffer.

This letter does not discuss the content of Bonhoeffer's books, including *Prayerbook*, but instead clarifies the position of the RSK regarding Bonhoeffer's professional status. At Lempp's recommendation, Bonhoeffer had argued that he and his writings were sufficiently scholarly to obviate any need for approval from the RSK. The RSK responded by clarifying that it defined academic writers not according to the content of their books but according to their professional status:

When in numeral 2 of my April 1, 1937, notice (revised November 21, 1938) on the registration with the Reich Chamber of Literature of those engaging in writing for publication, I decreed that whoever as a scholar publishes purely

⁵⁰ I am grateful to an anonymous reader for highlighting this possibility.

⁵¹ *DBWE* 16:189.

⁵² *DBWE* 5:153.

academic writings in his area of scholarly expertise does not fall within the jurisdiction of the Reich Chamber of Literature, I thereby had in mind the delimitation of areas of jurisdiction between the Reich Ministry for Science, Instruction, and Education and the Ministry for Public Enlightenment and Propaganda, of which my Chamber is part.

Accordingly, only those theologians who are occupants of chairs at state colleges and universities are exempted from membership in my Chamber—Authors' Group.

Furthermore, because of their overwhelming dogmatic allegiance, I cannot readily acknowledge clergy as scholars in this sense.⁵³

Since Bonhoeffer held no academic post at the time, the RSK dismissed Bonhoeffer's argument that he was an academic writing academic works. According to the RSK, one's status as *wissenschaftlich* was determined not by scholarly content of publications but by holding an academic position (a stipulation not satisfied simply by having the status of clergy). In other words, the theological writings of a professor were academic, regardless of their content; the theological writings of a non-professor (including clergy) were non-academic, likewise regardless of their content. In this way, the RSK removed from consideration the content of Bonhoeffer's books, concentrating on his professional status and deeming irrelevant the *wissenschaftlich* subject matter of his publications. Kelly claims that the RSK reacted to the content of *Prayerbook*; yet, as the RSK excluded from consideration the content of Bonhoeffer's publications, the exchange between Bonhoeffer and the RSK could scarcely have had less to do with the content of his books, including *Prayerbook*.

Thus, since the RSK was—insofar as its proceedings in Bonhoeffer's case—uninterested in the content of Bonhoeffer's books, his protestations that his books were scholarly left the Chamber unmoved:

Your explanations are not, however, sufficient to induce me to rescind or revise my decision of March 19, 1941. The refusal to accept you into the Authors' Group of the Reich Chamber of Literature or to confer an exemption remains in force. This refusal has the effect of an official prohibition on writing for publication.⁵⁴

According to Kelly, the RSK at this point “strengthened the prohibition against any further publishing on Bonhoeffer's part.”⁵⁵ In fact, the RSK did not “strengthen the prohibition,” but only clarified the force and effect of the decision already communicated to Bonhoeffer on March 19, 1941. For the RSK to “strengthen the prohibition” in this letter, there would need to be some change from its previous

⁵³ DBWE 16:189-190.

⁵⁴ DBWE 16:189.

⁵⁵ Kelly, “The Prayerbook of the Bible,” 36.

decisions; there was no such change. This is also the letter in which, Kelly contends, the RSK stated “that there were enough dangerous dogmatic and spiritual connections in the book [*Prayerbook*] to make it impossible for the board to accept Bonhoeffer’s reasoning.”⁵⁶ This claim is utterly insupportable, as there is no mention of *Prayerbook* in this letter. There is also no reference in this letter to Bonhoeffer’s “dangerous dogmatic and spiritual connections,” nor indeed anything in this letter that resembles the statement that Kelly ascribes to the RSK.

Subsequently, the decision of the RSK was recorded in a document now held in the archives of the *Bundesarchiv Berlin-Lichterfelde*. Dated July 2, 1941, the document is addressed “To the editor of the journal, ‘The Writer.’”⁵⁷ It includes lists of individuals, categorized according to decisions of the RSK regarding their cases. Bonhoeffer is listed under this heading:

For the following applicants, the application for admission,
or issuance of a certificate of exemption, is rejected.⁵⁸

Under this heading, the RSK lists seven applicants, including Bonhoeffer, whose information appears as follows:

026055✓⁵⁹

am 19.3.1941 Dietrich Bonhoeffer Schlawe/Pom., Koppelstr. 9⁶⁰

The date given for the decision (March 19, 1941) corresponds to the date of the letter Bonhoeffer received informing him of the decision. Bonhoeffer’s status is listed exactly as he was notified, as having been denied membership or exemption. No further information appears in this document regarding Bonhoeffer’s case; there is no mention of *Prayerbook*.

3.6. *Concluding Analysis of Kelly’s Account*

Bonhoeffer’s exchange with the RSK is well documented, with correspondence originating from the RSK, Bonhoeffer, and representatives of two publishers, as well as documentation internal to the RSK. Yet nowhere in this correspondence is the content of *Prayerbook* discussed. The title—or, rather, the incorrectly cited subtitle—is mentioned just once by the RSK, and then only in a list among other works. Furthermore, the internal documentation of the RSK, including the communications with the Reich Church Ministry reported by Barbian, does not mention *Prayerbook*. None of the documentary evidence supports Kelly’s claim that the content of *Prayerbook* exerted a decisive role for the RSK. Significantly, there is

⁵⁶ Kelly, “The Prayerbook of the Bible,” 36.

