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The Making and Unmaking of a Protestant Hero – British Perceptions on Martin Niemöller in Context of the German Church Struggle, 1934–1945

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Martin Niemöller was many things; he was a U-boat commander in the German navy during the First World War, a theological student at Munster and later became a Lutheran pastor. However, it is his involvement in the German Church Struggle and role as the figurehead of the Confessing Church for which he is remembered. The German Church Struggle had origins in 1932 when the German Christians, a right-wing faction of the Protestant Church, first introduced the ‹Ayran› paragraph which sought to unify regional Protestant churches into one Reich Church.[1]

In retaliation, Niemöller co-founded the Pastors' Emergency League in 1933 and afterwards the Confessing Church. On 1 July 1937, Niemöller was arrested by the Gestapo for the sixth time, this time for leading inflammatory lectures and sermons against the State.[2] He was tried by a special court in 1938 and spent several years in the concentration camp Sachsenhausen and later Dachau, where he was kept as Hitler's ‹personal prisoner› until 1945.[3] For both his commitment to his faith and resistance against Hitler, Niemöller received international praise.

Niemöller was an unlikely hero. In his autobiography, in which he discussed his career transition, *From U-boat to Pulpit*, he expressed strong nationalist views. He initially supported the National Socialists and voted for Hitler in the 1933 elections. Moreover, his opposition to the German Christians was unrelated to anti-Semitism but a protest against interference in matters of the Church.[4]

Niemöller's involvement in the German Church Struggle has attracted the interests of scholars. James Bentley has written a biography of Niemöller in which his involvement in the Confessing Church features heavily.[5] More recently,

1 James Bentley, Martin Niemöller, Oxford 1984, 46–47.
2 Matthew Hockenos, Then They Came For Me, New York 2008, 123–25.
3 Hockenos, Then They Came (see note 2), 135.
4 Bentley, Niemöller (see note 1), 47.
5 Bentley, Niemöller (see note 1), 47.

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Matthew Hockenos' book explored, amongst other topics, the perceptions of Niemöller in America where he was found to be extremely popular.[6]

In 1970, Keith Robbins published an article which focused on the opinions of members of the Church of England (CofE) hierarchy towards Niemöller throughout the German Church Struggle.[7] Robbins discovered different attitudes towards Niemöller pertained within the CofE and that the Bishop of Chichester, George Bell, was his primary supporter. His article can be viewed as the first brief attempt to understand British perceptions of Niemöller. More research, however, is necessary to uncover how Niemöller was observed more widely in Britain.

Early Interest in Martin Niemöller

British interest in the German Church Struggle was evidenced in national newspapers. The public's interest in the Struggle and, specifically, Niemöller's role in it sparked debate within the Nation. Keen to help from afar, George Bell, the Bishop of Chichester and Chairman of the Universal Christian Council for Life and Work, sought to generate sympathy for Niemöller in Britain. British supporters of Niemöller recognised the power of newspapers to influence national opinion. In particular, *The Times* which was of centre-right political orientation. However, as the Struggle became more aggressive, the threat of offending the German State sought to quieten even Niemöller's most ardent supporters. Whilst this made it difficult to protest the treatment of Niemöller, the sentencing of Niemöller to Sachsenhausen that followed prompted bolder protest against the actions of the Nazi State.

British interest in Niemöller was at first entwined with interest in the German Church Struggle. Whilst articles often mentioned Niemöller in conjunction with news of the German church strife, he was not the focus of reports. Headlines indicative of this include «30 Pastors to Be Arrested» published by the *Daily Express* in 1934, «German Protestants» published by the *Manchester Guardian* in 1935 and «Nazis and the Church» published by *The Times* in 1936.[8] It was not until his arrest in July 1937 that Niemöller appeared at the forefront of news regarding the German Church Struggle and warranted headlines such as, «Pastor Accused of High Treason» and «Arrest of Man Who Defied Hitler» published in papers aligned to the Conservative Party, the *Daily Express* and *Daily Telegraph*

6 Hockenos, Then They Came (see note 2).

7 Keith Robbins, Martin Niemöller, the German Church Struggle, and English Opinion, in: The Journal of Ecclesiastical History, 21/2 (1970), 154–55.

8 30 Pastors to Be Arrested, in: The Daily Express, 8 December 1934; German Protestants, in: Manchester Guardian, 1 February 1935; Nazis and the Church, in: The Times, 24 August 1936.

respectively.[9] His trial, verdict, and subsequent detainment by order of Hitler in 1938 earnt Niemöller further coverage in British papers. Consequently, there was an increase in the number of news articles referencing Niemöller across different papers between 1934 and 1938.

George Bell first met Niemöller in early 1937. The meeting left a lasting impression on Bell, after which he described Niemöller as «a man on fire, but smiling and friendly all the time; and a man of very great faith».[10] Following the arrest of Niemöller, he received a letter from the Embassies of Reconciliation which stated, «we realise how closely you will be watching the situation» and «we should want to support you if you see a clearer line of action.»[11] One immediate line of action was Bell's letter to the editor of *The Times*. Part of his letter, published on 3 July 1937, read as follows:

> «The news of his arrest will be received with dismay here and among all the Churches abroad. The announcement of the grounds of his arrest suggests that he is an agitator of the State. What is his crime?»[12]

Keith Robbins' study of British opinion of Niemöller has shown that contrasting views existed within the CofE. Whilst Bell was not afraid to question the actions of the Nazi government against the pastors of the Confessing Church, other CofE members were more reluctant to do so and some even defended its actions.[13] In response to Bell's letter, Reverend Macdonald wrote to *The Times*. Part of his letter read, «If he [Niemöller] has contravened the regulations of the German ‹Home Office› we can only expect that he will be dealt with as other such offenders».[14] His viewpoint was shared by Arthur Headlam, the Bishop of Gloucester and chairman of the CofE Council on Foreign Relations, who favoured unity across the Church and believed that punishment of the pastors for engaging in political agitation was justified.[15] He fundamentally clashed with Bell who believed that the state imposed restriction of churchmen in Germany constituted religious persecution.[16]

Bell believed he could best help Niemöller by keeping him present in the press. There was a lull in interest from the British press during the months between his

