

THE WISCONSIN EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN SYNOD'S REACTION  
TO WORLD WAR TWO

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## ABSTRACT

Two great events marked the first half of the twentieth century: the First and Second World Wars. The common theme of these two catastrophic events is that Germany found itself on the wrong side of history in both cases. One would expect that a Lutheran Synod with German roots would have been persecuted during both wars due to suspicion of German sympathizing. That is exactly what happened in WWI. But persecution of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod during WWII was almost non-existent. This thesis will explore the reasons for why this German Lutheran synod in America was not persecuted or oppressed during WWII.

## Introduction

In a speech in Chicago, in the year 1933, the grandson of famous composer Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy, Dr. Albrecht Mendelssohn Bartholdy blamed the Lutherans for the persecution of Jews in Germany.<sup>1</sup> Dr. Bartholdy, because he was of Jewish lineage, would have had reason to be concerned for the Jewish population in Europe upon the ascension of the National Socialist Party in Germany. His comments would also carry a certain weight. Not only was Dr. Bartholdy the grandson of a famous composer and an excellent pianist in his own right, as well as great grandson to famous philosopher Moses Mendelssohn, but he was also a legal scholar and the founder of the Hamburg Institute for Foreign Policy.<sup>2</sup>

Dr. Bartholdy was in the Midwest to speak on the issues in Germany. Specifically, the titles of his lectures were “Democracy in Germany” and “The European Situation.”<sup>3</sup> Here is an excerpt from Mendelssohn Bartholdy’s speech, recorded in the Wisconsin Synod publication *The Northwestern Lutheran*:

There is one body on whom responsibility for events in Germany rests most heavily. That is the leaders of the Christian church connected most closely with the present government. The Roman Catholic church in Germany is now, politically speaking more or less in opposition. It is the Lutheran church which is in close union with the National Socialists. If appeals are made to Germany because of persecution they had best be made by leaders of the Protestant Lutheran Evangelical churches in other countries, addressed to the Lutheran Evangelical churches in Germany.<sup>4</sup>

If what he said that day in Chicago to the crowd was true, it would be devastating for Lutherans everywhere. In fact, the writer of this article in *The Northwestern Lutheran* echoes that

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<sup>1</sup> Z. “Hitler and Luther,” *The Northwestern Lutheran*, Vol. 20, No. 9, April 23, 1933: 131. Note: Author listed only by initial.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.mendelssohn-gesellschaft.de/en/mendelssohns/biografien/albrecht-mendelssohn-bartholdy>

<sup>3</sup> Chicago Daily Tribune Monday March 27<sup>th</sup> 1933.

<sup>4</sup> Z. “Hitler and Luther,” 131-132.

very thought: “These words are of grave import if true.”<sup>5</sup> Anti-German Lutheran sentiment like this could point to more of the same rhetoric to come, rhetoric against Lutherans and, perhaps, rhetoric against German Lutherans in America associated with Lutherans in Germany. Was it to be a repeat of the oppression faced during World War One<sup>6</sup> for the American Lutherans of German descent in America?

German American oppression reached its peak during the WWI. If one considers Dr. Bartholdy’s comments to be a general understanding of the nation’s feelings towards German Lutherans before the start of the Second World War<sup>7</sup>, it would lead one to believe that this oppression would continue into WWII. Couple Dr. Bartholdy’s opinion of Lutheran responsibility for the Jewish persecution problem with the atrocities performed by the Germans during WWII, and one would have no doubts left in his mind that Germans in America would be in for some oppression and persecution. German Lutherans, especially, might be in for a great deal of public chastisement for any association with churches in Germany or any pro-German sympathies, including German heritage.

All of this might lead one to believe that this paper would cover the many instances of German Lutheran persecution and oppression during and after WWII. However, this will not be the case. Instead, this paper will address the topic of why there was *not* German Lutheran persecution in America during or after WWII, specifically in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Z. “Hitler and Luther,” 132.

<sup>6</sup> From here on out WWI

<sup>7</sup> From here on out WWII

<sup>8</sup> I understand that during WWII, the Wisconsin Synod would have been called the *Synod of Wisconsin, Minnesota, Michigan and Other States*. However, for the purpose of this paper, I will refer to it only as the Wisconsin Synod.

There are many contributing factors in the discussion of why Lutheran oppression in America was, virtually, non-existent during these years from the late 1930s to the late 1940s. This paper will focus on the following: The language change from German to English, the Wisconsin Synod's publications produced before, during, and after the war, the communication with the government concerning the separation of church and state, the Wisconsin Synod's participation in the war effort in America, and the Wisconsin Synod's humanitarian aid after the completion of the war.

## PART 1: WORLD WAR ONE

### **Persecution and Oppression During World War One**

The Wisconsin Synod has always been a church with a German heritage. One can still see the evidence of our German roots by simply taking a look at any church directory in the WELS. It will be filled with Schroeders, Meyers, Schultzs, and many other German names. Many of our older church buildings still have the words *Evangelische Lutherische Kirche* carved into the stonework. Our German heritage was never something we tried to hide. In fact, it has been a source of pride, connecting us to the very beginning of Lutheranism and the German Reformer Martin Luther.

The history of the Wisconsin Synod is comprised almost entirely of Germans who migrated to the United States in the 1800s and settled in the Midwest. Naturally, the Midwest is still the center of our Synod to this day. However, during the early twentieth century, it was also the center for the strongest German Lutheran persecution our Wisconsin Synod has endured during the course of its history. This persecution came because of our German heritage and our unwillingness to "Americanize" to the same extent as other "American Lutherans."

The first example of the persecution experienced by German Lutherans came in the form of the Bennett Law. The Bennett Law, which was passed in Wisconsin in 1889, would have been devastating for Wisconsin Synod Lutherans. In this law, there was a clause which would have made “(English) the only acceptable medium for all core subjects, a clause meant to strike at the German-language education of the Lutheran parochial schools.”<sup>9</sup> Wisconsin and Missouri Synod Lutherans, along with many Catholics, flocked to the polls and voted the law down. But the message that this law sent was clear. America wanted the German Lutherans to assimilate.

Wisconsin Synod Lutherans did not want to leave the German language behind. They believed that the German language helped to protect against becoming like the evangelicals in America. Stephen Gurgel makes this point clear, “As a counterculture, this group by conviction opposed nearly all means of integration into a broader American Society. By doing so, they hoped to avoid following the same course as the ‘American Lutherans.’”<sup>10</sup> Many German Lutherans felt no need to assimilate because they lived in isolated rural communities. Gurgel named this as a “factor preserving this counterculture.”<sup>11</sup>

The problem with the Wisconsin Synod Lutheran micro-communities was that the “American Lutherans” had closer connections with the state and believed that “the German Lutheran presence alone could even forestall Christ’s second coming.”<sup>12</sup> This stemmed from their postmillennial belief of having the goal to create heaven on earth, which they worked to

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<sup>9</sup> Stephen Gurgel, *The War to End All Germans: Wisconsin Synod Lutherans and the First World War* (2012), 1.

<sup>10</sup> Gurgel, 7.

<sup>11</sup> Gurgel, 8.

<sup>12</sup> Gurgel, 11.

accomplish through governmental policies and reform.<sup>13</sup> The German Lutherans were being pressured to assimilate with American culture even before WWI. The start of WWI in Europe brought with it a new wave of harsher persecution for Wisconsin Synod Lutherans. The reason for this was simple, “Wars require incorporation and solidarity to achieve victory.”<sup>14</sup> This was certainly the national mood throughout WWI. The isolationism of the Wisconsin Synod would go against the grain of this national mood. Stephen Gurgel summarized what happened in WWI well, when he said, “At a time when civil liberties were rarely put into practice, and instead served simply as a catchphrase, Wisconsin Synod Lutherans received a rude awakening for their wartime dissent and their slow, or nonexistent, assimilation into American Culture.”<sup>15</sup>

The oppression of the Wisconsin Synod Lutherans took on many forms. In his thesis *The War to End All Germans*, Stephen Gurgel thoroughly details this persecution and the many forms it took. To very briefly summarize, there were investigations into many German Lutherans, including professors at Northwestern College. Specifically, there was an investigation into the President of Northwestern College, August Ernst. This was due to their formation of the German American Club of Watertown, which existed to encourage the use of the German language.<sup>16</sup> There were still other investigations into many members of our clergy. Yellow paint was splattered on a Wisconsin Synod pastor’s home. A Lutheran pastor and his wife were publicly beaten. Lutheran parochial schools were burned to the ground. A bullet was fired through the

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<sup>13</sup> Gurgel, 6.