⁵⁷ BArch (Berlin-Lichterfelde) R 56 V/80 fol. 145.

⁵⁸ BArch (Berlin-Lichterfelde) R 56 V/80 fol. 146.

⁵⁹ This number is added by hand and followed by a checkmark.

⁶⁰ BArch (Berlin-Lichterfelde) R 56 V/80 fol. 146.

also no evidence that Bonhoeffer himself believed the RSK reacted to the content of his books, including *Prayerbook*; to the contrary, Bonhoeffer accused the RSK of not even having his books on hand.

Rather than supporting Kelly's claim that the RSK acted in response to the content of *Prayerbook*, the evidence indicates that the RSK focused on two considerations: Bonhoeffer's professional status and his political reputation. First, whereas Bonhoeffer argued that his books were outside the purview of the RSK by virtue of their academic content, the RSK focused not on whether his books were academic (in terms of content) but on whether he was academic (in terms of professional status). Contrary to Kelly's contention that the RSK responded to the contents of *Prayerbook*, the RSK emphasized that Bonhoeffer's professional status—and not the content of his books—was relevant to his case. Second, the RSK sought to determine Bonhoeffer's political reliability which, due to the restrictions already imposed by the Gestapo, would clearly have been deemed inadequate by an agency of the Reich. Indeed, it seems likely that Bonhoeffer's history with the Gestapo ensured, before this correspondence with the RSK even began, that he would never again publish in Nazi Germany.

Kelly's claim that *Prayerbook* "constituted an explosive declaration both politically and theologically" is further disconfirmed by the notably mild actions of the RSK. Had the RSK deemed *Prayerbook* a volcanic anti-Nazi protest, as Kelly argues, then the response of the Chamber would have included aggressive action against the offending publication and its author. At the very least, one would expect the RSK to have deemed *Prayerbook* "harmful and undesirable" (*schädlich und unerwünscht*)—or, as is perhaps more likely, to have applied that designation to all of Bonhoeffer's works.⁶¹ I have found no mention of Bonhoeffer in any such lists produced by the RSK.⁶² Instead of banning and destroying copies of *Prayerbook*, the RSK imposed a modest fine, then—following Bonhoeffer's objections—rescinded the fine to acknowledge Bonhoeffer's "absence of guilt." Ultimately, the only action taken against Bonhoeffer by the RSK was to refuse him membership or exemption, thereby preventing him from further publishing. If *Prayerbook* were

⁶¹ The actions of the RSK in Bonhoeffer's case could be compared, for instance, to its actions regarding Emil Brunner only seven months prior. In a letter dated August 13, 1940, the RSK communicated the following from Ihde's desk:

"Re: Ban on the complete writings of the Swiss theology professor Emil Brunner.

At the instigation of the Reich Minister for Public Enlightenment and Propaganda, I have classified the complete published writings of the aforementioned in the list of harmful and undesirable literature."

The reason for this action, as stated in a letter dated August 8, 1940, from the Reich Propaganda Ministry to the RSK, was as follows: "Brunner has recently agitated against the German Reich in an extraordinarily spiteful manner." RG 242 Foreign Records Seized Collection, BDC Microfilm/RSK 2108/A3339-RKK-Z008, frames 1796 and 1800. If, as Kelly argues, the RSK considered *Prayerbook* an anti-Nazi diatribe, then we would expect Bonhoeffer's actions to have been deemed, like Brunner's, "extraordinarily spiteful" against the Reich, resulting in a similar ban on all of Bonhoeffer's works. No such action resulted from the publication of *Prayerbook*.

⁶² Bonhoeffer does not appear, for instance, in a listing of "harmful and undesirable" literature, dated 1934-1941. RG 242 Foreign Records Seized Collection, BDC Microfilm/RSK 2108/A3339-RKK-Z005.

anywhere near as “explosive” as Kelly claims, then Bonhoeffer would have contended with far more severe measures from the RSK than a canceled fine and a declined application. By the standards of the RSK, and the Reich agencies with which the RSK communicated and coordinated, the actions taken against Bonhoeffer during this exchange were lenient. This was hardly the bristling response of a Nazi agency that had unmasked in *Prayerbook* a strident anti-Nazi protest; this was the response of an agency that may never have even bothered to obtain—let alone read—a copy of *Prayerbook*.

4. The Place of *Prayerbook* in Post-Holocaust Context

Bonhoeffer’s interactions with the RSK, when examined with attention to the original sources, show that the Chamber appeared uninterested in the content of *Prayerbook*; however, beginning with Kelly’s argument, this episode has been exaggerated to signify the very opposite, that the RSK fumed at the supposedly pro-Jewish and anti-Nazi content of *Prayerbook*. Yet considering the total absence of historical corroboration for Kelly’s argument, a question arises: why has Kelly’s historically untenable account proven influential? That is, why does one find Kelly’s unsubstantiated and implausible account mirrored, and even magnified, in scholarly contexts?