9 Pastor Accused of High Treason, in: Daily Express, 2 July 1937; Arrest of Man Who Defied Hitler, in: Daily Telegraph, 2 July 1937.
10 Andrew Chandler, Brethren in Adversity, Woodbridge, 1997, 1–32.
11 Lambeth Palace Library [hereafter LPL], Bell 10, f. 21, Embassies of Reconciliation, 2 July 1937.
12 Arrest of Dr. Niemöller, in: The Times, 3 July 1937.
13 Robbins, English Opinion (see note 7), 154.
14 Dr. Niemöller, in: The Times, 7 July 1937.
15 Robbins, English Opinion (see note 7), 155–163.
16 Robbins, English Opinion (see note 7), 163.

arrest and trial. In October 1937, Bell asked the editor of *The Times*, Geoffrey Dawson, why «very important events in the last month had not obtained publication».[17] He offered to write an anonymous letter about the situation in Germany only to be rejected by Dawson, who told Bell he was satisfied with the paper's coverage of events.[18] Bell believed that a letter from a layman would have better chance of being published and issued letters to a number of people asking them to write to the paper about the Struggle in Germany.[19,20] His letters demonstrate the extent of his efforts to publicise Niemöller in *The Times*.

The lack of press coverage of the German Church Struggle had not gone unnoticed. Bell had been contacted by friends from Germany who were perturbed by the «lessening attention» which they viewed as proof that «the battle was lost in England».[21] Kenneth – has argued that Dawson used *The Times* to dull public awareness of the true situation in Germany.[22] Bell received multiple letters suggesting this was the case. In October 1937, Bell was contacted by Hilda Grenfell, Vice President of World's YMCA and a relative of Dawson, complaining that he had not published her letter about the Confessing Church.[23] In relation to Niemöller's trial, Bell received letters from the General Secretary of the World's Evangelical Alliance, who felt that «something should be said in the press», and the vicar of a church in Essex, who expected something more from *The Times* and believed there, «to be a conspiracy of silence in the newspapers».[24]

Those who believed Niemöller was suffering through lack of press attention sought Bell's help. Dorothy Buxton, chairman of the Labour Party Advisory Committee on Foreign Affairs, was especially keen to publicise the German Church Struggle in Britain.[25] In December 1937 she sent a letter to Bell, and to several other Anglican bishops, which she wanted them to sign and send to *The Times*.[26] This was highly critical of the German government, whom it accused of starving out the Confessional Church, establishing a State church and prohibiting religious teachings in schools, amongst other claims that undermined Herr Kerrl's notion of

17 LPL: Bell 9, f. 19, Dawson Correspondence, 23 October 1937.
18 LPL: Bell 9, f. 19, Dawson Correspondence, 23 October 1937.
19 LPL: Bell 9, f. 32, Aubrey Correspondence, 12 November 1937.
20 LPL: Bell 9, ff. 20–1, Bell to Robertson, 23 October 1937 and ff. 53–4, Bell to Grey, 6 November 1937.
21 LPL: Bell 9, ff. 20-1, Bell to Robertson, 23 October 1937.
22 Kenneth Slack, George Bell (London, 1971), 71.
23 LPL: Bell 9, ff. 40–1, Grenfell Correspondence, 29 October 1937.
24 LPL: Bell 9, ff. 144–5, Evangelical Alliance, 31 January 1938 and f. 153, Vicarage in Essex, 9 February 1938.
25 Keith Robbins, Church and Politics: Dorothy Buxton, in: Studies in Church History, 12 (1975), 183.
26 LPL: Bell 9, f. 77, Buxton Correspondence, 7 December 1937.

«religious freedom».[27] Multiple correspondents, including Bell, refused to sign it. Buxton re-drafted the letter, but this was met with similar hostility from Anglican bishops. The Bishop of Carlisle, for example, agreed with its general principles but felt her language was too emotional.[28] The letter was published regardless by *The Times* on 20 December 1937.[29] Bell was unhappy that it had been signed by the Bishops of Lichfield, Bristol, St. Edmundsbury and Chelmsford.[30] He believed the letter was inaccurate and would provoke a damaging response from the Nationalist Socialist Party, for which the signatories of the letter would be blamed.[31]

Bell recognised the potential damage a letter published in the press, signed by Anglican bishops, could cause, particularly a letter that criticised Kerrl, the German Minister of Church Affairs. Robbins has previously shown that the opinion of English clergy on the Church Struggle was important to the German Foreign Office, which was anxious not to jeopardise the Reich's relations abroad.[32] In support of this, one of the charges brought against the Confessing Church was colluding with the foreign press.[33] On 2 February 1938, Bell learnt that Niemöller specifically would be charged with being the source of reports transmitted to London.[34] On 8 February, it was reported that a number of people waiting to attend the trial in Berlin, including the Dean of Chichester, had been denied entrance to the court.[35]

Niemöller was found guilty of misusing the pulpit on 2 March 1938. He received a fine and a seven-month sentence from which he was effectively acquitted because he had already spent eight months in Moabit prison.[36] British papers reacted differently to the outcome of the trial. The *Daily Telegraph*, praised the German justice system for ruling «the lightest sentence that could have been possible given the circumstances».[37] *The Times* agreed the sentence was comparatively mild but criticised the rigid nature of the totalitarian state.[38]

Shortly after his release, Niemöller was re-arrested and sentenced to Sachsenhausen, and papers began to speculate that «Niemoeller may be in Prison Camp».[39]

27 LPL: Bell 9, ff. 48–51 Suggested Draft, December 1937.
28 LPL: Bell 9, f. 57, Carlisle to Bell, 13 December 1937.
29 German Church, in: The Times, 20 December 1937.
30 LPL: Bell 9, f. 122, Buxton Correspondence, 21 December 1937.
31 LPL: Bell 9, f. 122, Buxton Correspondence, 21 December 1937.
32 Robbins, English Opinion (see note 7), 155–157.
33 Hockenos, Then They Came (see note 2), 134.
34 LPL: Bell 10, f. 38, Micklem to Bell, 2 February 1938.
35 Pastor Faces his Accusers, in: Daily Mail, 8 February 1938.
36 Hockenos, Then They Came (see note 2), 135.
37 Honourable Detention for Niemoeller, in: Daily Telegraph, 3 March 1938.
38 Dr. Niemöller's Sentence, in: The Times, 3 March 1938.
39 Niemoeller May Be in Prison Camp, in: Daily Telegraph, 4 March 1938.

