

Todd Komarnicki, director. *Bonhoeffer: Pastor. Spy. Assassin*. Angel Studios, 2024.

In the 1930s, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German Lutheran pastor and theologian, spied on the Nazis and was executed for dissidence on April 9, 1945. The movie depicts Bonhoeffer's political perspective, religious devotion to Lutheranism, and private reflections on the Nazi regime shared within his family circle. While the film effectively portrays German history and the Lutheran Church's resistance to Nazism, Angel Studios has acknowledged several historical inaccuracies.

The film moves between Bonhoeffer's final days before his execution and his life many years prior, going back to his time in the US. Bonhoeffer's experiences at the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, New York, shaped the pastor's growing resentment of Nazism in the early 1930s. He began to view ethnic minorities, like African Americans, as deserving of the salvation of Jesus Christ. This perspective moved him to assist Jews to escape Germany. Between October 1941 to April 1943, Bonhoeffer used his position in the German intelligence office to alert foreign contacts of Jews being detained or killed. He also arranged for bribes to help Jews cross the German Swiss border. Although Angel Studios admits that Bonhoeffer never drove to the border to escort Jews personally, he was involved with collecting money for bribes from churches to ensure targeted Jews escaped successfully. Ultimately, Bonhoeffer was arrested after the Nazis uncovered the bribery scheme and was imprisoned in 1943.

Hitler and the Nazis affected the German Lutheran Church with important changes to religious doctrine, censorship, and restricting free speech. From 1933-1945, the Nazis censored the Bible, replaced Crucifixes with swastikas, and destroyed church statues. Hitler's attempt to restructure churches forced German Church pastors to either submit or risk arrest and imprisonment by the Gestapo. Hitler made theological changes, mandating twelve biblical commandments instead of ten (two honoring the Führer specifically), and portraying Jesus Christ as Aryan in the Bible instead of Jewish. Bonhoeffer spoke out against Nazi influence, but he was not the only pastor to do so. The movie chooses to solely focus on the German Church's adjustment to Nazi rule and not give attention to the reactions of other Christian denominations. Bonhoeffer witnessed his theological colleague Martin Niemöller being seized

by the Gestapo for speaking out, a grave example of Germans who resisted Nazism and were imprisoned for expressing their thoughts.

Bonhoeffer's family was known for being politically active. In the movie, the young pastor learns of Hitler's rise from his family after returning from seminary. Their attempts to dissuade him from preaching anti-Nazism from the pulpit ultimately failed. While in prison from 1943-45, Bonhoeffer had opportunities to escape Germany. However, he understood that fleeing the country meant putting his family in danger, so Bonhoeffer accepted his fate to protect his family.

This version of *Bonhoeffer* misses on accurately depicting Bonhoeffer's involvement in the well-known assassination attempt on Hitler, the 1944 Operation Valkyrie. First, there were several attempts on Hitler's life between 1938 and 1945. However, the only assassination attempt depicted in the film was the 1943 Gersdorff Bomb Plot, named after Rudolf-Christoph von Gersdorff, who was shown wearing a suicide vest under his military clothing.

Angel Studios also made mistakes about Bonhoeffer's final days. The film ends on a more optimistic note than with the grim truth. Rather than showing his execution in the Flossenbürg concentration camp, naked, on April 9, 1945, Bonhoeffer is seen outside of an empty school with his clothes on. Although *Bonhoeffer* ends with an explanation of his theological and historical impact during World War II, the title of this film portrays him differently. Bonhoeffer was a spy for the churches in Germany, but he was no assassin. The poster shows him holding a gun, visually symbolizing Bonhoeffer as a killer. Bonhoeffer did not use a gun in the movie, nor did this iteration show him demonstrating a violent nature.

*Bonhoeffer: Pastor. Spy. Assassin* effectively shows the theological love of a man for his Church and its resistance to Nazi authority. This story partially illustrates how much he resisted the restructuring of the German Lutheran Churches and his growing support of Jews. However, it misses some important aspects about his life, including details about his execution and his involvement in the assassination attempt against Hitler. This movie is intended for general audiences rather than students of history.

*Lachlan Streeter*