

Thomas Flammer:
Nationalsozialismus und katholische Kirche
im Freistaat Braunschweig 1931–1945,
Paderborn [u. a.] 2013.

(= Veröffentlichungen der Kommission für Zeitgeschichte, Reihe B: Forschungen, Bd. 124)

The present regional study is the first to focus on the history of the Catholic Church in the Free State of Brunswick during the Nazi period. In this diaspora region, the Catholic Church was forced to deal with a National Socialist movement that established itself at an early stage. Furthermore, the Church confronted massive difficulties in providing pastoral care, owing to the migration of numerous Catholics drawn to the region as a result of one of the Reich's most ambitious industrialization projects.

In pursuing its political and pastoral aims, the Catholic Church had long dealt with the challenge of being, at best, a tolerated religious minority in this traditionally Evangelical-Lutheran Land (state). Not until the collapse of the monarchy after World War I, under the new Weimar constitution, was the equality of religious communities legally anchored in Brunswick, which made possible the construction of numerous churches, as well as the unimpeded practice of religion.

At the same time, however, the newly constituted Free State of Brunswick experienced increasing politicization in the Weimar period. This led to the Nazi Party's participation in the state government as early as 1930 and in a Nazi Ministerpräsident (state governor) in 1931. By 1933, the party boasted a dense organizational network in Brunswick. For the state's Catholic minority, this meant that the systematic public suppression of Church organizations and institutions set in sooner and, at least in part, more intensely than in other regions of the Reich. Brunswick's few Catholic associations, for example, were harassed to a greater degree than elsewhere in Germany.

A drastic worsening of the Church's situation occurred in 1937. In the context of the economic Four Year Plan, and owing to what was seen as a strategically favorable location, the »Hermann Göring Works« were established on the territory of the Land Brunswick. Within a very short time, one of the largest industrial regions of Germany with associated new settlement zones was conceived at the drawing board and constructed »overnight,« so to speak. Tens of thousands of people from all parts of the Reich, from friendly European countries, and – once the war had started – from the occupied territories were sent to this so-called »developmental region.« Among them were thousands of Catholic migrants with the

most diverse religious traditions and experiences. These were part of what Catholic authorities described as the »wandering Church,« a phenomenon that dated to the mid-1930s, when the Reich Labor Service and the pursuit of other agricultural or industrial employment uprooted thousands of young Catholics from their traditional religious surroundings.

The rapidly rising number of Catholics generated unanticipated pastoral challenges, the more so since Nazi leaders wanted to minimize the influence of the Church in the »developmental region« as much as possible, or eliminate it altogether. Countless confrontations with the party and its organizations and agencies were »preprogrammed,« as the traditional setup of systematic pastoral work through the construction, purchase, or renting of church buildings usually foundered on the rocks of resistance by the Nazi rulers.

Against the backdrop of this particular Catholic diaspora situation in the Land of Brunswick and the political repression of the Church there, surprising alternative pastoral structures and forms emerged with the help of the »Katholische Seelsorgsdienst für die Wandernde Kirche« (Catholic Pastoral Service for the Wandering Church). These included the region-wide efforts of Seelsorgehelferinnen (women pastoral care helpers), who took on additional ministering responsibilities, such as home visits and religious instruction, and thereby helped bring about the networking of newly arrived Catholics. Besides German clergy, priests of various foreign nationalities occasionally operated inside labor and POW camps – some as volunteers, others as prisoners – thereby providing pastoral care to a large number of Catholics. Finally, foreign Catholic laypeople and clergy helped make religious services possible for some German Catholics as well.

Church-historical events in the state of Brunswick also make evident an essential problem of an internal church organization based on parochialism. On the one hand, state-directed migration led to a progressive distancing from the Church. Some newly arrived Catholics »lost« their traditional native faith upon leaving their home regions and no longer had any interest in being integrated into the work of a parish or building up churchly organizations. On the other hand, the religious witness of Catholic migrants who, despite the adverse external conditions, were not prepared to passively accept the prevailing conditions can also be traced. Their efforts included protesting to municipal and state authorities, »fronting« the purchase of buildings for the Church, and making their homes available for the religious instruction of their children and the celebration of Mass, at the risk of incurring political consequences for themselves (a risk that occasionally did materialize). As a case in point, a closer look at the developmental region around the Hermann Göring Works shows that a comprehensive

network of »unofficial« points that provided pastoral services was able to emerge through such efforts.

The politically induced transformation of ministry work in the diaspora ultimately proved to be a secularization process that was paralleled by an inner-ecclesiastical and religious »densification« among some Catholic migrants. The special vigor with which the Nazis attempted to enforce their ideological claim to power in Brunswick and in the vicinity of the Göring Works makes the latter development appear as a particular form of religiously based resistance.