Robbins believed the detention of Niemöller was an important turning point, resulting in more decisive support for Niemöller in Britain.[40] He has cited a united declaration, protesting against the treatment of Niemöller, as proof of recognition that the gravity of the situation had changed.[41] The declaration was signed by world Protestant leaders including the Archbishop of Canterbury, who had refrained from commenting on the German Church Struggle until then through fear that protest would stiffen the obstinacy of the German Government.[42] The declaration was sent by telegram to Hitler on 10 March 1938 and followed the next day by a telegram from the Church of Scotland appealing Niemöller's detainment.[43]

In February 1938, Bell was involved in the organisation of a conference about the German Church situation.[44] Amongst those invited were representatives of the YMCA, Anglicans and members of the House of Laity and Baptist Union.[45] The result of the conference, held on 24 March 1938 at the YMCA Central Hall, was the formation of a formal committee, tasked with generating further support for Niemöller in Britain.[46] These efforts evidence new attempts to generate support for Niemöller in light of his detention.

In July 1938, Headlam wrote to *The Times* stating that Niemöller had been sentenced to solitary confinement by result of his refusal to obey the law.[47] In response, two letters of contrasting opinions were published in the paper. Nathaniel Micklem, a congregationalist minister and ally of Bell, contested Headlam and argued that Niemöller was in confinement by way of ‹intervention of the Secret Police.›[48] James Merchant, on the other hand, sided with the Bishop and was grateful he had put «the case of the German Christians in a clearer light».[49] He considered Niemöller a nuisance who might have been released if only, «he would avoid using his pulpit for political purposes».[50]

During the early years of his emergence in Britain, the Church, press and public alike developed an interest in Niemöller. To a large extent, this had been encouraged by coverage of Niemöller in the press. Bell's commitment to generating support for Niemöller is evident from the measures he took to publicise the German Church Struggle in *The Times* despite resistance from Dawson. Bell was

40 Robbins, English Opinion (see note 7), 168–169.
41 Robbins, English Opinion (see note 7), 168–169.
42 Robbins, English Opinion (see note 7), 169.
43 LPL: Bell 10, f. 88, Church of Scotland Telegram, 11 March 1938.
44 LPL: Bell 9, f. 163, Drewett to Bell, 24 February 1938.
45 LPL: Bell 9, ff. 192–4, List of invitation, March 1938.
46 LPL: Bell 9, f. 9, German Church Conference, 15 July 1938.
47 The German Church, in: The Times, 22 July 1938.
48 The German Church, in: The Times, 22 July 1938.
49 The German Church, in: The Times, 22 July 1938.
50 The German Church, in: The Times, 22 July 1938.

regarded as an authority on Niemöller, which is apparent from the letters he received from those concerned as to why news decreased in the press. Following the sentencing of Niemöller to Sachsenhausen, the CofE more boldly protested against his treatment, and a committee, which strove to raise awareness of the Struggle in Britain, was established. Whilst these actions support Robbins' assertion that the detention of Niemöller marked a turning point, the negative perceptions of Niemöller expressed in press reports and letters sent to the editor after his detention show that its effect in immediately influencing positive perceptions was limited and that opinion of Niemöller was divided in Britain.

The Heroisation of Martin Niemöller

On the first day of his trial, the Archbishop of York led one minute of silence in honour of Niemöller during a meeting of the Church Assembly at Westminster.[51] This can be considered one of the first acts in which Niemöller was honoured a hero in Britain. Following Niemöller's detainment in Sachsenhausen, the British press reported that his mental and physical health were deteriorating. This belief was embraced and reinforced by Bell and enabled perceptions that Niemöller was a hero in Britain. Niemöller's subsequent popularity in Britain was reflected in the emergence of his story in newspapers as well as books and film based on his involvement in the German Church Struggle.

National newspapers gave rise to rumours that Niemöller was suffering in solitary confinement. In July 1938, the *Daily Telegraph* contested this, stating that claims he was ill, «are semi officially denied here.»[52] In November 1938, however, the *Manchester Guardian* published an article titled «Dr. Niemöller In Bad Health», reporting that his doctor had not been allowed to see him.[53] In December, it published a second article claiming that he was «seriously ill».[54] In January 1939, a service was held for Niemöller at his former church in Dahlem where it was claimed that his courage had been «broken by loneliness» in solitary confinement.[55] This was quoted, and thus reinforced, by the *Daily Mirror* and *Manchester Guardian*, both of which were of left-wing persuasion by the late 1930s.[56] Concerns for Niemöller's mental and physical health were short lived. In 1939, *The Times* lay to rest claims that he was ill, as confirmed by a correspondent in

[51] Pastor Faces his Accusers, in: Daily Mail, 8 February 1938.
[52] Niemöller Not Ill, in: Daily Telegraph, 9 July 1938.
[53] Dr. Niemoeller In Bad Health, in: Manchester Guardian, 17 November 1938.
[54] Anxiety For Niemöller, in: Manchester Guardian, 20 December 1938.
[55] Dr. Niemöller Broken, in: Manchester Guardian, 16 January 1939.
[56] Dr. Niemöller Broken, in: Manchester Guardian, 16 January 1939. Pastor Broken By Loneliness, in: Daily Mirror, 16 January 1939.

Berlin.[57] The impression that Niemöller was suffering in the concentration camp, however, had already been made.