I suggest that Kelly’s argument, though it lacks historical credibility, coheres with an appealing narrative of Bonhoeffer as heroically pro-Jewish and anti-Nazi. Kelly’s argument, and its appeal, might then be viewed as exemplifying a problematic tendency in readings of Bonhoeffer, which is to interpret his life and work through a hagiographical or heroic lens—especially in the context of Jewish-Christian relations. “Perhaps it is not surprising,” Stephen R. Haynes suggests, “that texts authored by an anti-Nazi resister and martyr, texts reputed to mark a path out of the morass of Christian anti-Judaism, would become the focus of wishful interpretation.”⁶³ However, in order to assess Bonhoeffer’s legacy for post-Holocaust Jewish-Christian relations, it remains vital to pursue, in Andrew Chandler’s phrase, “the quest for the historical Dietrich Bonhoeffer,” by examining the historical record.⁶⁴ This pursuit involves attending to narratives of Bonhoeffer’s life and actions that are supported not by wishful thinking but by historical evidence, especially since, as Victoria J. Barnett observes, “popular hagiography has lifted him far beyond that historical record.”⁶⁵ Kelly’s version of Bonhoeffer’s engagement with the RSK exemplifies a hagiographical or heroic approach,⁶⁶ reimagining Bonhoeffer’s exchange with the RSK as a fiery confrontation between the dissident author

⁶³ Stephen R. Haynes, *The Bonhoeffer Legacy: Post-Holocaust Perspectives* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 105.

⁶⁴ Andrew Chandler, “The Quest for the Historical Dietrich Bonhoeffer,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 54, no. 1 (January 2003): 89-96.

⁶⁵ Victoria J. Barnett, “Bonhoeffer Is Widely Beloved. But to Fully Understand Him We Should First Dial Back the Hero Worship,” *Washington Post*, April 9, 2015.

⁶⁶ Haynes observes that “hagiographical impulses are often at work when Bonhoeffer is remembered.” Haynes, *The Bonhoeffer Phenomenon: Portraits of a Protestant Saint* (London: SCM Press, 2004), xiii.

of an anti-Nazi tract and his seething Nazi opponent. As we have seen, the reality supported by historical records is far less dramatic, involving a relatively routine—even bureaucratic—dispute with a Nazi agency.

Furthermore, the historically tethered account of this episode suggests far less obvious implications for Jewish-Christian relations. If Kelly's claims were correct, and the RSK had indeed reacted harshly to an "exposé of the suffering inflicted by Nazism on so many" that Bonhoeffer unleashed in *Prayerbook*, then this treatment of the Psalms could—as an "explosive" exegetical protest—carry significant implications for Bonhoeffer's place in post-Holocaust Jewish-Christian conversations. However, since the historical record does not indicate any correlation between the content of *Prayerbook* and the actions of the RSK, any such inquiry must shift away from the Nazi reception of *Prayerbook* to focus instead on the text. That is, if *Prayerbook* is indeed significant for Bonhoeffer's place in post-Holocaust Jewish-Christian conversations, then this significance must be demonstrated with reference to the text itself and not by recourse to a fictionalized account of the response of Nazi authorities. That text, however, is a radically christological interpretation of the Psalms, which could be viewed—in 1940 or now—as an erasure of Jewish readers of the Jewish Scriptures.⁶⁷ Interpreters of Bonhoeffer may therefore be left with hard questions regarding the troubling practice, initiated by Kelly and replicated by others, of presenting an exclusively Christian interpretation of the Psalms, written during the Holocaust, as a heroic act.⁶⁸

In this context, Haynes cites John Conway's insight: "Largely because [Bonhoeffer] seemed to be the one 'good German' whose witness could be held up for unstinting praise, and whose heroic martyrdom vindicated these ideas, we have numerous publications of his life and thought of the hagiographical kind." Conway, "Coming to Terms with the Past: Interpreting the German Church Struggles 1933-1990," *German History* 16, no. 3 (1998): 382. Haynes also observes that "images of a heroic anti-Nazi resistor figure largely in literary accounts of Bonhoeffer's life." Haynes, "Readings and Receptions," in *The Oxford Handbook of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. Michael Mawson and Philip G. Ziegler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 476.

⁶⁷ See Walter Harrelson, "Bonhoeffer and the Bible," in *The Place of Bonhoeffer: Problems and Possibilities in His Thought*, ed. Martin E. Marty (London: SCM, 1963), 129-130.

⁶⁸ I thank the staff of the *Handschriftenabteilung* at the *Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin*, including Dr. Monika Linder, for generous and kind assistance. The staff of the *Bundesarchiv Berlin-Lichterfelde* offered valuable guidance, as did the staff of the Microfilm Reading Room at the US National Archives in College Park, Maryland. I thank the priests of the Missionary Servants of the Most Holy Trinity, who hosted me during my research in Maryland. I gratefully acknowledge funding from the Anne Tanenbaum Centre for Jewish Studies at the University of Toronto, which made possible my archival work through two Research and Travel Grants.