<sup>14</sup> Gurgel, 14.

<sup>15</sup> Gurgel, 16.

<sup>16</sup> Gurgel, 33.

window of a Wisconsin Synod classroom. German Lutherans endured much at the hands of their fellow Americans during WWI. The question is, why?

### **Causes of German Lutheran Persecution During the First World War**

Blame for this oppression can be laid at the feet of multiple parties, perhaps, even at the feet of Wisconsin Synod Lutherans themselves. From the secular side, there was a felt need to produce material which could get people to back the war efforts. “Also, unlike the Second World War, where the attack on Pearl Harbor roused the American nation, (President) Wilson felt extreme pressure to cultivate—even manufacture— public opinion.”<sup>17</sup> To get the nation on board with U.S. involvement in this war, Wilson was going to need the help of the churches. So, in 1917, Wilson created the Committee on Public Information.

The Committee on Public Information (CPI) immediately targeted the Midwest (Wisconsin, Minnesota, the Dakotas) because of the antiwar organizations there.<sup>18</sup> “The Nonpartisan League and the People’s Council of America were pervasive in these states.”<sup>19</sup> The CPI worked closely with evangelical churches.

The CPI and many evangelical churches felt no qualm in working together for the war effort. The CPI highlighted the war activities of churches and encouraged them to send in sermon extracts which set forth the ideals and war aims of the nation. The best of these sermons earned publication in the *Official Bulletin*.<sup>20</sup>

The CPI would also send in their Four Minute Men, men who gave four-minute patriotic speeches, into their churches to rouse the members into supporting the war. “The CPI repeatedly

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<sup>17</sup> Gurgel, 46.

<sup>18</sup> Gurgel, 46.

<sup>19</sup> Gurgel, 46, 47.

<sup>20</sup> Gurgel, 48.

wrote ministers across the country requesting them to preach in favor of Liberty Loan purchases or food and fuel conservation.”<sup>21</sup> Naturally, the Wisconsin Synod wanted no part of this. Pro-war or anti-war feelings aside, this would have broken fellowship practices. It should also be noted that the Wisconsin Synod Lutheran position was, and still is, that the state has no business interfering with church activities and for them to come into the church to sway a congregation’s opinion to a certain political ideology would cross the line. Some Wisconsin Synod Pastors refused to participate in this type of war effort. The church’s goal is simply to preach the gospel. But the government took notice of our refusal. “All ministers who refused to reply and report, the letters claimed would be ‘noted.’”<sup>22</sup>

It is safe to say that most from the Wisconsin Synod were not in favor of the war against Germany. Remember that many German Lutherans still had family members back in the fatherland. How could someone, in good conscience, support a war that would be fought against family members? While other church bodies fell in line and did as the CPI asked, Wisconsin Synod Lutherans were more hesitant. When the Minnesota Committee of Public Safety (CPS) began requesting pastors in Minnesota to “speak patriotic sermons”<sup>23</sup> the Wisconsin Synod pastors abstained. “Wisconsin Synod Lutherans, conscience bound-not to confuse church and state convictions, not to mention distressed over a war against their relatives, could only have their duress increased from this outside religious pressure to conform.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Gurgel, 48.

<sup>22</sup> Gurgel, 48.

<sup>23</sup> Gurgel, 52.

<sup>24</sup> Gurgel, 53.

Another organization that was instrumental in the persecution of Germans Lutherans in the United States was the American Protective League (APL). The APL was a “voluntary auxiliary to the Department of Justice.”<sup>25</sup> These people who volunteered sought to weed out German spies in America. “A pent-up feeling of being unable to fight the enemy overseas led many to search for the enemy at home.”<sup>26</sup> This same spirit will still be around during WWII. A natural place to start was with the German speaking population, including Wisconsin Synod Lutherans.

There are certainly clear examples of the states overstepping their roles and meddling in church affairs during WWI, as previously mentioned. However, the government was not the only cause for our persecution. There were decisions we made as a synod, programs we took part in, and ill-timed writings we published which also cast the Wisconsin Synod in an unfavorable light.

After Congress declared war on 6 April 1917, German Lutherans hardly made a smooth transition from partisans for peace to flag waving patriots. Especially in the first months after declaration, Lutherans openly shared their objections to the conflict and ensuing government policies. Many felt no scruple with expressing their distaste because they had no idea what was required of them in a ‘total war’<sup>27</sup>

Many Wisconsin Synod Lutherans made their anti-war sentiment publicly known. Seminary professors, such as August Pieper and John Schaller, went to anti-war protests.<sup>28</sup> College professors in New Ulm, Minnesota were, perhaps, the most famous in their anti-war demonstrations. The issue in New Ulm began because so many were opposed to the draft.

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<sup>25</sup> Gurgel, 41.

<sup>26</sup> Gurgel, 41.

<sup>27</sup> Gurgel, 56.

<sup>28</sup> Mark Braun. “Being good Americans and better Lutherans: Synodical Conference Lutherans and the Military Chaplaincy.” *WELS Historical Institute Journal*, 2001: 25.

Wisconsin Synod members in New Ulm held a meeting to protest the draft but also “to persuade the boys to submit and obey the law until it could be repealed.”<sup>29</sup> At this meeting, two professors from Dr. Martin Luther College spoke against the draft. One of these professors was Adolph Ackermann. Ackerman was also the president of DMLC. This was problematic. The DMLC president made his political opinions known publicly, and not in a small way. There were between 7,000 and 10,000 people who attended this rally at Turner Park in New Ulm.<sup>30</sup> Because of his involvement in this meeting and his further involvement in advocating the anti-war movement, he was placed under investigation by the CPS. One government informant wrote about President Ackermann, “Dr. A. Ackerman [sic], Prof in Lutheran Theological College at this place, is one of the worst traitors to the United States in this section,”<sup>31</sup> The Minnesota CPS contacted the board at DMLC with their findings in the investigation on Ackermann, which made it clear that he was disloyal, and asked the board what action they would take.<sup>32</sup> The board had no choice but to ask Ackermann to resign, which he did. The Ackermann case is a sad example of the negative consequences that came with making anti-war feelings known during WWI.

One of the most important stances the Wisconsin Synod took during WWI was its stance on church and state relations. This stance was the cause of much persecution, but this was a doctrinal matter. So, the position of our synod on church and state division would not change

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<sup>29</sup> A.F. Kearney Report, “*Conditions at New Ulm, Minn.*,” 15 September 1917, OG 17438.

<sup>30</sup> John F. McGovern Report, “*Protest Meeting at New Ulm, Minn.*,” 25 July 1917, OG 17438.

<sup>31</sup> A.F. Kearney Report, “*Conditions at New Ulm, Minn.*,” 6 September 1917, OG 17438.

<sup>32</sup> Minnesota Commission of Public Safety, *Report of Minnesota Commission of Public Safety* (St. Paul: L.F. Dow., 1919), 220.

heading into WWII. The question must then be asked: Why did this generate persecution during WWI and not WWII?

The latter half of this paper will discuss the reasons that church and state division did not cause persecution during WWII. At this point, it is necessary to discuss why this issue caused persecution during WWI. At one point, the US Secretary of Treasury, promoted the idea that churches should use church funds to support the war effort by buying Liberty Loans.<sup>33</sup> This angered many in the Wisconsin Synod. The Wisconsin Synod publication, the *Gemeindeblatt*, published an article reminding the church and state of their places. “The war is for the state, not the church.”<sup>34</sup> The opinion of the Wisconsin Synod was different from the opinions of most other churches in the United States. Most churches followed the instructions of the government and raised funds to support the war efforts. During WWI, the Wisconsin Synod position was not viewed as neutral but as disloyal.

Because of the general distrust of everything German, everything in our Synod was under the investigation microscope. Even something as simple as our hymnal was scrutinized.

