

# Pastor Martin Niemöller



HOLOCAUST  
MEMORIAL  
DAY TRUST

Pastor Martin Niemöller is best known for writing *First They Came* - one of the most famous poems about the Holocaust - but he is a complicated figure. Initially an antisemitic Nazi supporter, his views changed when he was imprisoned in a concentration camp for speaking out against Nazi control of churches. He later encouraged Germans to take responsibility for Nazi atrocities.



'I had to tell him, "Dear brother, fellow man, Jew, before you say anything, I say to you: I acknowledge my guilt and beg you to forgive me and my people for this sin."'

**Sermon in Erlangen, Germany 1946**

Martin Niemöller was born in Lippstadt, in the west of Germany, on 14 January 1892. He was the son of a priest, and in 1910 he joined the German Navy. During World War One he was assigned to a U-Boat, a German submarine, and eventually became its commander.

Niemöller followed in his father's footsteps and started training to be a priest in 1920. The 1920s were a difficult time for many in Germany, and Niemöller took a part-time job laying railway tracks to earn money while studying. Many people, including Niemöller, believed that the new German government, the Weimar Republic, was unable to deal with the continuing economic and political problems Germany faced. Support for radical political groups like the Nazis grew. Life worsened for most Germans when the Great Depression, a worldwide economic crisis, started in 1929, with businesses closing and many people losing their jobs.

During the 1920s and early 1930s, the Nazi party under Adolf Hitler became increasingly popular. They blamed the country's difficulties on Jews, foreigners, and the weakness of the Weimar government, and promised they would improve ordinary people's lives. Niemöller was one of the Nazi party's early supporters. After being ordained in 1929, he remained a strong supporter of Hitler, despite the party's hatred of, and discrimination against, Jewish people and other groups.

Like many Germans at the time, Niemöller believed that the Nazis and Hitler would provide strong leadership to make Germany a powerful and respected nation again. He also saw the Nazi party as a way for Germany to return to the Christian morals he thought had been abandoned, even referring to Hitler as an 'instrument sent by god'. Niemöller's eventual split with the Nazi party came when they started to control the German Protestant Church. They appointed an official leader of the Church and changed the text of the Bible to remove what the Nazis saw as 'Jewish ideology'.

After meeting with Adolf Hitler in January 1934, Niemöller started to see the Nazi state as a dictatorship. Even then, although Niemöller criticised the German government for interference in religious matters, he did not criticise the discriminatory laws forbidding Jewish people from marrying non-Jews, and preventing Jews from having jobs in government. Niemöller himself held

antisemitic views; in the 1920s and 1930s he referred to Jews as a 'despised people' and 'Christ killers'. The only arguments he made were that Jews should be allowed to remain members of the church once they converted to Christianity, and that the German government should not interfere with the way churches were run.

Niemöller's opposition to the Nazi regime's rules for churches saw him arrested several times, as he became increasingly critical of the Nazis and Hitler. In July 1937 he was arrested again, held for eight months without trial, and re-arrested immediately after his release by the Gestapo, Germany's secret police. He was then sent to Sachsenhausen concentration camp. At this point, these camps held political prisoners, in addition to those perceived as 'threats to society' such as Jewish people, gay men, Roma and Sinti people, and 'asocials' including alcoholics and beggars. In 1941, Niemöller was transferred to Dachau concentration camp, where he would spend most of the rest of the war. Finally, in 1945 he was transferred to another camp in Austria, where he was liberated by American troops in April 1945.

After World War Two, Niemöller repeatedly expressed regret at his previous support for the Nazi party, and his failure to oppose it more broadly. In 1945 he admitted he 'never quarrelled with Hitler over political matters, but purely on religious grounds'. However, it is notable that the first public record of Niemöller apologising for his own antisemitic words and views was not until 1963 in a radio interview.

In October of 1945, just a few months after the war ended, Niemöller headed a group of German churches who admitted they did not do enough to oppose the Nazi regime. Niemöller was one of very few Germans who called on their fellow citizens to accept their responsibility for Nazi atrocities too, saying in a sermon in 1946:

'We must openly declare that we are not innocent of the Nazi murders, of the murder of German communists, Poles, Jews, and the people in German-occupied countries... And this guilt lies heavily upon the German people and the German name, even upon Christendom. For in our world and in our name have these things been done.'

The poem for which he has become most well-known, *First They Came*, was also written in this post-war period. Niemöller gave many lectures on a world tour in 1947, which included his poem, leading to several slightly different versions. He was one of the few to speak out quickly, and say that the German people should accept responsibility for the murders of six million Jewish people during the Holocaust. This opinion was often not well received in Germany at the time.

Niemöller remained a controversial figure for the rest of his life. The revelation that he wrote to the German Navy in 1938 and 1941, volunteering for military service during his imprisonment, damaged his reputation. Nevertheless, his lengthy imprisonment at Sachsenhausen and Dachau made Niemöller a symbol of Christian opposition to the Nazi regime. After the war, he travelled the world, becoming a popular figure due to his speeches sharing the German experience of life under the Nazis. He died on 6 March 1984, aged 92 in Wiesbaden, near Frankfurt.

Niemöller's poem has inspired people across the world to speak up for others when they face discrimination – but his personal history is complex. His story is a reminder that people often do not fall neatly into a category of 'good' or 'bad', and we must learn from experiences like his to understand how the Holocaust happened.

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The Holocaust: [hmd.org.uk/holocaust](https://hmd.org.uk/holocaust)

Life stories of those affected by genocide: [hmd.org.uk/lifestories](https://hmd.org.uk/lifestories)

Niemöller's poem *First They Came*: [hmd.org.uk/firsttheycame](https://hmd.org.uk/firsttheycame)