The notion that Niemöller was suffering in solitary confinement was actively encouraged by Bell. Niemöller's detainment provided Bell with a new opportunity to generate support for him. One way in which he sought to achieve this, was to establish a «Martin Niemöller Prayer Fellowship» in 1938.[58] A lifetime membership cost ten pounds, for which members would receive a quarterly leaflet.[59] The Prayer Fellowship encouraged members to recruit others; Bell's goal was to reach one million members.[60]

On the first anniversary of Niemöller's arrest, 1 July 1938, Bell organised a «special service of intercession» at the church St. Martin-in-the-Fields in central London. In the hope of gaining an advertisement in *The Times*, Bell wrote to Dawson, «Niemöller is not, and cannot be, forgotten.»[61] Although the service received a «good turn up», even greater efforts were made by Bell in 1939 to advertise the service of intercession via posters and notices in newspapers.[62] At the service, Bell read an address declaring that Niemöller was a «missionary» and shared symbol of the «Universal Church». He called for «all the Churches in all the countries in Europe» to lift up their voices believing in Christ, in honour of the second anniversary of his arrest.[63] Bell continued to hold intercession services annually at St. Martin-in-the-Fields until 1944. Smaller scale services were held by other CofE members elsewhere such as in 1941 at St Nicholas' Church in Warwick in honour of the fourth anniversary of his arrest.[64]

In 1939, a book about Niemöller titled *Pastor Niemöller and His Creed* was published in Britain. The book was priced at one shilling, in the hope that it would «generate a wide and most influential sale».[65] It was written by Franz Hildebrandt, a former colleague of Niemöller's and member of the Pastors' Emergency League. Its English translation included a foreword written by Bell which carried a similar sentiment to his address at St. Martin-in-the-Field, stating that «Niemöller is a great man» whose cause «is the common, immediate, concern of every Christian

[57] Pastor Niemöller, in: The Observer, 16 April 1939; Dr. Niemöller's Health, in: The Times, 19 July 1939.
[58] LPL: Bell 10, ff. 130–1, Prayer Fellowship, 1938.
[59] LPL: Bell 10, ff. 130–1, Prayer Fellowship, 1938.
[60] LPL: Bell 10, ff. 130–1, Prayer Fellowship, 1938.
[61] LPL: Bell 10, f. 111, Dawson Correspondence, 29 June 1938.
[62] LPL: Bell 10, f. 191, Davey to Bell, 26 June 1939 and f. 196, advertisement of Intercession, 29 June 1939.
[63] LPL: Bell 10, ff. 198–235, Service of Intercession.
[64] Warwick Deanery Service, in: Warwick and Warwickshire Advertiser, 4 July 1941.
[65] LPL, Bell 10, ff. 160–1, Hodder and Stoughton, 16 December 1938.

and every part of the Christian Church».[66] The rest of the book was less favourable; it provided personal insight into Niemöller's real character. Hildebrandt wished to separate «big Martin», or his myth, from «little Martin», the man as he really was, so as not to encourage his martyrdom.[67] He sought to describe Niemöller from various angles, without concealing his human faults and even gave reference to his initial support for the Nazi regime and failure to oppose it sooner.[68]

In contrast, Leo Stein's portrayal of Niemöller in *I was in Hell with Niemoeller* was excessive. Stein claimed to have met Niemöller in the concentration camp and his book was an expose of their time spent there.[69] Within the book, Stein proclaimed, «I look upon him now as a religious genius, akin to the saints».[70] Hockenos has accredited Stein's book as the source of rumours that Niemöller was tortured and abused by Nazis.[71] Bentley has argued that it portrayed him as, «a hero of almost mythical proportions».[72] The purpose of the book differed to that of Hildebrandt's. Rather than generate support for Niemöller, Stein wished to exploit the growing popularity of Niemöller in Britain and elsewhere.[73] This was recognised by Bell who knew there were crooks eager to make money from Niemöller and thought the book was likely false.[74]

Advertisements for the Warner Brothers production *The Bishop Who Walked with God* emerged in national papers in 1939.[75] The same year, the play *Pastor Hall*, written by Ernst Toller, was performed at the Repertory Theatre in Manchester.[76] The outbreak of War had led the Lord Chamberlain to reconsider his earlier refusal to grant permission of its performance.[77] Although explicit references to Niemöller were purposely omitted in its translation to English, it was noticeably based on the Pastor.[78] Florian Alix-Nicolai believes this was to avoid igniting a further outcry of public support for Niemöller in Britain.[79]

66 LPL, Bell 10, Bell's Foreword, December 1938.
67 Pastor Niemöller and his Creed, London 1939, 34–35.
68 Pastor Niemöller and his Creed, London 1939, 106–113.
69 Bentley, Niemöller (see note 1), 153.
70 Leo Stein, I was in Hell with Niemoeller, London, 1942, 109.
71 Hockenos, Then They Came (see note 2), 136.
72 Bentley, Niemöller (see note 1), 153.
73 Hockenos, Then They Came (see note 2), 136.
74 LPL, Bell 10, Bell to Weigert, 14 December 1942.
75 Studio and Screen, in: Manchester Guardian, 1 September 1939.
76 Manchester Stage and Screen, in: Manchester Guardian, 21 November 1939, 5.
77 Florian Alix-Nicolaï, Exile Drama: The Translation of Ernst Toller's Pastor Hall (1939), in: Translation and Literature, 24 (2015), 192.
78 Alix-Nicolaï, Exile Drama (see note 77), 195–196.
79 Alix-Nicolaï, Exile Drama (see note 77), 195–196.

An English production company named Boulting Brothers bought the film rights to *Pastor Hall*.[80] *The Observer* boasted that Britain would be the first to make a film based on Niemöller although, «nearly every major studio in Hollywood has played with the idea».[81] The pastor of the film, who escaped from the concentration camp and delivered one last sermon with the knowledge that he would be killed, played the protagonist.[82] In May 1940, *Pastor Hall* was shown at the Carlton in London but was withdrawn from the theatre after only one week of showings.[83] The film received mixed reviews, the *Daily Telegraph*, for example, reported *Pastor Hall*, «is by far the best and most-moving of all the screen-indictments of the Nazi regime.»[84] Conversely, the *Daily Mirror* reported that «Propaganda films are still flopping» and «The latest to do a box office nose dive is ‹Pastor Hall›.»[85]

As part of a survey investigating the effects of anti-Nazi propaganda in boosting war morale, Mass Observation questioned those who had seen the film. Mass Observation was founded in 1937 with the intent to study and thus better understand the British population. The survey was completed by thirty-one individuals, whose answers provide insight into how Niemöller's character in the film was perceived by the audience.[86] The construction of Niemöller as an anti-Nazi was popular in Britain in the context of the Second World War and it was partially on these terms that Niemöller resonated with the general public. Forty nine percent of those questioned believed the Pastor defeated the Nazis.[87] When asked who the hero of the film was, one person responded, «The hero of the film is the kindly old pastor» because «He is sent to a concentration camp where he is treated with all the usual brutality».[88] This reinforced the idea that Niemöller was suffering for his faith, which had first been suggested by the press.