Go to this address and ask for the hymnbook for the Ev-Luth. Congregations of the unaltered Augsburg Confession... Turn to the index. Find the patriotic hymns. You look in vain. They are not there. I’ll admit I have found a verse or two in the middle or at the close of some hymn. But there are no patriotic hymns indexed.<sup>35</sup>

It was simply not the Lutheran tradition to sing hymns that praised the state. Hymns were meant to be beautiful doctrinally sound praises to the Lord. The lack of patriotic hymns did not mean the Wisconsin Synod was anti-America. Rather, our hymns reflected the Christo-centricity of our

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<sup>33</sup> Gurgel, 72,73.

<sup>34</sup> “Was alles den Pastoren zugemutet wird!” *Gemeindeblatt*, 52:13 1 July 1917: 200.

<sup>35</sup> W.C. Rehwaldt to Chas. W. Henky, Public Director, 13 December 1918, 103.L.9.2F, CPS Records.

worship. However, in the times and climate of WWI, everything not patriotic was seen as a threat.

There are many other examples of persecution of Wisconsin Synod Lutherans during WWI. Many stories could be included of individual situations and experiences. Many investigations were conducted. Many reports were written. And many lives were changed. However, I have sought to give you a general picture of the persecution and oppression of German Americans during WWI. Hopefully we are now able to compare and contrast the climate of America and reaction to the climate of WWII by Wisconsin Synod Lutherans. What changes were made to prevent suspicion? Were there shifts in the cultural climate? Why was persecution of Wisconsin Synod Lutherans almost non-existent in WWII?

## PART II: THE INTER-WAR YEARS

### **The Change from German to English**

The first and perhaps most important change that occurred before, during, and after WWI was the switch from the German to the English language. The language change came about for more than one reason. In a paper titled *Language Changes – An Oral History*, Kerry Kronebusch and Gary Tryggstad interviewed nine elderly Wisconsin Synod members who lived through WWI and the language transition. From their interviews with these members they came up with the following reasons for the language change.

The basic reasons then for the change of languages according to these individuals were as follows: 1) more and more people were comfortable with or only knew English, 2) fewer and fewer pastors were capable of preaching well in German, 3) distrust of a strong German heritage during the wars, 4) a need to do mission work to non-German speaking people and 5) marriage.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Kerry Kronebusch and Gary Tryggstad, *Language Changes – An Oral History*, (Seminary Essay File, May 17, 1985), 13.

This use of the German language could not have lasted forever. It was sustainable for a time because many German Lutherans lived in smaller rural communities where the majority of people spoke German. However, the most common language in America was English and the majority of the people spoke English. Wisconsin Synod Lutherans could not stay isolated forever. If they were going to reach out to Americans, they were going to need to learn English. English became part of the instruction in the home for some Wisconsin Synod Lutherans. This is evident from the interviews conducted by Kronebusch and Tryggstad. They write about a woman named Marie Schoknecht who was born in 1902 and grew up in a German household. “(Marie) also spoke both German and English in her home as she was growing up, so she had no problems understanding either language when she attended church and school.”<sup>37</sup>

A strong indication of the switch to English happened in Thiensville, Wisconsin. In 1931, Calvary Lutheran Church in Thiensville, WI was formed. The reason for the establishment of this congregation is interesting because there were four other confessional Lutheran churches within about 5 miles of Thiensville.<sup>38</sup> The formation of this congregation came about after the congregation of Trinity South Mequon chose to have their 1931 Easter Sunday service in German instead of English. Already in 1931, their custom was to hold English services on the first and third Sundays of the month. Easter in 1931 happened to fall on the first Sunday. This decision to hold the service in German angered many of the English-speaking people in the congregation. The decision was finally made to establish a congregation to reach out to the

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<sup>37</sup> Kronebusch and Tryggstad, 11.

<sup>38</sup> Paul Lindloff, *The Reasoning Behind Beginning a Congregation in Thiensville with Several Lutheran Churches Already Existing in the Area*. (Seminary Essay File, April 18, 1989), 2,3.

English speakers in the Thiensville area. “On May 3, 1931 the solution to serving the English mission in the area of Thiensville was set in motion.”<sup>39</sup> Thus, Calvary was created as an English mission.

Slowly, Wisconsin Synod members at every level were becoming more Americanized. Children were learning English at home and in School. The new generation of pastors was also becoming more comfortable with English. Professor J. P. Meyer reflected upon the new seminary students in 1940 and his thoughts are recorded in *Jars of Clay*.

Especially since the first World War the transition of our churches to the use of the English language was greatly accelerated, the repercussions of which are ever more keenly felt in the Seminary. The ability of our student to express themselves fluently in German is rapidly declining. From year to year the new classes are in this respect inferior to the preceding classes. This is a decided loss, since from the time of the Reformation rich treasures of sound theology have been stored in the German language.<sup>40</sup>

While the older generation was not fond of the switch away from German, there was no slowing the tide. The persecution experienced by Wisconsin Synod Lutherans during WWI certainly pressured people of German descent to be more American. “The long-range benefit was that the long-overdue transition from German to English was speeded up in World War I.”<sup>41</sup> WWI was not what started this transition. The Wisconsin Synod had begun publishing the *Northwestern Lutheran*, an English publication, already in 1914.<sup>42</sup> But, WWI certainly made this transition move more quickly than it would have if America had not been involved in a war against Germany.

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<sup>39</sup> Paul Lindloff, 7.

<sup>40</sup> John M. Brenner and Peter M. Prange, *Jars of Clay: A History of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary 1863-2013* (Mequon: Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Press, 2013), 167.

<sup>41</sup> Edward C. Fredrich, *The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1992), 139.

<sup>42</sup> Fredrich, 139.

With a second war on the horizon, this change became even more necessary. Perhaps, rumblings of more war in Europe put more pressure on German Americans to become more American and less German. “Nevertheless the move toward English was seen as inevitable, a shift that would only be hastened with America’s entry into the Second World War.”<sup>43</sup>

It is impossible to pinpoint the exact year that the Wisconsin Synod officially became mostly English speaking. This has not stopped some from trying to estimate when the balance officially tipped to the side of English. “If pressed for a specific date for the transition, the writer would suggest the years 1929-1930. It was then, he estimates, that the Wisconsin Synod ceased being a German and became an English synod.”<sup>44</sup>

The language change that took place in the years between the wars is a monumental makeover to the appearance of our synod. Our use of the German language during WWI was perhaps the largest magnet for suspicion and unwanted attention. But by the time Hitler rose to power in Germany, and certainly by the time the United States entered WWII, the majority of Wisconsin Synod Lutherans had shed their German exteriors. This Americanization is, perhaps, the greatest reason that persecution of Wisconsin Synod Lutherans was almost non-existent. Wisconsin Synod Lutherans were not seen as German Lutherans anymore. To the untrained eye, they were simply Lutherans.

### **The Wisconsin Synod Publications During the Inter-War Years**

On June 28, 1919, the *Treaty of Versailles* brought WWI to an end. But this treaty was not simply a declaration of cease fire. This treaty forced Germany to take responsibility for the

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<sup>43</sup> Brenner and Prange, 167.

<sup>44</sup> Fredrich, 139.

war and to make payment as reparation. Germany was forced to pay 132 billion marks for the damages they caused during the war. This was a devastating blow to an already declining economy in Germany. Even after experiencing harsh persecution in America for being of German heritage during WWI, Wisconsin Synod Lutherans were not happy about the price Germany had to pay. In the early twentieth century, *The Black and Red* was still being published. *The Black and Red*<sup>45</sup> was a periodical produced by students at Northwestern College, one of our synod's worker-training schools. Here is what one student wrote about Germany's sentencing after the war:

Being aware of her present impotence, the victorious Entente (the Allied powers) has swooped down like a hawk upon its victim and has grasped the opportunity to prey upon it. Recognizing no restraint, devoid of shame, the Entente has shackled the German people hand and foot, and drunk with victory and with the animal lust of the primitive savage, it desires to transform a great historic and civilized class of people into eternal slaves.<sup>46</sup>

If the Wisconsin Synod was trying to seem less German or less sympathetic with the German nation in order to avoid further persecution, this would not have helped. These were harsh words aimed at the Allied powers, in favor of the German people. As a synod, we still had strong ties to our German heritage and the German nation. It should be noted, however, that *The Black and Red* was published in English.

