

## **Karl Holl and the Fatherland Party, 1917-1918: A German Liberal Protestant Embraces the Right**

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Towards the end of World War I, debates over war aims created sharp political divisions in German society. A left-liberal alliance for whom domestic political reforms were uppermost in importance was prepared to begin negotiations for a peace settlement. Their opponents on the right were not opposed to peace but what they had in mind was an “annexationist peace,” or more precisely, territorial acquisitions to establish German hegemony on the continent. The means to this end required a renewed war effort for which public support was needed and to achieve that goal they organized a movement known as the German Fatherland Party.<sup>1</sup> Dissension within the political sphere found echoes within German Lutheran Protestantism. Leading voices in the Lutheran community, including Adolf von Harnack, Ernst Troeltsch and Martin Rade rejected an annexationist peace. One major exception, however, was Karl Holl, professor of church history at the University of Berlin, best known to English-speaking readers as the spiritual father of the Luther Renaissance. Holl chose to support the Fatherland Party’s aggressive agenda; the reasons why he did so and the significance of his decision in the context of German political culture are the foci of this paper.

In Germany, as elsewhere in Europe, the outbreak of World War I inspired an efflorescence of national unity.<sup>2</sup> All the differences – social, political, confessional, ethnic, regional – that had fragmented German society in the pre-war period had been transcended. The feeling of unity was captured in a phrase known as the “spirit of 1914.” By September,

however, military stalemate on the western front forced the German people to confront the reality of a protracted war with the result that the euphoria of August quickly dissipated and before long war-weariness became apparent, a trend that more than one observer including Holl noted with some dismay. Instead of determination to fight, Holl saw “smug self-satisfaction, moral relativism, the sense of fatalism, decline in the sense of duty, and the reluctance to sacrifice one’s life for the Fatherland.” All this he feared had ominous implications for the future.<sup>3</sup> By 1917 widespread dissatisfaction in the population at large reached a crisis point. Anti-war attitudes were exacerbated by the weather which also seemed to conspire against the German war effort. The winter of 1916-17 was the coldest in memory and to make matters worse heavy rains devastated the potato crop. Events in Germany were complicated by developments elsewhere in the world. A revolution convulsed Russia in March, overthrowing an autocratic Tsarist regime. Because German Social Democrats had justified their support for the war by depicting it as a fight against autocracy, it seemed that no compelling reason remained for continuing the conflict. In April, the US declaration of war on Germany raised the prospect of the imminent arrival of American troops on German soil. Thus it could be argued that conditions both domestic and external favoured a speedy termination of hostilities. On 19 July 1917 a left-liberal coalition consisting of deputies from the Social Democratic party, the Catholic Centre party and the Progressives succeeded in passing a peace resolution in the Reichstag. Its tone was conciliatory. “The Reichstag strives for a peace of understanding and permanent reconciliation of the peoples. With such a peace, forced acquisitions of territory and political, economic or financial oppression are inconsistent.”<sup>4</sup>

This act of parliamentary defiance, or so it was perceived in some circles, provided the stimulus for the creation of the German Fatherland Party in September 1917. Its titular leader was Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz who assumed the role of propagandist for the movement. One of the party’s supporters observed “everybody suddenly hoped that this new party would rally all nationalist and energetic Germans in a large and strong organization. It seemed as if, in the twelfth hour, a star [Tirpitz] had appeared galvanizing our last hopes.”<sup>5</sup> As he proceeded from one engagement to another Tirpitz impressed on his audiences “that Britain was the key to the enemy alliance, that Anglo-American capitalism wanted to subdue the last remnants of freedom in the world, and that Germany

would decline unless it secured hegemony over Belgium.” Territorial acquisitions were needed because “a peace without annexations would leave Germany with astro-nomic debt and a debilitating economic crisis.”<sup>6</sup> Tirpitz’ rhetoric succeeded in pumping up enthusiasm for a continuing commitment to war, particularly in the ranks of the middle classes and nationalistic elements of the working classes. At the high point of its expansion, it had close to a million members organized into more than 2,000 local chapters<sup>7</sup> though it did not maintain its cohesion after the war ended.

Holl did not take an active part in the Fatherland Party’s activities<sup>8</sup> but he backed the movement fervently nonetheless.<sup>9</sup> As he put it in a letter to a colleague, Heinrich Baumgarten, “I stand decisively on the side of the Fatherland party.”<sup>10</sup> It does not seem to have been an easy decision for Holl to take for two reasons. In the first place, as a former Anglophile, he regretted “as strongly as anyone our break with England for I am almost as indebted to English theologians such as Robertson and Kingsley as much as to those who are German,” he wrote to Baumgarten. “But I am strongly convinced that the first condition of any rapprochement [with Britain] requires that we must defeat the Anglo-Americans.” The second source of Holl’s distress had a religious basis; namely, how to reconcile his nationalism with Christian teaching. The manner in which he resolved this religious difficulty was discussed in a pamphlet entitled “Luther’s Conception of Gospel, War and Duty of the Church in light of the World War” based on a speech he had given the previous year to the annual Lutheran church conference.