Although there is evidence to suggest that the heroisation of Niemöller began before his sentencing to Sachsenhausen, it was not until afterwards that admiration for him became widespread. This was expressed from within the CofE and by literature and film. The detention of Niemöller gave rise to rumour that he was ill in the concentration camp, as suggested by national press. The belief that Niemöller was suffering in solitary confinement was perpetuated by Bell in creating

80 Pastor Hall, in: The Observer, 21 January 1940.
81 Pastor Hall, in: The Observer, 21 January 1940.
82 Pastor Hall, in: The Observer, 21 January 1940.
83 No more Donat during the war, in: Daily Express, 31 May 1940.
84 Pastor Niemöller Film, in: The Telegraph, 23 May 1940.
85 They Flop and Flop and, in: Daily Mirror, 31 May 1940.
86 Mass Observation Online. Religion 1937–50, in: Mass Observation Online http://www.massobservation.amdigital.co.uk.sheffield.idm.oclc.org/Documents/Details/TopicCollection-47 [accessed 9 March 2020].
87 Mass Observation Online. Religion 1937–50 (see note 86).
88 Mass Observation Online. Religion 1937–50 (see note 86).

a Prayer Fellowship and initiating annual services of intercession. This perception was reinforced by both Leo Stein's portrayal of Niemöller and the utilisation of his story as means as anti-Nazi propaganda in *Pastor Hall*. Whilst other perceptions of him were disseminated throughout this period, such as Hildebrandt's portrayal of Niemöller as ordinary, the dominant perception the public were exposed to was that he was a Protestant Hero.

The Downfall of a Protestant Hero

In August 1940, *The Times* quoted an article stating, «the last thing that the ex-submarine officer would have wanted was a lot of pathos about his martyrdom.»[89] The «pathos» about Niemöller would not last for long. The pedestal which he had been placed upon first started to subside when rumours reached British papers that Niemöller had requested to serve in the Wehrmacht and had converted to the Catholic Church. This challenged existing perceptions of Niemöller which is evident from the reactions of those who rushed to defend him and equally in the reactions of those who withdrew their support for him and later opposed his intended visit to England. Following his liberation, Niemöller attended a press conference in Naples which has since been described as, «missing the oversight of a good public relations agent» by Hockenos.[90] Between 1939 and 1945, Niemöller had lost support in Britain but this had not disappeared entirely. Those supporting him, however, had come to accept that Niemöller was merely a human rather than a hero.

Criticism of Niemöller began as a murmur when in 1939 newspapers, including *The Times*, published that Niemöller had offered his services to fight in the Second World War.[91] In 1941, a second blow was dealt to Niemöller's reputation when most national newspapers claimed he had converted to the Catholic Church. The news had been foreshadowed by an earlier article, published in the *Manchester Guardian*, reporting that Niemöller had been studying Catholic theology whilst in solitary confinement.[92] Ultimately, both rumours were to threaten existing perceptions of Niemöller, which rested upon his anti-Nazi stance and commitment to Protestant religion.

The rumours provoked a reaction from members of the public who wrote to the press with differing views about Niemöller. In his defence, Arnold Ehrhardt, a German with Jewish ancestry who had emigrated to England and was receiving funding from the CofE, wrote to the *Daily Telegraph*. He argued that Niemöller

[89] Pastor Niemöller, in: The Times, 1 August 1940.
[90] Hockenos, Then They Came (see note 2), 162.
[91] Dr. Niemöller's Offer to Join Up, in: The Times, 20 October 1939.
[92] More Berlin Pastors Arrested, in: Manchester Guardian, 1 July 1941.

had not applied to the German Navy and that the rumour had been a «Nazi Ruse to Discredit Him».[93] With reference to the rumour Niemöller had converted to the Catholic Church, Tom O'Brien of the TUC General Council, wrote to the *Manchester Guardian* arguing, «Niemöller himself is a Nazi in everything except his refusal to tolerate interference with his priestly vocation.»[94] In 1941, the *Daily Telegraph* published a letter signed by the «Former curate of the Confessional Church», which dismissed both rumours as instances of anti-Niemöller propaganda that surfaced «from time to time».[95]

In 1939, Bell delivered a service to refugees at St. John's Church in Westminster at which he was reported to have said, «it cannot be true that he has offered his services to the German Government as a U-boat commander».[96] At the intercession service in 1941, Bell was joined by Hildebrandt who is quoted to have said, «we are not prepared to believe it until we have heard it from his own lips» in regard to his rumoured conversion.[97] The rumours about Niemöller had unsettled members of the CofE and in March 1941, Bell received a letter from the Archbishop of Canterbury asking if there was any truth behind reports of his conversion to the Catholic Church.[98] Because it had been discredited by the *Daily Telegraph*, Bell told the Archbishop that he did not believe the rumour was true.[99] Nevertheless, Bell was in contact with sources in Switzerland to make sure of this.[100] Their letters suggest that support for Niemöller from the CofE depended upon his Protestant faith.

In May 1945, Niemöller was liberated by American troops.[101] It was soon after reported that he intended to visit Britain. In quoting letters to the editor of the *Daily Telegraph*, Bentley has shown that several members of the public were against Niemöller's visit.[102] Bentley found the reasons why the public were anti-Niemöller related to British resentment towards Germany generated throughout the Second World War and the purpose of his visit, which was to collect money for the starving people of Germany.[103] Bentley illustrated this by referring to quotes from different letters including those from Helen Beveridge Thomas who

93 Arnold Ehrhardt, Pastor Niemoeller, in: Daily Telegraph, 6 November 1939.
94 Tom O'Brien, Vansittartism, in: Manchester Guardian, 20 July 1943.
95 Pastor Niemoeller, in: Daily Telegraph, 18 February 1941.
96 Bishop of Chichester and Pastor Niemöller, in: West Sussex Gazette and South of England Advertiser, 2 November 1939.
97 Nazis Arrest Three More Pastors, in: Liverpool Evening Express, 30 June 1941.
98 LPL: Bell 10, f. 255, Canterbury Correspondence, 21 March 1941.
99 LPL: Bell 10, f. 255, Canterbury Correspondence, 27 March 1941.
100 LPL: Bell 10, f. 255, Canterbury Correspondence, 27 March 1941.
101 Hockenos, Then They Came (see note 2), 160.
102 Bentley, Niemöller (see note 1), 179–180.
103 Bentley, Niemöller (see note 1), 179–180.

had written, «no German has anything good to teach us» and Philip Moreton who wrote, «What Niemöller should be doing is collecting money in Germany for the starving people of Holland».[104] Their letters show that the earlier heroisation of Niemöller had not made a lasting impression on British perceptions.