As the 1920s moved forward, *The Black and Red* was still producing pro-German writings. Not only were there pro-German articles, but there were also articles which could have been perceived as unpatriotic. In 1920, W. M. Heidtke wrote in *The Black and Red* concerning America's political situation:

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<sup>45</sup> The Black and Red was not the official voice of the Wisconsin Synod.

<sup>46</sup> "The Future of the German People," *The Black and Red*, Vol XXIII, Number 5, October 1919: 237.

If our politicians would have directed the affairs of the nation during its time of war, grave consequences would have arisen for our nation that could probably not be remedied for a long time... The time is ripe for reform. Who then is able to bring about the reform? The voter.... Voters of America, awake! Our country is passing through a crisis unparalleled in its history. The voter must determine whether the change shall be for better or for still worse.<sup>47</sup>

Here, we see a clear example of a Wisconsin Synod Lutheran calling for political reform. Pro-German sentiment extended beyond the political realm. In May of the same year, another article was written in *The Black and Red* promoting Classic German music over American music. “The music of German composers was considered the best in Europe for three centuries, and no concert was given without at least one German composition in the program.”<sup>48</sup> The author goes on to express his distaste with American music.

Why doesn't some American genius bring an animal orchestra on the stage? The tin can tied to the tail of a dog would be an excellent piano accompaniment to the night cry of a cat, imitating a clarinet, to the crowing of a rooster, a perfect cornet, to the bleating of a sheep, a living trombone, to the barking of dogs and grunting of pigs, an animated drum corps. The public would be enraptured, the newspapers would devote the first page to a description of this new music, and it would be the standard of the future.<sup>49</sup>

There are plenty of examples in *The Black and Red* which point to the Wisconsin Synod's connection to Germany. However, there were a few things published in this periodical which would lead the reader to believe that the Wisconsin Synod had Americanized. One of these has already been mentioned, that *The Black and Red* was published in English. The second important factor was the use of pronouns. Already, in 1921, an article in *The Black and Red* described the arms race which took place between England, Japan, and the United States. Here is

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<sup>47</sup> W. M. Heidtke, “Our Politicians,” *The Black and Red*, Vol. XXIII, Number 8, January 1920: 332, 333.

<sup>48</sup> J. *The Black and Red*. Vol. XXIV, Number 2, May 1920: 57.

<sup>49</sup> J. *The Black and Red*. Vol. XXIV, Number 2, May 1920: 57.

the language the author used: “America is a nation of no mean influence in the world. We succeeded in ending the Russo-Japanese war in 1905; it was through our intervention that the world war was finally terminated.”<sup>50</sup> Notice the inclusive pronouns. Perhaps this is evidence of a lesson learned in WWI. It was no small thing for the Wisconsin Synod to state in writing that we considered ourselves to be American and not German.

As Hitler and the National Socialist Party rose to power in Germany in the early 1930s, news of the German political climate reached the United States. Forced to respond after accusations made by Dr. Bartholdy, in which he put the blame on the Lutheran church in Germany for the persecution of Jews, the Wisconsin Synod published an article in *The Northwestern Lutheran*. In this article, the author explains how the Lutheran churches in Germany, which were tied tightly to the National Socialists, are not strictly Lutheran. “The Doctor, of course, is speaking of the Protestant and Evangelical state churches of Germany. These state churches are not strictly Lutheran, as is well known.”<sup>51</sup>

This article made it clearly, publicly, that Wisconsin Synod Lutherans in America, did not support Hitler and the National Socialists. This article also presented a narrative which would continue in the pre-WWII years. Any information coming out of Europe would be hard to trust due to their propaganda and censorship.

In the face of the propaganda that has been spread in this country on the affairs of the present government of Germany, propaganda that is so readily believed here. We are not in a position to either affirm or deny these reports. May we venture, however, to maintain that the Lutheran church, historically considered, has never been a persecuting church and hence not a Jew-hating church. As our information of real conditions and their causes is rather inadequate and possibly somewhat colored, the safest thing for us seems to be to suspend judgment until we have fuller and more reliable data.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> V. W. “Disarmament,” *The Black and Red*, Vol. XXV, Number 3, 1921: 81.

<sup>51</sup> Z. “Hitler and Luther,” 132.

<sup>52</sup> Z. “Hitler and Luther,” 132.

While the Wisconsin Synod did not openly endorse Hitler and the National Socialists, neither did we fully condemn them and their politics. The Wisconsin Synod was content to sit back and wait for the situation in Germany to play out before casting any judgment. Dr. Bartholdy had called for a response from the churches in America to openly condemn the Nazis. The Wisconsin Synod was not ready to participate.

Meanwhile, while awaiting further developments, it might be well for us not to join in the prevalent hysteria. Appeals by leaders of the Lutheran churches of America to the so-called Lutheran churches of Germany might not only be rather out of place, but might produce a well merited snub from the churchmen over there. However much the church may be mixed up in politics in Germany and other European countries, it ill behooves us to appeal to any church to change the government policies of any land. We have had a bitter lesson on the sad evils falling upon a people that is living under a government much influenced by the church. Our warning in this case would be: Hands off!<sup>53</sup>

“Hands off” the Wisconsin Synod would remain. In September of 1933, the same year as the previously mentioned *Northwestern Lutheran* article, an article was published in *The Black and Red* titled *Germany’s Plight*. This article echoed the same thoughts as the article published five months earlier. “It has been rumored that Hitler is persecuting the Jews. Speaking loosely, this statement is perhaps true. However, we should not condemn him, since we are in no position to judge fairly; for the true facts of the situation in Germany are unknown to us.”<sup>54</sup> Articles like this could have had a potentially harmful effect on the Wisconsin Synod, especially as the situation in Germany developed and more information was brought to light.

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<sup>53</sup> Z. “Hitler and Luther,” 132.

<sup>54</sup> R. H. “Germany’s Plight,” *The Black and Red*, Vol. XXXVII, Number 4, September. 1933: 104.

What is most troubling is that the author of *Germany's Plight* goes on to partially defend Hitler's treatment of the Jews.

Hitler is persecuting, if we term boycott and imperative commands to leave the country "persecution", only that class of Jews which has base moral standards, in which category he places those whose influence on the people is indisputably degenerating, as moving-picture magnates, novelists and others, and also those Jews who are unpatriotic, who live like leeches without regard for that which sustains them – some bleed the people, many others hold responsible positions which should belong only to those who understand and love the German people.<sup>55</sup>

One might think that the Wisconsin Synod would swiftly move away from rhetoric like this. This was not necessarily the case.

Distrust of the American press in its reporting of events in Germany was very prevalent among Wisconsin Synod Lutherans in the years before WWII. This distrust can be seen in the article which was referenced previously concerning Dr. Bartholdy. But, perhaps the most glaring instance of distrust surrounded the events of June 30, 1934. It was on this date that Hitler ordered the purge of his enemies within the Nazi party. It has become famously known as the *Night of the Long Knives*. It is estimated that hundreds of people were murdered that night.<sup>56</sup> In an attempt to control the narrative, Dr. Joseph Goebbels issued a statement on a radio broadcast, in which he denounced the American and foreign press reports of the event. He called their reports, "lies, slander and misrepresentation of facts without a parallel in journalism."<sup>57</sup> Dr. Goebbels was the German Reich's Minister of Propaganda. So, who is to be trusted? Should the Wisconsin Synod trust the American and foreign press or the German Minister of Propaganda?

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<sup>55</sup> R. H. "Germany's Plight," 104.

<sup>56</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/event/Night-of-the-Long-Knives>

<sup>57</sup> J. Jenny, "Was Goebbels Wrong?" *The Northwestern Lutheran*, Vol 21, Number 16, August 5, 1934: 247.

It is in a situation like the Wisconsin Synod's reaction to the reporting of the *Night of the Long Knives*, that we can, perhaps, see our German heritage refusing to fade. In an article titled *Was Goebbels Wrong?*, which was published in *The Northwestern Lutheran*, the Wisconsin Synod position is made clear. We would rather trust the Minister of Propaganda.