The reference to Martin Luther was timely. During the pre-war period Luther had been regarded as a national hero; idealization of the sixteenth-century Reformer intensified during the war, reaching a peak in 1917, the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the nailing of Luther’s 95 theses to the Württemberg church door. For Holl the reliance on Luther whom he read during the war “with burning intensity as never before”<sup>11</sup> was the natural outcome of his pre-war research into Luther’s theology. Salvation for Germany both political and religious, it seemed to Holl, lay in a return to the teachings of Martin Luther. “Only Luther can help us, not the orthodox, Luther as interpreted by his disciple Melanchthon but the genuine, honest great Luther,”<sup>12</sup> he declared to a former student. Expounding Luther’s theology and its socio-political implications was his own personal contribution to the war effort (*Kriegswerk*), the primary example being his

1917 address “Luther’s Conception of Religion” in which he provided a powerful synopsis of Luther’s religion and how it succeeded (in his estimation) in freeing Europe from the burden of Catholicism. The pamphlet mentioned above, “Luther’s Conception of Gospel, War and Duty of the Church in the light of the World War” complemented his other Luther studies. In it Holl addressed himself to religious-socialists, Social Democrats and persons Holl called “friends of peace,” all of whom had sharply criticized the German war effort, German Christianity and Martin Luther, the author in their view of everything pernicious in German religion. With an intensity that matched his critics Holl insisted that “it is Luther who first considered all the questions which we are presently considering regarding Christianity and war, Christianity and social relationships.”<sup>13</sup> In justifying Christian participation in war, Holl drew on Luther’s distinction between the Kingdom of God which is governed by the law of love (*Liebesordnung*) as found in the gospel, and the secular realm under the jurisdiction of the state (*Rechtsordnung*) where reason and human law prevail.<sup>14</sup> The spiritual realm governs relationships between Christians only, whereas the secular realm deals with both Christians and non-believers. Secular authority has as its responsibility, “its God-given duty,” the protection of its subjects “even if the consequence is war.”<sup>15</sup> The Christian in his capacity as soldier carries out a similar function; indeed, the more the soldier “slashed his sword and stabbed at his enemy, the better he protected the innocent, the weak and the defenceless in his Fatherland.”<sup>16</sup> Because of self-seeking egotistical drives in human nature it is not easy to carry out this duty in a Christian spirit, as Luther himself recognized. The soldier may be motivated by the sheer pleasure of conflict or vindictiveness but such impure motives can be overcome through faith, dependence on God and the awareness that as a Christian he is part of the invisible church. In other words action that appears contradictory to God’s will is transformed into God’s work if undertaken with the right motives.

Having provided a legitimation for war on both the national and individual levels, Holl then addressed the issue of German territorial expansion. Momentous economic and demographic changes have profoundly transformed the world since the sixteenth century. Among the most significant changes is the rise to world importance of various peoples.<sup>17</sup> Utilizing a Hegelianized version of geopolitical theories current at the time, Holl declared that it is not fair that a growing *Volk* (by implication Germany) should be restricted within geographical boundaries

that are too narrow while a declining people (the British) hang on to their possessions. It is also contrary to God's will as revealed in history for it is God who allows one *Volk* to grow and another to decline, just as it is God who endows some *Völker* with the spirit of resistance to difficulties while others sink under the same burdens. It is God who determines their geographical boundaries, and for this reason as well war is something inevitable between peoples.<sup>18</sup> Only military might could decide – temporarily at least – the appropriate limits for each *Volk*. According to Holl, God was not making a judgment about the moral worth of a *Volk* when he gave it military success; it simply meant that God had decided it needed more space in which to live at that point in its historical development. What would be its eventual destiny in world history was God's secret to be revealed in the course of time.<sup>19</sup>