Another reason why the public disliked Niemöller related to his service as a U-boat commander in the First World War. One letter to the press read, «I wonder whether Niemoeller, when commander of a U-boat, would have spared one such ship as to save starving Britishers».[105] His previous career as a U-boat commander, however, was something that had been known by the public for some time.

The English translation of Niemöller's autobiography *From U-boat to Pulpit* was published 1936 and yet in July 1945, pastor Meyer-Klugel, writing from Birmingham to the *Christian Pacifist,* referenced the autobiography as evidence that he was a «violent militarist».[106] He advised those who had been too quick to support Niemöller to read *From U-boat to Pulpit*, referencing specific pages that would expose his true nature.[107] The book, in which Niemöller reflected proudly on his contribution to the Navy in the First World War, had only earnt him praise before. In 1938, the *Irish Times*, which was more liberal minded than its English counterpart *The Times*, published an appraisal of the book. It cited the autobiography as proof that, «a man could command a submarine and at the same time be a gentleman».[108] New criticisms of Niemöller as a U-boat commander and of his autobiography, emerging in 1945, show that perceptions of him had changed.

In response to the comments made by Meyer-Klugel, a second letter was published in the *Christian Pacifist*. Whilst agreeing that *From U-boat to Pulpit* did not «make pleasant reading», the letter sympathised with Niemöller, writing that «most eminent men reveal traits at some time or other which they would later prefer to forget.»[109] This letter portrayed Niemöller not as a man who was exceptional but one who had been a victim to «admirers whose sentiments have outstripped their knowledge and judgment» and concluded that «the man as he really is suffers through the imaginative picture of him that so many people have formed.»[110] It suggested that Niemöller was neither not a hero and had never wished to be recognised as such.

Writing to the *Daily Telegraph*, Arthur Waddell complained that «Niemoeller has suddenly emerged as a representative of the good Germans, and the real issue

[104] Bentley, Niemöller (see note 1), 179–180.
[105] Pastor Niemoeller, in: Daily Telegraph, 29 May 1945.
[106] LPL: Bell 10, f. 326, Newspaper cutting, July 1945.
[107] LPL: Bell 10, f. 326, Newspaper cutting, July 1945.
[108] The Niemoeller Case, in: Irish Times, 11 March 1938.
[109] LPL: Bell 10, f. 326, Newspaper cutting, July 1945.
[110] LPL: Bell 10, f. 326, Newspaper cutting, July 1945.

has been obscured by the romantic fog of martyrdom which has cloaked this man».[111] The fog cleared somewhat in June 1945 when Niemöller attended a conference in Naples where, as well as declaring Germany ill-suited to democracy and that his objections to Nazism had not been political, he confirmed he had offered his services to the Wehrmacht in 1939.[112] Hockenos found that revelations made at the conference changed how Niemöller was perceived in America.[113] Its Director of Education and Religious Affairs, for instance, declared, «Niemöller, the religious leader and Confessional martyr is clearly to be distinguished from Niemöller the politically-minded retired naval officer».[114] The British press, however, chose to believe that Niemöller stood somewhere between the two. Following the conference, the *Daily Express* published an article titled «Brave Coward» that read:

> «Those who regard him as the symbol of resistance to Nazism and those who regard him in a sinister way as a ‹good German› are equally wrong. He stands between those Germans who died for freedom in the concentration camps and those who died for Hitler in Russia and North Africa. He is Honest.»[115]

Hockenos has argued that the conference tested support for Niemöller in America but that, ultimately, it had not been perturbed.[116] Its effect in Britain had been similar. Following the conference, Maude Roydon Shaw sent a letter of apology which was published in the *Daily Telegraph*.[117] She had previously contested those who claimed Niemöller had offered to fight for Germany in the Second World War in letters to the paper but now conceded that she had been wrong.[118] It would be incorrect, however, to assume that the British withdrew their support for Niemöller entirely. In defence of Niemöller, M. Peters wrote to the *Daily Telegraph*, arguing that Niemöller's objections to the Nazi regime, whilst not political, had been moral.[119] The letter accepted that Niemöller had been prepared to sacrifice his life for his country but believed, «he would not, and indeed never did, accept the Nazis' claim to dictate what he should believe».[120] Both letters to

[111] Arthur Waddell, ‹Pastor Niemoeller›, in: Daily Telegraph, 6 June 1945.
[112] Hockenos, Then They Came (see note 2), 163.
[113] Hockenos, Then They Came (see note 2), 163–64.
[114] Hockenos, Then They Came (see note 2), 165.
[115] I was Shocked says the Pastor, in: Daily Express, 6 June 1945.
[116] Hockenos, Then They Came (see note 2), 162, 164.
[117] Maude Roydon Shaw, Pastor Niemoeller, in: Daily Telegraph, 11 June 1945.
[118] Maude Roydon Shaw, Pastor Niemoeller, in: Daily Telegraph, 11 June 1945. See also, Bentley, Niemöller (see note 1), 160.
[119] M. Peters, Pastor Niemoeller, in: Daily Telegraph, 8 June 1945.
[120] Peters, Pastor Niemoeller (see note 119).

the *Daily Telegraph* demonstrate that, even after the conference in Naples, the British public remained divided in their perceptions of Niemöller.

