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Himmlers Klostersturm.

Der Angriff auf katholische Einrichtungen im Zweiten Weltkrieg und die
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Operation *Klostersturm* (Monastery Storm), to which more than 300 Catholic monastic and other church properties fell victim between 1940 and 1942, was one of the high points of the Nazi *Kirchenkampf* (anti-church struggle) during World War II. Monastic orders and monasteries were among the most important targets of Nazi anti-church policies, since they were considered the “mainspring” and the “best and most dangerous combat troops” of the Catholic Church. Not only did the Nazi regime object to the monastic way of life, it also cast a covetous eye on the orders’ supposed wealth.

In the 1930s, the Nazi regime had already attempted to slander and combat the monastic orders through the foreign currency and morality trials. A decisive escalation of the conflict, however, did not occur until after 1939. In time of war, the features of Nazi anti-church policies changed. The influence of the relatively moderate Reich Church Minister Hanns Kerrl dwindled, while Nazi Party *Reichsleiter* Martin Bormann seized control of competencies relating to church-policies in those territories Germany had annexed or occupied. Concurrently, Heinrich Himmler continued to expand his SS and police empire.

Although Adolf Hitler repeatedly called for quiet in matters of church policy, the regime did not grant the Catholic Church the truce it had hoped for. To the contrary, beginning in 1940, monasteries and other church institutional properties were confiscated and their residents expelled under the guise of *Reichsaufgaben* (property or services the national government could requisition in time of emergency). Branded “enemies of the people and the state,” monastics were robbed of their property and their homes, even though they had explicitly committed themselves to serving the fatherland in the crucible of war.

The resettlement of ethnic German populations from the states of Eastern and Southeastern Europe (altogether, approximately half a million people were brought “home to the Reich”) provided the regime a welcome pretext to attack the monasteries under cover of the *Reichsleistungsgesetz* (roughly: National Obligations Law) of 1939. When it came to finding facilities in which to set up the resettlement camps, the Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle (Ethnic German Liaison Office) targeted Catholic holdings with highly disproportionate frequency. In the Diocese of Rottenburg, for example, (one of this study’s focal points), over 20 monastic

subsidiary stations, parish houses, homes for spiritual exercises, and other Catholic properties were taken over completely in the span of a few weeks during fall 1940. Their residents were literally put out on the street, even though many were serving either in the armed forces or as nurses in military hospitals on the “home front.”

In 1941, *Klostersturm* escalated once more. The Gestapo seized more than 300 Catholic monasteries, theological seminaries, and other properties, particularly in the northwest of Germany. In the Archdiocese of Cologne alone (another focus of this study), twenty monasteries were affected. Here, too, the monastics had to leave their houses on the shortest of notice and were often expelled from their cities and provinces as well. Defined as “assets from enemies of the people and state,” seized property was confiscated for the benefit of the Reich.

Altogether, more than 300 monasteries, convents, and other properties fell victim to *Klostersturm*, not “merely” 123, as older scholarship posited. Until now, *Klostersturm* was occasionally referred to as the “Bormann action against the monasteries,” but this study reveals that the truly decisive force behind the operation was Heinrich Himmler. By the time Bormann intervened, the first great wave of confiscation had already passed. Himmler, on the other hand, not only headed the Gestapo, but also the SD (Security Service), which even before the war had developed the strategy of requisitioning monasteries and other religious institutional properties under the guise of serving the public interest. Finally, Himmler possessed ultimate authority over the Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle, which carried out the first wave of requisitions.

One of the necessary prerequisites for the realization of *Klostersturm* was the hostile picture that Nazi propaganda had for many years been painting of monastic orders and monasteries. The initiative of local Nazi satraps and police agents, however, also played a vital role. In some cases, these local leaders did not even need to be committed or especially radical Nazis. As the examples of the Gestapo in Cologne and Bonn show, even police officials who had no personal vested interest in the abolition of monasteries could sometimes demonstrate an over-eager anticipation of orders. In such cases, the police officers’ conception of duty dovetailed with the products of Nazi propaganda to produce fatal results for the monasteries. In general, the influence local authorities exercised on the course of *Klostersturm* led to considerable differences in the process and the scale of property seizures.

The selection of monasteries actually expropriated by the Nazis does not suggest unified planning for *Klostersturm*; instead, it exposes clear signs of arbitrariness and unsystematic procedure. Large, important monasteries were requisitioned, as were small, unknown ones.

Monastic communities that were active in charity suffered, as did orders – for both men and women – that focused on the contemplative life. Some of the monasteries that were ultimately spared may have been saved only by the “stop decree” (Stopp-Erlass): on 30 July 1941, Hitler issued the order to discontinue the expropriation of monasteries. Consequently, the Nazi regime’s attack on the monasteries shifted from the street to the offices of banks and land registries, where the requisitions took the form of administrative actions.

One reason for Hitler’s decision to end *Klostersturm* was a series of protests by the Catholic populations in a variety of places. The Bishop of Münster, Clemens Count von Galen, achieved the biggest public effect with his sermons of July and August 1941. His success, however, does not alter the fact that *Klostersturm* caught the German bishops in an extremely tense situation. As the regime exerted pressure on the Church – pressure that only increased from 1940 onward – disagreements over how best to respond deepened the chasm between the bishops. While the Chairman of the Bishops Conference, Adolf Cardinal Bertram, clung to his paradigm of a harmonious relationship between church and state even as the regime’s crimes became impossible to overlook, the Bishop of Berlin, Konrad von Preysing, favored public protest on the part of the bishops. At the Fulda Bishops Conference in 1940, matters came to a head between the two.

From the start, the German bishops reacted to the attacks on the monasteries with massive protests, but these were mostly limited to written petitions that remained largely ineffective. The Fulda Bishops Conference was not a body that was capable of reacting flexibly to the challenges posed by the Nazi regime. Nor did the monastic orders themselves possess the kinds of organizational structures that would have enabled a united response to *Klostersturm*.

A “Committee for Matters Concerning Monastic Orders” (Ausschuss für Ordensangelegenheiten), which included bishops, monastics, and also one layman, was not established until August 1941 and thus arrived too late to be able to combat *Klostersturm* effectively. In the end, the committee’s biggest success was in initiating the so-called *Dekalog-Hirtenbrief* (Pastoral Letter about the Ten Commandments) of 1943.

The effects of *Klostersturm* continued to be felt long after 1945. Many of the expropriated monasteries and other properties remained occupied after the war, serving above all as camps for displaced persons, expellees, and refugees. Some of the restitution cases dragged on into the 1970s. For many monastic orders, what was even more damaging than the material losses was a severe decline in new members, which Nazi policies had helped bring about. As a result, *Klostersturm* represents a deep caesura in the history of monastic orders in Germany, from which many monasteries have never completely recovered.