Nowhere in the essay did Holl refer directly to the Fatherland Party, nevertheless the argument he developed to justify participation in war makes it clear why he had no difficulty supporting the Party's dreams of territorial aggrandizement. There was a convergence on social issues as well. In sketching out the basis for an ideal social order, Holl returned to Luther's distinction between spiritual and secular realms but took as his departure point Jesus' conception of religion as he, Holl, understood it. To use Jesus' conception of the Kingdom of God as a basis for an earthly social and political order – something which the religious-socialists did – was wrong, in fact a misuse of the term. Jesus came solely as a religious reformer.<sup>20</sup> He was indifferent to worldly things and had no desire to change them. Indeed the more obstacles with which a person had to struggle, the easier it was to turn to God. Jesus taught his disciples that they should seek inner independence from their earthly circumstances, that their duty to God and concern for their souls was more important than earthly happiness. Put in slightly different terms, Holl insisted that Gospel offered no guidelines whatsoever concerning economic or political issues but spoke only of matters touching the soul.<sup>21</sup> Any to attempt to derive any political ethic from Jesus' religion was useless. The Apostle Paul's advice to slaves to accept their lot in life showed that he understood the nature of Jesus religion in a similar manner,<sup>22</sup> as did Luther in making the distinction between the Kingdom of God and the secular world.<sup>23</sup> Holl's social vision based as it was on the principle of social inequality was entirely compatible with the anti-socialist values of the Fatherland Party's primary adherents in the worlds of big business, the aristocracy, and the educated bourgeoi-

sie.<sup>24</sup>

Holl's adoption of a stridently nationalistic position legitimated by religious arguments was not exceptional. Protestants were among the most fervent in their readiness to go to war; some went so far as to interpret the spirit of 1914 in terms that echoed very closely the account of the first Pentecost described in Acts 2 when the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus' followers and united them in enthusiastic anticipation of his imminent return. Protestant theologians also developed a war theology (*Kriegstheologie*) justifying Germany's invasion of Belgium. They accepted the claim that Germany had been encircled by her enemies and forced to undertake a defensive war. Holl's mentor, Adolf von Harnack compared Germany's invasion of Belgium to the actions of King David, who, when his men were starving took consecrated bread reserved for the priests and gave it to his soldiers. Unusual circumstances demanded action that would otherwise be unacceptable.<sup>25</sup> But as the war continued, Harnack underwent a change of heart. Along with other intellectuals who included Ernst Troeltsch, Albert Einstein, and Max Weber, Harnack became part of a movement that rejected extensive territorial acquisitions in favour of a foreign policy that would allow Germany to live in peace with its neighbours.<sup>26</sup> Another of Holl's colleagues, Martin Rade, the editor of the foremost liberal Lutheran journal *The Christian World*, went so far as to describe the outbreak of war in 1914 as a bankruptcy of Christianity and was willing to establish a dialogue with church representatives from neutral nations, pacifists and religious socialists. From Holl's perspective changing course in this fashion suggested a dangerous weakness in character. Sustained by the conviction that Germany's cause was reasonable and right, that God would neither allow Protestantism to disintegrate nor permit German defeat,<sup>27</sup> Holl never wavered in his personal commitment to the war. Doing one's duty whether as on the battlefield or on the home front, was paramount. Even the deaths of his brother in law and his nephew did not shake him although his mood became more sombre as casualty lists mounted, and as one after another of his former students died. The move to a more stridently nationalist and politically conservative position cooled relations between Holl and Harnack, Rade and others in the liberal ranks of the Lutheran community and brought him closer to such religious conservatives as Reinhold Seeberg, one of the most outspoken supporters of the Fatherland Party.<sup>28</sup>

What is the significance of Holl's support for the Fatherland Party?

Historians of the Weimar Republic have drawn attention to what Larry Eugene Jones has called the “dying middle,”<sup>29</sup> that is, a weakening of support for liberal political values and practices in German political culture. Karl Holl’s decision to embrace a movement whose goals were antithetical to liberal values reflects the same trend. In doing so he became part of what has been called the conservative revolution. It took several forms, and yet it was united by certain elements – dismay over the materialism and the loss of spiritual values in German society, fear of Bolshevism and its German counterparts which included both communists and socialists, dislike of parliamentary democracy and a call for a dictatorship, which meant, in the context of that period, a strong authoritarian government. Rather enigmatic too are Holl’s references to the *Volk*. As interpreted by Holl, *Volk* did not have the romanticized connotations typical of its usage among extreme conservatives but nonetheless in Holl’s usage *Volk* was an exclusionary concept. It signified a homogeneous group, centred on Luther’s teachings and organized on a religious basis,<sup>30</sup> a community that by definition excluded Catholics whom he once described as “our worst enemy”<sup>31</sup> and Jews. It would be going too far to suggest that Karl Holl helped prepare the ground for the Third Reich; nevertheless the direction of his political thinking as well as his conception of an ideal society certainly did not equip him to challenge National Socialism; nor is it surprising that Holl’s student Emmanuel Hirsch did decide to take the fateful step and cast his lot with a repressive regime.