In reaction to the conference Bell is alleged to have said, «when a hero ceases to be a hero, he becomes a problem».[121] In October 1945, he wrote directly to Niemöller to ask why he had offered his services to the Wehrmacht.[122] In his response Niemöller acknowledged that it was a complicated situation for a foreigner to grasp, but defended his decision as one he made as both a Christian and German.[123] It took Bell some time to digest this, writing to Niemöller the following January, he revealed, «I have been thinking about you a great deal, and have also been studying again your letter to me of the 31st October.»[124] Bell declared that in considering his justifications for offering his services, he found himself in full sympathy and that he hoped to make use of his letter «in some appropriate way».[125] Bell's correspondence with Niemöller demonstrates that whilst his support had been tested by the conference, he remained loyal to Niemöller despite public scrutiny.

The seeds of Niemöller's demise were sown in 1939, when rumours first appeared in British newspapers and grew in 1941 when a second wave of rumours were reported. The belief that Niemöller had offered his services to the German Navy and had converted to the Catholic Church incited a reaction from amongst the CofE and members of the public who wrote to the press. Whilst these rumours were not immediately detrimental to Niemöller's reputation, his later attendance at the conference in Naples damaged perceptions of him and news of his intended visit in 1945 brought negative opinions to the surface. In contributing to Bentley's analysis of the reasons why Niemöller was disliked, new criticisms of his previous career as a U-boat commander in the First World War have been explored to illustrate that perceptions of him had changed. Rather than hold Niemöller accountable for his actions, others preferred to blame the earlier heroisation of him which had clouded their perceptions. Niemöller was not the Protestant Hero he had been portrayed as and this was something that his supporters and even Bell had to come to terms with.

Conclusion

Through its investigation of British perceptions of Martin Niemöller, this study has demonstrated how the making and unmaking of a Protestant hero took place. It has

[121] Bentley, Niemöller (see note 1), 160.
[122] LPL: Bell 10, ff. 335–6, Niemöller Correspondence, 31 October 1945.
[123] LPL: Bell 10, ff. 335–6, Niemöller Correspondence, 31 October 1945; see also Bentley, Niemöller (see note 1), 147.
[124] LPL: Bell 10, ff. 348–349, Niemöller Correspondence, 3 January 1945.
[125] LPL: Bell 10, ff. 348–349, Niemöller Correspondence, 3 January 1945.

shown that this process occurred across three key phases, each framed by developments in Niemöller's plight throughout the German Church Struggle. The first phase, in which British interest in Niemöller gained momentum, occurred between 1934 and 1938 and was stimulated by news of his arrest, trial and detainment in Sachsenhausen. The second phase was most active between the years 1938 and 1942 and underpinned by the misbelief that Niemöller was mistreated in the concentration camp Sachsenhausen, contributing to a period of widespread admiration for him. Finally, the third phase, during which Niemöller's reputation declined, was already underway in 1939 but was accelerated in 1945 after his liberation.

The first chapter of this study demonstrated that Niemöller's most influential advocate in Britain was Bell through an examination of how he used national newspapers to grow support for Niemöller. Although Bell's methods garnered support from others including Buxton, it is clear that not all Britons held Niemöller in the same esteem. This is evidenced by comments from other CofE members such as Macdonald and Headlam. Ultimately, this article demonstrated that, despite Bell's efforts, it was not until news of Niemöller's detainment that the public engaged directly in debate about him and his fate.

Nationwide support for Niemöller increased following reports of him suffering in Sachsenhausen. The second chapter of this study examined how Niemöller was perceived as a hero and how this was disseminated to the wider public. It argued that Bell's continued support for Niemöller contributed to their admiration. Niemöller's popularity in Britain was enabled by anti-Nazi feeling fuelled by events of the Second World War, leading different forms of media to perceive him as a hero. Niemöller's increased popularity was reflected in books and films inspired by him. This had direct influence on British perceptions, with *Pastor Hall* convincing audiences that Niemöller was a hero.

The third chapter of this study investigated how Niemöller's heroic status was «unmade» in Britain beginning with the crumbling of his support between 1939 and 1941 when rumours of his conversion to Catholicism and desire to serve in the Navy surfaced. These reports led many Britons to question the validity of Niemöller's heroic status. Niemöller's appearance at the Naples conference in 1945 was immediately detrimental to British perceptions, after which even Bell wavered in his previously steadfast support for Niemöller. This chapter argued that Niemöller's appearance at the conference enabled Britons to recognise the romanticisation of Niemöller that had taken place.

In conclusion, this study has shown that Bell, the Church and the media each contributed to the rise and fall of Niemöller in British perception that occurred between 1934 and 1945. However, it has argued that Niemöller ultimately brought about his own demise in how the British perceived him by failing to meet their expectations of a Protestant Hero.

The Making and Unmaking of a Protestant Hero – British Perceptions on Martin Niemöller in Context of the German Church Struggle, 1934–1945

Martin Niemöller is known for his participation in the German Church Struggle (1934–1945) and role as the figurehead of the Confessing Church, for which he was sentenced to the concentration camp Sachsenhausen and gained recognition overseas as a Protestant Hero. British perceptions of Niemöller can reveal how deeply his character was understood and whether he was considered a ‹good German› in Britain as he was elsewhere. In investigating how Niemöller was perceived in Britain in context of the German Church Struggle, the varying perceptions of him across the Church of England, British media and amongst the public have been considered and a range of primary material, including the private letters of George Bell and national newspaper articles, explored. This article argues that a rise and fall in British perceptions of Niemöller took place between 1934 and 1945. It discusses how interest in Niemöller first gained momentum in Britain and the mixed reactions to his initial opposition to the German Christians. It proceeds to trace the origins of the perception that Niemöller was a hero in Britain evident in books and films that were based on his life. The final chapter examines how Niemöller eventually lost status in Britain, by consequence of negative press reports and his attendance at a conference in Naples soon after his liberation in 1945, and the effect this had on pre-existing perceptions of him in Britain.

Martin Niemöller – German Church Struggle – German Christians – Sachsenhausen – George Bell – Confessing Church – *The Times* – Geoffrey Dawson – *Pastor Hall* – Mass Observation – Britain – Second World War.