Was Reich's Minister Goebbels right, when in his radio address he said, "I call you all to witness, that there have been cases of lies, slander and misinterpretation of facts, such as are almost without parallel in journalism"? We think he was. In support of this our candid opinion we add, the verdict on whether or not reports circulated by the foreign press about recent events in German are true primarily rests with the German people itself, not with foreign press agents, who apparently held themselves responsible for sending out news to nothing else save their own consciences.<sup>58</sup>

Not only did the author of this article put his trust in the German perspective of the events on June 30, 1934, but he also vehemently condemned the American press for their reports on the matter. "For the American and foreign press to condemn Hitler's quick actions in suppressing the revolt against the German government by force as being in violation of justice and humanity is to invite consequences of a terrific nature."<sup>59</sup> The author goes on to explain how WWI could have been avoided had similar swift action been taken in regards to a revolt and countless lives could have been saved. This article by J. Jenny, published in a Wisconsin Synod periodical, could even be correctly understood to support the actions of Hitler in his purge of the Nazi party.

But in the words of a Clarence Darrow, "Hitler is a dangerous man" say some. To suppress a revolt in his country he has killed 77 of his own people. Is such an act compatible with justice and humanity? they ask. We answer, such a conception of the case in question can only proceed from morbid sentimentality.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> J. Jenny. "Was Goebbels Wrong?" 248.

<sup>59</sup> J. Jenny. "Was Goebbels Wrong?" 248.

<sup>60</sup> J. Jenny. "Was Goebbels Wrong?" 248.

Of course, living almost ninety years after these events, we have a better understanding of what happened on the *Night of the Long Knives*. There is a certain amount of understanding we have for the opinions of people trying to discern what was happening in Germany from 3,000 miles and an ocean away. One author, in *The Northwestern Lutheran*, concedes this very point: “It is difficult for us on this side of the sea to form an opinion on what is going on over there. Ever since the World War we are slow to believe what is set before us for our consumption.”<sup>61</sup> However, one can certainly see how an article like this could prove to be problematic once the full extent of the Nazi crimes was made known. But it is clear from these early writings that at the beginning of Hitler’s rise to power, Lutherans in the Wisconsin Synod were certainly not opposed to Hitler. One could even argue that the Wisconsin Synod gave the new German government the benefit of the doubt. This may have been due to our German heritage. Why would people of German descent not want to see positive change or believe that positive change was taking place in Germany? This was the genuine hope for many Wisconsin Synod Lutherans, especially after the *Treaty of Versailles* which left the German people destitute.

This hope for positive change in Germany would continue to influence written opinion into the late 1930s. In 1938, Wisconsin Synod publications still sounded very much the same.

In political matter conceptions are yet more in error with the added factor of propaganda. Horrible things are told about Germany. Hitler and his staff are killing everybody. The German people are being ground under the heel of their dictator. Things are terrible. But where is the counter-revolution? People can stand only so much and they take things into their own hands again. Perhaps there is the other side, suppressed by propaganda. It may not be as dark as it is shown to us. It may be that the German people, demolished by the World War are being restored to a nation to be respected.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> G. “Bar Nazi Members,” *The Northwestern Lutheran*, Vol 23, Number 14, July 5, 1936: 215.

<sup>62</sup> W[illard].E.K[ehrberg]. “Facts, fancies, fallacies...,” *The Black and Red*, Vol. XXXXII, Number 2, May 1938: 51.

Even up to a year before Germany's invasion of Poland, Wisconsin Synod Lutherans were hopeful that Germany was on a path of betterment. This hope is made evident by the article above. In the view of Wisconsin Synod Lutherans, the German people had been through enough with WWI and the political and economic fallout caused by WWI. It was hard to believe that Germany could be the cause of another World War. However, history would not be so kind to the German nation. On the other hand, history would not repeat itself among Lutherans in America. The constant persecution and oppression prevalent in WWI would be almost nonexistent in WWII. Another reason for lack of persecution was the Wisconsin Synod reaction to WWII.

### PART III: WISCONSIN SYNOD LUTHERANS DURING WORLD WAR TWO

#### **Wisconsin Synod Reaction to News of War**

On September 1, 1939, Hitler and his forces invaded Poland showcasing the *Blitzkrieg* military strategy. WWII had begun. This time it was clear the Germans were the aggressors. However, news in the late 1930s traveled slowly. How would Wisconsin Synod Lutherans react to news that the German were at war again? How would they react to Germany's aggression? Perhaps a word to describe the Wisconsin Synod react at home was 'disbelief.' Concerning an article published in a Milwaukee newspaper, which cautioned against believing news from overseas, one *Northwestern Lutheran* author wrote:

We believe this notice to be very fair and sane advice. In fact, we believe the public press owes this unprejudiced explanation to all its readers. If all readers will heed this honest warning and read the "war news" knowing that much of it bears local color and much of it is *intended* to prejudice our minds against or in favor of one or the other countries now at war, it will help us to keep our mental balance and preserve us from that hysteria which marked the World War.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> W. J. S[chaefter]. *The Northwestern Lutheran*. Vol. 26. Number 24, November 19, 1939: 375.

There was a hesitancy in the Wisconsin Synod to believe any news coming from overseas which might have any sort of bias attached to it. I believe that the reluctance to believe this war news also stemmed from our German heritage as a synod. It is hard to believe that your motherland is at fault when the only news you receive comes from half the world away and is subject to propaganda. This was an understandable position that the Wisconsin Synod took. It is also important to remember that many in our synod still had ties to Germany. There were stronger ties to Germany in WWI. But, as a new generation emerged, ties began to weaken and disappear, but some still existed. The author of the previous *Northwestern Lutheran* article echoes this thought: “The sympathies of the Christian go out to all men and all nations, especially at such trying times, knowing full well that he has brethren in the faith in every trench and that tears and heartaches will be found wherever the devil has his work.”<sup>64</sup>

It was in December that the Wisconsin Synod finally received news from Poland and the church there about war events. In an article titled *News from Poland*, W. Bodamer informed the readers that the synod received three separate letters, one from a Pastor A. Lerle in Poland, one from a theology student at Berlin-Zehlendorf, and the third containing quotes from members of our church in Lodz, Poland.<sup>65</sup> This article is exceptionally interesting, because one may be able to see the reluctance of German Lutherans in America to condemn Germany’s actions and their invasion of Poland. In this article, Bodamer highlights the letter from Pastor A. Lerle, which describes the situation of the church members. “A number of the members of his congregation

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<sup>64</sup> S[chaefer], 375.

<sup>65</sup> W. Bodamer, “News from Poland,” *The Northwestern Lutheran*, Vol. 26, Number 25, December 3, 1939: 394.

were carried off. God graciously freed them from the hands of their captors, however, and granted them a safe return to their homes and loved ones.”<sup>66</sup> Notice that Bodamer writes “from the hands of their *captors*,” not from the hands of the *Germans*.

Though Wisconsin Synod Lutherans were slow to believe news coming out of Europe, especially news which was unfavorable toward Germany, never did the Wisconsin Synod align themselves with the National Socialist Party in Germany. We may have been slow to condemn, but when the situation turned into another war, Wisconsin Synod Lutherans showed themselves to be American, through and through.

### **Patriotic Wisconsin Synod Lutherans**

Beginning in 1941, a shift occurred in the tone and presentation of Wisconsin Synod publications. The call to arms had been sounded throughout the United States after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Men were being drafted for a new war. Already on September 16, 1940, the United States had issued the *Selective Training and Service Act*, which “required all men between the ages of eighteen and sixty-five be registered for military service.”<sup>67</sup> Wisconsin Synod Lutherans were also called upon to take up arms to defend their country. The men of our synod would go on to serve honorably during the war. The shift that occurred in the publications of the Wisconsin Synod was in support of boys who served.

In the 1941 issue of *The Northwestern Lutheran*, a flyer was included from the Spiritual Welfare Commission. The contents of this flyer included a plea from the Executive Secretary of

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<sup>66</sup> Bodamer, “News from Poland,” 394.

