



# Jehovah's Witnesses and the Third Reich: Sectarian Politics under Persecution

*By James Penton*

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## **Jehovah's Witnesses and the Third Reich: Sectarian Politics under Persecution** By James Penton

Since the end of World War II, leaders of the Jehovah's Witness movement in both Germany and elsewhere have steadfastly argued that Witnesses were united in their opposition to Nazism and did not collude with the Third Reich. Documents have been uncovered, however, that prove otherwise. Using materials from Witness archives, the U.S. State Department, Nazi files, and other sources, M. James Penton demonstrates that while many ordinary German Witnesses were brave in their opposition to Nazism, their leaders were quite prepared to support the Hitler government.

Penton begins his study with a close reading of the "Declaration of Facts" released by the Witnesses at a Berlin convention in June 1933. Witness leaders have called the document a protest against Nazi persecution, however closer examination shows it contained bitter attacks on Great Britain and the United States - jointly referred to as "the greatest and most oppressive empire on earth" - the League of Nations, big business, and above all, Jews, who are referred to as "the representatives of Satan the Devil."

It was later, in 1933 - when the Nazis would not accept Witness blandishments - that leader J.F. Rutherford called on Witnesses to seek martyrdom by carrying on a campaign of passive resistance. Many ultimately died in prisons and concentration camps, and postwar Witness leaders have attempted to use this fact to assert that Jehovah's Witnesses stood consistently against Nazism.

Drawing on his own Witness background and years of research on Witness history, Penton separates fact from fiction during this dark period.

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"For many years our organization has put forth an unselfish and persistent effort to do good to the people. Our American brethren have greatly assisted in the work in Germany, and with money freely contributed, and that at a time when all Germany was in dire distress. Now because it appears that Germany may soon be free from oppression and that the people may be lifted up, Satan, the great enemy, puts forth his endeavours to destroy that benevolent work in this land."

#### **About the Author**

**M. James Penton** is a professor emeritus of history and religious studies at the University of Lethbridge.

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