Werden und Vergehen eines protestantischen Helden – Britische Wahrnehmungen Martin Niemöllers im Kontext des deutschen Kirchenkampfes, 1934–1945

Martin Niemöller ist bekannt für seine Teilnahme am deutschen Kirchenkampf (1934–1945) und seine Rolle als Gallionsfigur der Bekennenden Kirche, für die er ins Konzentrationslager Sachsenhausen gebracht wurde und in Übersee als protestantischer Held Anerkennung fand. Die britische Wahrnehmung Niemöllers kann Aufschluss darüber geben, wie eingehend sein Charakter verstanden wurde und ob er in Großbritannien wie anderswo als «guter Deutscher» galt. Um zu untersuchen, wie Niemöller in Großbritannien im Zusammenhang mit dem deutschen Kirchenkampf wahrgenommen wurde, wurden die unterschiedlichen Wahrnehmungen in der Kirche von England, in den britischen Medien und in der Öffentlichkeit untersucht und eine Reihe von Primärmaterial, darunter die privaten Briefe von George Bell und nationale Zeitungsartikel, ausgewertet. In diesem Artikel wird argumentiert, dass die britische Wahrnehmung Niemöllers zwischen 1934 und 1945 auf und ab ging. Es wird dargelegt, wie das Interesse an Niemöller in Großbritannien zuerst in Schwung kam und wie unterschiedlich die Reaktionen auf seine anfängliche Opposition gegen die Deutschen Christen waren. Anschließend wird der Beginn der Wahrnehmung Niemöllers als Held in Großbritannien nachgezeichnet, die in Büchern und Filmen, die auf seinem Leben basieren, deutlich wird. Im letzten Kapitel wird untersucht, wie Niemöller schliesslich aufgrund negativer Presseberichte und seiner Teilnahme an einer Konferenz in Neapel kurz nach seiner Befreiung im Jahr 1945 seinen Status in Grossbritannien verlor und welche Auswirkungen dies auf die bereits bestehende Wahrnehmung von ihm in Großbritannien hatte.

Martin Niemöller – Deutscher Kirchenkampf – Deutsche Christen – Sachsenhausen – George Bell – Bekennende Kirche – *The Times* – Geoffrey Dawson – *Pastor Hall* – Massenbeobachtung – Grossbritannien – Zweiter Weltkrieg.

La création et la disparition d'un héros protestant – Perceptions britanniques de Martin Niemöller dans le contexte de la lutte pour l'Église allemande, 1934–1945

Martin Niemöller est connu pour sa participation à la lutte des Églises allemandes (1934–1945) et son rôle de figure de proue de l'Église confessante, qui lui ont valu d'être condamné au camp de concentration de Sachsenhausen et d'être reconnu à l'étranger comme un héros protestant. Les perceptions britanniques de Niemöller peuvent révéler la profondeur de sa personnalité et s'il était considéré comme un «bon Allemand» en Grande-Bretagne comme ailleurs. En étudiant la façon dont Niemöller a été perçu en Grande-Bretagne dans le contexte de la lutte pour l'Église allemande, les différentes perceptions de Niemöller au sein de l'Église d'Angleterre, des médias britanniques et du public ont été examinées et une série de documents primaires, y compris les lettres privées de George Bell et les articles de journaux nationaux, ont été explorés. Cet article soutient que les perceptions britanniques de Niemöller ont connu des hauts et des bas entre 1934 et 1945. Il examine comment l'intérêt pour Niemöller a pris de l'ampleur en Grande-Bretagne et les réactions mitigées à son opposition initiale aux chrétiens allemands. Il retrace ensuite les origines de la perception de Niemöller comme un héros en Grande-Bretagne, comme en témoignent les livres et les films basés sur sa vie. Le dernier chapitre examine comment Niemöller a finalement perdu son statut en Grande-Bretagne, suite à des articles de presse négatifs et à sa participation à une conférence à Naples peu après sa libération en 1945, et l'effet que cela a eu sur les perceptions préexistantes de lui en Grande-Bretagne.

Martin Niemöller – lutte de l'Église allemande – chrétiens allemands – Sachsenhausen – George Bell – Église confessante – *The Times* – Geoffrey Dawson – *Pastor Hall* – observation de masse – Grande-Bretagne – Seconde Guerre mondiale.

Fare e disfare un eroe protestante. Impressioni britanniche di Martin Niemöller nel contesto del conflitto ecclesiastico tedesco (1934–1945)

Martin Niemöller è noto per la sua partecipazione al conflitto ecclesiastico tedesco (1934–1945) e per il suo ruolo di guida della Chiesa confessante, per il quale fu condannato al campo di concentramento di Sachsenhausen e fu riconosciuto all'estero come eroe protestante. Impressioni britanniche di Niemöller possono rivelare quanto profondamente venisse compresa la sua figura e se fosse considerato un «buon tedesco» in Gran Bretagna come lo era altrove. Nell'indagare su come Niemöller fosse percepito in Gran Bretagna nel contesto del conflitto ecclesiastico tedesco, sono state prese in considerazione le diverse impressioni che di Niemöller avevano la Chiesa d'Inghilterra, i media britannici e l'opinione pubblica ed è stata esaminata una serie di materiali primari, tra cui le lettere private di George Bell e articoli di giornali nazionali. L'articolo sostiene che tra il 1934 e il 1945 si verificarono un'ascesa e un declino nella percezione britannica di Niemöller. L'articolo analizza il modo in cui l'interesse per Niemöller prese inizialmente slancio in Gran Bretagna e le reazioni contrastanti alla sua iniziale opposizione ai cristiani tedeschi. Procede poi tracciando le origini dell'impressione che Niemöller fosse un eroe in Gran Bretagna, evidente nei libri e nei film basati sulla sua vita. L'ultimo capitolo esamina come Niemöller abbia perso il suo status in Gran Bretagna, a seguito di notizie negative della stampa e della sua partecipazione a una conferenza a Napoli subito dopo la liberazione nel 1945, e l'effetto che questo ebbe su preesistenti impressioni di lui in Gran Bretagna.

Martin Niemöller – conflitto ecclesiastico tedesco – Cristiani tedeschi – Sachsenhausen – George Bell – Chiesa confessante – *The Times* – Geoffrey Dawson – *Pastor Hall* – Osservazione di massa – Gran Bretagna – Seconda guerra mondiale.

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