<sup>67</sup> Erwin E. Kowalke, *Centennial Story: Northwestern College, 1865-1965*, (Milwaukee: Northwestern 1965), 196.

the Spiritual Welfare Commission, asking pastors to make sure all of the men from their congregations serving in the armed forces had filed the proper documents with the Spiritual Welfare Commission. That way the men who were serving could be sent supportive spiritual literature. Not only was this a letter supporting the men in the armed forces but there was another important graphic on the page. In the top left corner of the document was a cross. But, on the top right, there was an American flag.<sup>68</sup>

Such a patriotic symbol would never have been seen in a publication during WWI. But the inclusion of an American flag shows how far the Wisconsin Synod had come in only 20 some years. Gone were the days of considering themselves to be a strictly German synod. The Wisconsin Synod now viewed themselves as American. And, perhaps this influenced others to see the Wisconsin Synod as being patriotic as well. The importance of this shift when considering the lack of German Lutheran persecution in America during WWII cannot be underestimated.

*The Northwestern Lutheran* was not the only publication to show this shift to patriotic symbols either. In 1943, a letter was published in *The Black and Red* containing a message from a young man who used to be a student at *Northwestern College* before being called into service. In his letter, Pvt. Gale Vertz requested prayers from his classmates as he prepared for war. Beneath his letter on the same page was an American flag.<sup>69</sup>

The inclusion of an American flag was a patriotic gesture. However, the inclusion of a flag does not necessarily mean support of war efforts. There was a symbol that did imply support of the war effort and the symbol was printed in an issue of *The Black and Red*. In 1944, at the

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<sup>68</sup> E. R. Blakewell, *The Northwestern Lutheran*, Vol. 28, Number 25, December 14, 1941: 391.

<sup>69</sup> Pvt. Gale Vertz, *The Black and Red*, Vol XLVII, Number 4, September 9, 1943: 138.

bottom of the page of a list of *Northwestern College* students serving in the war, stood a symbol which read: “For Victory buy United States war bonds and stamps.”<sup>70</sup> A war support symbol would have been unheard of in Wisconsin Synod publications only 25 years earlier. There were so many Wisconsin Synod Lutherans who were vocal in their opposition to WWI. This was a significant reason for the persecution of Wisconsin Synod Lutherans during WWI. The lesson was learned. Changes were made. Vocal opposition to war efforts was nonexistent.

The war bonds stamp wasn't the end of the patriotic symbols. In 1945, *The Black and Red* included the obituary of Thomas Arnold Nickels who died in action fighting in Germany. Nickels had been a student at *Northwestern College* and he served in the Third Armored Division of the First Army.<sup>71</sup> At the bottom of the page containing his obituary was another patriotic sign. This sign was of a large eagle and a banner which read “E Pluribus Unum.”<sup>72</sup>

The simple fact that Wisconsin Synod publications included stories of men who served and died fighting for their country overseas would only serve as a positive influence on the synod's public patriotic image. We have recorded the stories of many other men from the Wisconsin Synod who served in WWII.

### **The Draft and Chaplaincy Issues**

In May of 1941, over six months before Japan would bomb Pearl harbor and bring the United States into WWII, an article was published in *The Black and Red* addressing the draft issue. According to the *Selective Training and Service Act of 1941* students enrolled at a

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<sup>70</sup> *The Black and Red*, Vol XLVII, Number 8, January 1944: 268.

<sup>71</sup> F. K. *The Black and Red*. Vol XLIX, Number 2, April 1945: 59.

<sup>72</sup> F. K., 59.

Theological Seminary or a Divinity School received temporary deferment to fourth class draft status.<sup>73</sup> The article is titled *Conscientious or Objectors?*. The author explores the question that was the center of the New Ulm incident in WWI. What is the proper Lutheran reaction to being drafted? As a citizen of the United States, a Lutheran cannot ignore a summons from the government. “When Uncle Sam calls, we can’t simply toss *that* notice into the waste basket and forget about it.”<sup>74</sup> The author goes on to explain that Wisconsin Synod Lutherans certainly must obey the authorities, but they are also able to take advantage of the written laws in our country.

According to the *Selective Training and Service Act*, divinity school students were exempt from military service. The Seminary students in Mequon and the college students at Northwestern College fit into the category of attending a divinity school and, therefore, would be classified as fourth class draft status. The *Selective Training and Service Act of 1941* would help to keep many of the Wisconsin Synod students at home during WWII. There was nothing wrong with taking advantage of said law. “Anyone who, in all sincerity, is here for ministerial preparation need not have qualms of conscience over asking deferment. The law is wholly on our side; why should not *we* avail ourselves of it?”<sup>75</sup>

There were some hiccups during WWII concerning draft status classification, however. “This exemption applied, however, only to the Junior and Senior classes at Northwestern College, while the entire student body at the Seminary was exempt.”<sup>76</sup> Professor Kowalke

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<sup>73</sup> R[obert]. W. S[teffenhagen]. “Conscientious or Objectors?” *The Black and Red*, Vol. XLV, Number 2, May 1941: 58.

<sup>74</sup> S[teffenhagen], 58.

<sup>75</sup> S[teffenhagen], 59.

<sup>76</sup> Daniel Sargent, *The Seminary, Northwestern College and the Draft During World War II*, (Seminary Essay file, 1988), 2.

referenced a few instances where exempt status was not able to be attained when he wrote, “in all but three instances it was possible to secure exemption from service of those who were taking the regular courses with the intention of becoming pastors.”<sup>77</sup> There were also a few cases where a student would somehow end up being registered as 1A and not 4D. This was cause for concern and had to be cleared up by the president of the synod, John O. Brenner, with the draft board.

One example of President Brenner stepping forward to resolve a draft issue was the case of Kenneth Otto. Kenneth Otto was a Wisconsin Synod teacher at St. John’s Evangelical School in Cedar Mills, Minnesota. Mr. Otto was given the draft classification of 1A. President Brenner wrote to the Selective Straining and Service System explaining that Mr. Otto attended one of our “divinity schools” and was now a “regular minister of religion.”<sup>78</sup> President Brenner stepped in to speak on behalf of the Wisconsin Synod’s called workers on multiple occasions.

In order for the college students to retain their 4D draft status, Northwestern College and Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary had to exercise summer courses for their students. This happened after the Selective Service System sent a letter to the schools saying, “the office was not prepared to say that a student who had been exempted as a divinity student would lose exempt status by reason of an extended summer vacation.”<sup>79</sup> Essentially, this meant that the schools would have to keep their students in classes year round in order for them to keep their 4D status. For two years, 1944 and 1945, both the Seminary and the College held summer courses for the students.

It should also be noted that the Wisconsin Synod never encouraged men to disregard the summons from the government to service, if such a call did come. It was already shown that

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<sup>77</sup> Kowalke, 196.

<sup>78</sup> John O. Brenner, *Letter to General Lewis B. Hershey, Director of the Selective Training and Service System*. 1.

<sup>79</sup> Kowalke, 196.

articles were published in *The Black and Red* explaining that students could not throw away that notice. This was the consistent position of the Wisconsin Synod. “(The church) teaches Christians to be subject to the higher powers, to be loyal and law-abiding citizens, to serve and obey the government even if it means being drafted into the army and eventually going into battle.”<sup>80</sup>

There were, of course, students who did fight for their country. And there were those students who paid the ultimate price for their country. The loss of former students was felt at the college level.

On March 23, 1945, twenty Seniors graduated from Northwestern College. There were seventeen students who went on to study at the Seminary. This class was the one that suffered heavy losses by the way of enlistments at the beginning of the war. It was also sadly noted in the Synodical report on May 31, 1945, that four of the men who, but for the war would still have been students at Northwestern College, were casualties of the war. The school sent their sympathies and their prayers to the parents of Arthur Nordbly, Carl Upleger, Tom Nichols and John Masch.<sup>81</sup>

The majority of the students at the Wisconsin Synod’s synodical training schools remained safe here at home. This led to one of the few instances of persecution of Wisconsin Synod Lutheran’s during WWII, which will be discussed in the next section.

The other issue that is worth noting is the chaplaincy issue. During WWI, the Wisconsin Synod was happy to participate in the chaplaincy program of the United States military. However, after WWI, the United States chaplaincy program changed. The Wisconsin Synod devoted much time to looking at the chaplaincy issue. “Every look from the first in peacetime to those later on while World War II was raging found the government’s Military Chaplaincy a

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<sup>80</sup> I[m]. P. F[rey]. “The Church and War,” *The Northwestern Lutheran*: Vol. 28, Number 25, December 14, 1941: 388.

