

Lord Lexden

Conservative peer and historian

Andrew Chandler has produced a long overdue and powerful exploration of how British Churches and their congregations responded to Hitler's Nazi regime

British Christians and the Third Reich

Church, State, and the Judgement of Nations

By **Andrew Chandler**
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There has long been a conspicuous gap in the immense literature on Britain and Nazi Germany. A satisfactory study of how the British Churches and their congregations responded to Adolf Hitler's evil regime has been lacking. This may be due to a belief that by the 1930s no one was much interested in what they said or did. Church-going had become a minority pursuit. Christian values seemed to be in retreat.

Andrew Chandler, professor of modern history at the University of Chichester, gives that view short shrift in this deeply researched, clearly written book. The pews might no longer be packed tightly with worshippers, but all the main Christian denominations retained undiminished confidence in themselves and in the gospel they preached in their varying ways.

Those in high political office listened to them. Stanley Baldwin, prime minister for much of the 1930s, was a man of deep Christian convictions, who after his retirement raised a record

sum to help refugees from Germany. His successor, Neville Chamberlain, had no religious faith, but he believed strongly that everything Hitler represented was morally repugnant. Like the contemporary Christian leaders – Anglican, Nonconformist and Roman Catholic – analysed so acutely by Chandler, he hoped that the German people would be able to organise effective action against the vile tyranny Hitler had inflicted on them.

What should deeply concerned Christians in Britain do? The question was endlessly discussed in pamphlets, newspaper correspondence columns,

ecumenical gatherings (previously almost unknown in a Britain riven by splits between the churches), and parliamentary debates, particularly in the House of Lords where the bishops' bench produced much impressive moral argument.

Chandler seems to have studied everything that was said and written during these agonised exchanges between British Christians. His scholarship is impeccable.

Some, like Arthur Headlam, the pugnacious Bishop of Gloucester, urged caution, believing that uninhibited denunciation of Hitler would bring down even greater wrath on the heads of Jews and outspoken German Christian critics of the Nazis.

Others wondered whether the gospels of Christ permitted undue hostility to Germany. In March 1938 the *Church Times* asked, "Is it not the law of God to try friendship and understanding?" Several leading British Christians went to talk to Hitler and his henchmen, including Hermann Goering and Joachim von Ribbentrop. They did not return home rejoicing.

Yet for a time nothing mattered more than the preservation of peace in Europe. Chandler writes: "From the

spring of 1938 the policy of the Chamberlain government found the winds of Christian opinion blowing supportively in its sails." The archbishop of Canterbury, Cosmo Gordon Lang, gave the Munich agreement his blessing.

Shortly afterwards, the mood in Christian circles changed dramatically when the Jews of Austria were attacked with great brutality. Every kind of practical help now had its ardent supporters. George Bell, the revered bishop of Chichester who knew more about Germany than any other churchman, was at the forefront of moves to secure the successful resettlement of refugees. Their work was much increased by the government's decision to allow refugee children to come to Britain.

In 1939 Bell and his fellow bishops defended the justice of the war against Hitler in ringing, confident tones which would be inconceivable today. Bell was no less outspoken in condemning the conduct of the war when it involved the killing of German civilians through carpet bombing.

This powerful book reminds us of what we have lost as a result of the collapse of Christian belief and values in our time. 🏰