### ***Endnotes***

1. The term “party” in the Fatherland Party’s name was somewhat misleading because it suggested a structured organization. In fact the Party was made up of several groups and associations on the super patriotic right wing of German political culture. Additional details on the groups who made up the Party are found in Heinz Hagenlücke, *Deutsche Vaterlandspartei: Die nationale Rechte am Ende des Kaiserreiches* (Düsseldorf: Droste Verlag, 1997), 143-192. Dirk Stegmann points out that the leaders of the various groups who made up the Party shared “an anti-socialist, anti-democratic, and anti-parliamentary ideology” (*Die Erben Bismarcks: Parteien und Verbände in der Spätphase des wilhelminischen Deutschlands* [Cologne: Verlag Kiepenheuer und Witsch, 1970], 512).

2. Recent research has modified this claim. In more than one locality, ambivalence, anxiety and fear were characteristic emotions (Richard Bessel, "Germany Between War and Dictatorship," in *German History Since 1800*, ed. Mary Fulbrook (London: Arnold, 1997), 236.
3. Holl to Schattenman, 24 October 1915, in Paul Schattenmann, "Briefe von Karl Holl 1914-1921," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 79 (1968): 79.
4. Quoted in Arno J. Mayer, *Wilson vs. Lenin: Political Origins of the New Diplomacy* (Cleveland: World Publishing Co., 1964), 133.
5. Rafael Scheck, *Alfred von Tirpitz and German Right-Wing Politics, 1914-1930* (Boston: Humanities Press, 1998), 67.
6. Scheck, *Alfred von Tirpitz*, 68.
7. Roger Chickering, *Imperial Germany and the Great War, 1914-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 165.
8. Dietrich Korsch, "Zeit der Krise und Neubau der Theologie: Karl Holl als antipode Ernst Troeltschs," in *Umstrittene Moderne: die Zukunft der Neuzeit im Urteil der Epoche Ernst Troeltschs* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, Mohn, 1987), 221.
9. Friedrich Meinecke recalled that at a meeting of the discussion group known as the Wednesday Club, Holl took strong exception to an article Meinecke had written criticizing the Fatherland Party. When Meinecke stood his ground, Holl's response was to break off relations with members of the group. *Holl zerschneidet das Tischtuch zwischen uns beiden und erklärte darauf seinen Austritt aus der Mittwochs-Gesellschaft* (Friedrich Meinecke, *Erlebtes: 1862-1919* [Stuttgart: K.F. Koehler Verlag, 1964], 264-265).
10. Holl to Heinrich Baumgarten, 30 June 1918, unpublished.
11. Holl to Schlatter, 05 May 1917 in Robert Stupperich, ed., "Briefe Karl Holls an Adolph Schlatter 1897-1923," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 2 (1976): 223.
12. Holl to Schattenmann, 25 June 1915, in Schattenmann, 78.
13. Karl Holl, *Gesammelte Aufsätze* (hereafter *GA*), 3:148.
14. Holl, *GA*, 3:150.
15. Holl, *GA*, 3:151.
16. Holl, *GA*, 3:152.



17. Holl, *GA*, 3:165.
18. Holl, *GA*, 3:162.
19. Holl, *GA*, 3:166.
20. Holl, *GA*, 3:163.
21. Holl, *GA*, 3:151.
22. "Slaves obey your earthly masters in fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as you obey Christ, not only while being watched, and in order to please them, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart. Render service with enthusiasm, as to the Lord and not to men and women, knowing that whatever good we do, we will receive the same from the Lord, whether we are slaves or free," Ephesians 6: 5-8, New Revised Standard Version.
23. Holl, *GA*, 3:163.
24. Dirk Stegmann, *Die Erben Bismarcks: Parteien und Verbände in der Spätphase des wilhelminischen Deutschlands* (Cologne: Verlag Kiepenheuer und Witsch, 1970), 512.
25. Arlie J. Hoover, *God, Germany, and Britain in the Great War: A Study in Clerical Nationalism* (New York: Praeger, 1989), 75.
26. Gordon A. Craig, *Germany 1866-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 362.
27. Holl to Schattenmann, 24 October 1915, in Schattenmann, 79.
28. Klaus Böhme, ed., *Aufrufe und Reden deutscher Professoren im ersten Weltkrieg* (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam, 1975), 125-135.
29. Larry Eugene Jones, " 'The Dying Middle': Weimar Germany and the Fragmentation of Bourgeois Politics," *Central European History* 5 (1972): 23-54.
30. Holl, *GA*, 3:167-168. It was the first task of the institutional church "to awaken the feeling for the church among our people . . . Church understood in Luther's sense as a community of believers united in God and Christ." The Protestant understanding of the sense of community was deeper than that found among Catholics, according to Holl.

31. Quoted in Johannes Wallmann, "Karl Holl und seine Schule," in *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*, Beiheft 4, in *Tübingen Theologie im 20m Jahrhundert*, Eberhard Jüngel, ed. (J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1968), 9.