<sup>81</sup> Sargent, 6.

program that a confessional Lutheran church body would have to avoid. Among other doctrinal concerns regarding the call and church and ministry, it mandated a unionistic ministry, requiring ‘Protestant’ services and Christian burials for all.”<sup>82</sup> So, the Wisconsin Synod did not take part in the Military Chaplaincy during WWII. They did, however, still manage to care for the large number of souls who were serving in the armed forces by sending camp pastors and religious literature.

### **Limited Persecution of Wisconsin Synod Lutherans**

Imagine being the parents of a young man who is overseas fighting in the war, and you happen to look out your front door and see a man walking down the street, roughly the same age as your son. Why is he still here while your son is over there? That is enough to give someone pause or even enough to make someone very angry. This was the situation in Watertown, Wisconsin. The men who were attending Northwestern College were exempt from military service. The other young men of Watertown were not exempt. Naturally, people in Watertown did not look favorably on these young men who got to stay here while their sons had to fight overseas. “People quite naturally looked askance at our older boys when they appeared on the street and wondered why they were not in the army, but the boys were admonished to conduct themselves quietly at all times and not to attract unfavorable attention to themselves in any way.”<sup>83</sup> One student of Northwestern College wrote, “Fringeries which were abundantly present before the

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<sup>82</sup> Fredrich, 195.

<sup>83</sup> Kowalke, 196.

war have very little place in our schedule now. Since the eyes of the country jealously watch us, we must be ever on our guard against giving offense, ever mindful of our delicate position.”<sup>84</sup>

The situation at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary was much the same. The Seminary students were also exempt from military service and remained in the States. So, when the Seminary students would walk around Mequon, there were people who would “boo” the students as walked by.<sup>85</sup>

This was one of only two forms of persecution of Wisconsin Synod Lutherans during WWII. WWI was overflowing with different instances and types of persecution. There was no easy way to overcome the oppression in WWI. In WWII, to avoid persecution, students were simply told to keep a low profile. It is a striking contrast which is highlight further by the next example of persecution.

The only other instance of persecution that I found comes from Lansing, Michigan. A member of Emmanuel Lutheran Church in Lansing informed me that the police were called to the church during WWII. They were called because someone happened to peek into the church basement windows while a voters meeting was going on. Whoever looked in saw men raising their hands and though they were performing the Nazi salute. Of course, this was a misunderstanding. I was also informed that after this incident, the church installed opaque windows.<sup>86</sup>

After careful research, this was all I could find by way of persecution of Wisconsin Synod Lutherans during WWII. Those were two fairly easy problems to deal with. One required

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<sup>84</sup> J. P. S. “The Lord Hath Dealt Kindly With Us,” *The Black and Red*, Vol. XLVII, Number 5, October 1943: 165.

<sup>85</sup> Professor John Brenner, 2019.

<sup>86</sup> E-mail communication from Mary Black Junttonen

College and Seminary students to keep their heads down and the other required a fresh window installation. It is clear that oppression of German Lutherans in America during WWII was miniscule compared to the oppression experienced during WWI.

### **Separation of Church and State**

There are a few more reasons worth mentioning that help explain the lack of persecution. The first has to do with the separation of church and state. This paper has previously mentioned that, during WWI, the government tried to impose patriotic sermon texts on churches in an effort to have one united home front. The churches had the best standing in the communities, which made them the perfect tool for the governments purpose. It was also already mentioned that the Wisconsin Synod refused to participate in the promotion of the war efforts in church functions. This position would remain the same all the way through WWII.

It appears that sometime between the wars opinion on the church helping the government by supporting war efforts shifted. The separation of church and state over war issues was no longer an idea unique to Wisconsin Synod Lutherans. In 1941, *The Northwestern Lutheran* featured a quote from Baptist pastor Rev. Charles A. Carman:

(He) is quoted as saying that the church would not be ‘stampeded into becoming a recruiting agency or a mouthpiece for war morale. Churches became so emotionally involved in the World War that they devoted themselves to preaching war and drumming up enlistments. I believe that the trend of pastors today is definitely against this. They are concentration on a solid foundation of faith to help people endure the strain of war. Certainly the church should not be a mouthpiece for war morale. Government agencies would like to have the pulpit for a loudspeaker and send out the steady stream of propaganda. Most pastors see that it all ends up in the waste basket.’<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> F[rey], 388.

At some point, perhaps the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the tide had turned in favor of Wisconsin Synod ideology. At this point, it is worth revisiting a quote from Stephen Gurgel: “Also, unlike the Second World War, where the attack on Pearl Harbor roused the American nation, (President) Wilson felt extreme pressure to cultivate—even manufacture— public opinion.”<sup>88</sup> The government no longer needed to manufacture public opinion to support the war. Everyone was of the opinion that something had to be done after Pearl Harbor. The government did not need the help of the churches to persuade people to become involved in the war effort. The church did not feel a need to assist the government in the furthering of their cause. This fit the Wisconsin Synod position much more comfortably than the position in WWI, where churches went out of their way to carry out the message of the state.

The Wisconsin Synod position is and always will be that there is a separation between the church and state. We call this the doctrine of the two kingdoms. This doctrine was summarized and preached again and again in different periodicals and publications of the Wisconsin Synod during WWII. In the *Northwestern Lutheran*, the separation of church and state was stated clearly. “The church has nothing to do with political matters. The weapons of its warfare are not carnal. Its calling is a spiritual one. It is to preach the Gospel, to proclaim the forgiveness of sins in Christ Jesus.”<sup>89</sup>

The message that the Wisconsin Synod would make clear was that it is the government’s role to operate in the physical kingdom and the church’s job to operate in the spiritual kingdom. It is the church’s job to prepare men for the ministry. It is the government’s job to prepare men

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<sup>88</sup> Gurgel, 46.

<sup>89</sup> F[rey]. 388.

for war. In the opening service of the 1943-44 school year at Northwestern College, Professor Kowalke gave this address.

In these trying times in which our country has “gone all out” for victory and needs and demands everyone’s efforts, our young men at our colleges may be troubled in mind about the part they are playing toward this end. People may look askance and with suspicion at them and may even call them slakers[sic] and say so openly. There is a danger in this. The Spirit might be quenched: the Spirit who moved them to enroll in this school established to prepare men for the ministry. Our nation and the world that will survive this war will need them and their services after the war. The world and our nation will need the gospel of Jesus Christ. This they will be prepared to bring them.<sup>90</sup>

These publications are very helpful in understanding our synod’s position on the separation of church and state. But, perhaps the most helpful piece of information which aids in our understanding of this issue comes from the president of the Wisconsin Synod during WWII, John O. Brenner.

In June of 1942, President Brenner received a letter from the Office of Civilian Defense. This letter spoke about the war effort and how “the war job” is too big a task for one single organization to take on. The government was asking for help from the church bodies in the war effort. Specifically, they asked “that you urge the nationwide membership of your church to volunteer their services to defense councils wherever they live and to cooperate with defense councils in strengthening their communities.”<sup>91</sup> Assistant Director Jonathan Daniels also asked if President Brenner “could secure reports of the activities which your local churches are now carrying on in cooperation with their defense councils in the committees where they are located?”<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Sargent, 4.

<sup>91</sup> Jonathan Daniels, Letter to President John Brenner, July 23, 1942, 1.

<sup>92</sup> Jonathan Daniels, 2.

In response to the letter from the Office of Civilian Defense, President Brenner replied with a letter, explaining that a discussion about the separation of church and state was needed. In fact, President Brenner was even visited by a government official, Mr. Maynard L. Cassady, and they discussed this very issue. Apparently, during their discussions, Mr. Maynard suggested that President Brenner write down a statement of the Wisconsin Synod doctrine on the separation of church and state. What followed was a four-page explanation of our practice.

How President Brenner began this statement is important for the purpose of this paper.

We Lutherans yield to no one in our appreciation of and thankfulness for the blessings we are enjoying under the Constitution of our Country, especially that of the separation of Church and State, with the consequent freedom of the citizen to worship God according to the dictates of his conscience. Our Country is dear to us particularly as the land in which the Church can pursue its God-assigned task without interference on the part of the civil government.<sup>93</sup>

One notices that President Brenner makes it clear that the Wisconsin Synod is a part of this country. He used the phrase “our country” multiple times. President Brenner went on to explain in detail the doctrine of the two kingdoms. He also gave information concerning the Spiritual Welfare Commission. Already, in 1942, the Spiritual Welfare commission was providing spiritual literature to between 6000 and 7000 of our members in the armed forces.

In this long letter, it is hard to pick a paragraph which summarizes the content of the entire letter. But, after mentioning the goal of the government to make the people “war-minded,” President Brenner makes this statement:

To these endeavors of the government the Church cannot lend itself, just as little as it can permit itself to be drawn into other political or economic movements. Divinely commissioned, it cannot become an agency of any government. No matter what conditions may obtain, the Church must remain within its calling and strive in a single-minded manner for its Scriptural objective, the glory of God and the salvation of souls,

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<sup>93</sup> John O. Brenner. Letter to the Office of Civilian Defense. November 2, 1942, 1,2.

while the civil government deals with its citizens, irrespective of their religious convictions.

This is our American way. In public affairs we meet as individuals on the common grounds of our citizenship leaving all of our private interests aside.<sup>94</sup>

While this may not have been exactly what the government wanted to hear, direct communication with the United States government cannot go overlooked. This was a unique situation where the president of our Synod communicated the doctrine and practice of our church to the United States government. President Brenner specifically stated that the Wisconsin Synod was American. Any suspicion that members of the Wisconsin Synod might be German sympathizers would be hard to find after such communication.

Not only were President Brenner's letters helpful in establishing the Wisconsin Synod as a patriotic synod, but other writings served to further the same goal. We have already mentioned the patriotic symbols in *The Black and Red*. There were also patriotic writings in *The Northwestern Lutheran*. In 1942, one author wrote:

Now that America has entered the war the word "patriotism" will be on the lips of our people. The government has the divine right to expect the support and the loyalty of all its citizens. This is especially true in emergencies. This means, of course, that under *all conditions* they will abide by the laws of the nation and observe them – not only the letter but the spirit of the laws. Many forget that this is the true mark of patriotism.<sup>95</sup>

The Wisconsin Synod was ready to follow the laws on the nation. The Wisconsin Synod was ready to serve their country with military service. The Wisconsin Synod was ready to serve here at home.

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<sup>94</sup> Brenner, 4.

<sup>95</sup> W. J. S[chaefter]. "Whose is the Guilt?" *The Northwestern Lutheran*, Vol. 29, Number 1, January 11, 1942: 3.

### The Wisconsin Synod War Effort

Fredrich states in his book, *The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans*, that some 22,000 members of the Wisconsin Synod served in the armed forces during WWII.<sup>96</sup> This is an impressive number. But this number does not include all of the men and women of the Wisconsin Synod who served their country by participating in different government initiatives at home. Wisconsin Synod Lutherans did participate in the war effort at home and their efforts were recorded.

In a previous section, we saw the promotions in *The Black and Red* for the purchasing of war bonds. In a 1942 article, Wilbert Gawrisch asked for a different kind of support from the Lutherans. Gawrisch wrote, “Our government is asking all of us to do our part. Some of us it asks to go to the far corners of the world to fight for the cause of freedom. Those of us who remain at home can help toward victory by buying defense bonds and stamps. All of us will have to get along without certain things which in our modern life have become almost necessities.”<sup>97</sup> Gawrisch goes on to talk about how the Lutherans can continue to support the war effort by conserving rubber. At the end of his article he makes this important statement: “Our country needs the full cooperation of all of us, its citizens, to bring this war to a speedy, successful close.”<sup>98</sup> It is evident from this article that Wisconsin Synod Lutherans were more than happy to participate in the programs of the government to help bring peace to our nation.

Professor Kowalke makes a similar observation in his book. He writes, “War stamps, rationing of food and materials, registrations, draft, suspense... and steady application to work became the order of the day.”<sup>99</sup> The Wisconsin Synod’s participation in the war effort during

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<sup>96</sup> Fredrich, 194.

<sup>97</sup> Wilbert Gawrisch, *The Northwestern Lutheran*, (March 1942), 322.

<sup>98</sup> Gawrisch, 323.

<sup>99</sup> Kowalke, 197, 198.

WWII was a striking contrast to the outspoken dissention of our synod during WWI. The willingness to help bring peace was certainly an important reason for why there was no persecution of Wisconsin Synod Lutherans during WWII.

### **Other Relief Efforts in Europe after the war**

In August of 1945, *The Black and Red* published an issue with a cannon and an American flag on the front cover. The title read “Cease Firing!”<sup>100</sup> There was finally peace in the world. “Six o’clock P. M., Tuesday, August 14, 1945 was the moment we all had been awaiting for over three and one-half years. Japan surrendered. The war was over.”<sup>101</sup> The long-awaited day was finally here. The horrific war had come to an end. There were still details about the war which would soon be discovered that would make people realize just how horrific it really was. But now that the war was over, the humanitarian relief effort began.

The Wisconsin Synod would have a large role in the humanitarian aid after the conclusion of WWII. Already in March of 1946, the Committee of Relief for War-Sufferers (CRWS) released a statement asking for congregations to start to gather relief funds and supplies to send over to Europe.<sup>102</sup> In April of 1946, the CRWS held a meeting. In this meeting, it was decided that the Committee would send two men to Europe, specifically Poland, to make contact with the pastors there who were in fellowship with the Wisconsin Synod.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> “Cease Firing!” *The Black and Red*, Vol XLIX, Number 5, August 1945.

<sup>101</sup> “Peace...,” *The Black and Red*, Vol XLIX, Number 5, August 1945: 134.

<sup>102</sup> Statement from the CRWS, March 1946.

<sup>103</sup> Notes from the Special meeting of Committee on Relief for War-Sufferers, April 8<sup>th</sup>, 1946.

When the CRWS met again on August 22, 1946, the financial secretary reported that collections for relief totaled \$91,544.98. “\$5,000 was appropriated for the purpose of foodstuffs to be channeled through Lutheran World Relief.”<sup>104</sup> In December of that same year, the CRWS released a report which pleaded for the relief efforts to continue. Primarily, our synod’s relief efforts were focused among our Polish brethren in the faith. As of December of 1946, there were reportedly 740 souls in Poland which had yet to be addressed.<sup>105</sup> “There must be no let-down in our efforts, if we are to continue our program at the pace which it holds at present.”<sup>106</sup>

It is important to note that our initial war-sufferer relief efforts were focused on those in Poland who had been victims of German cruelty. This helped to further distance the Wisconsin Synod from any suspicion of German sympathy.

### **Conclusion**

After careful study of the treatment of Wisconsin Synod Lutherans of German heritage in WWI and WWII, it is clear that there is a night and day difference between the two wars. WWI was a very trying times for German Lutherans in America. WWII did not come close to the same level of oppression. This can be explained by the reasons mentioned in this paper. The things which kept the Wisconsin Synod from oppression during WWII were the language change, our publications before and during the war, our clear communication with the government about the doctrine of the two kingdoms, our synod’s participation in the war effort at home, and our war

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<sup>104</sup> Minutes of Meeting – CRWS, Plymouth, MI, August 22, 1946.

<sup>105</sup> CRWS, Bulletin No. 11, December 1946.

<sup>106</sup> CRWS, Bulletin No. 11.

relief efforts. Simply put, the Wisconsin Synod had Americanized. We no longer considered ourselves to be primarily German. We were an American Synod.

There is one other thing worth mentioning, and it is perhaps the most important piece to this puzzle. God extended his protecting hand over the Wisconsin Synod during one of this world's foremost tragedies. One student from Northwestern College reflected on this very thought. "We are indeed thankful to God for bringing the worst of all wars to a successful conclusion. We know that human nature does not change, that wars and rumors of wars will not cease as long as this world endures, but we are thankful that the world is at peace, and we pray that this peace be of long endurance."<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> *The Black and Red*. Vol XLIX, Number 5, August 1945: 133.

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