

Reverend Martin Niemöller

First they came for the Communists



[Reverend Martin Niemöller, 1892-1984](#)

**First they came for the communists,
and I didn't speak out because I wasn't a communist.**

**Then they came for the trade unionists,
and I didn't speak out because I wasn't a trade unionist.**

**Then they came for the Jews,
and I didn't speak out because I wasn't a Jew.**

**Then they came for me
and there was no one left to speak out for me.**

Reverend Martin Niemöller, First they came for the Communists, 1945

Taken from Iraq-war.ru, 17.03.2005, <http://www.iraq-war.ru/article/42748>

Did they come for the Jews first?

Als die Nazis die Kommunisten holten, habe ich geschwiegen; ich war ja kein Kommunist.
Als sie die Sozialdemokraten einsperrten, habe ich geschwiegen; ich war ja kein Sozialdemokrat.
Als sie die Gewerkschafter holten, habe ich geschwiegen; ich war ja kein Gewerkschafter.
Als sie die Juden holten, habe ich geschwiegen; ich war ja kein Jude.
Als sie mich holten, gab es keinen mehr, der protestieren konnte.

The Reverend Martin Niemöller, an inmate of the [Dachau bunker](#)



Photos from <http://www.martin-niemoeller-schule.de>

A short biography of Martin Niemoeller (1892-1984) can be found [here](#)

A submarine commander in World War I. After the war, he studied theology and was ordained in 1931, a protestant priest in Berlin. A German nationalist, Niemöller initially expressed hope that Hitler would bring about a "National Revival". His 1933 autobiography *From U-Boat to Pulpit* was a best-seller in Germany. By the autumn of 1934, Niemöller's faith in Hitler has collapsed. In 1937 he was arrested because of his outspoken sermons, and sent to Sachsenhausen concentration camp. In 1941 he was moved to Dachau, where he stayed until the end of the war.

Eight years in concentration camps have evidently changed Niemoeller for the rest of his life. The more I read about him the more I am convinced that he was sincere in his activity after the war.

Now I quote from [Pastor Niemöller page](#):

Everybody loves to quote Martin Niemöller's lines about moral failure in the face of the Holocaust: 'First they came for the Communists, but I was not a Communist, so I said nothing. Then they came for the Social Democrats, but I was not a Social Democrat, so I did nothing. Then came the trade unionists, but I was not a trade unionist. And then they came for the Jews, but I was not a Jew, so I did little. Then when they came for me, there was no one left to stand up for me.'

But interestingly, people use the quotation to imply different meanings – even altering it to suit their purpose. When Time magazine used the quotation, they moved the Jews to the first place and dropped both the communists and the social democrats. American Vice-President Al Gore likes the to quote the lines, but drops the trade unionists for good measure. Gore and Time also added Roman Catholics, who weren't on Niemöller's list at all. In the heavily Catholic city of Boston, Catholics were added to the quotation inscribed on its Holocaust memorial. The US Holocaust Museum drops the Communists but not the Social Democrats; other versions have added homosexuals.

Why history matters, DD Guttenplan, The Guardian, Saturday April 15, 2000:

'The Nazis did not come first for the Jews, as Peter Novick explains in his brilliant and provocative new book, The Holocaust in American Life, "First they came for the Communists" - a circumstance acknowledged by Niemöller, who continued, "but I

was not a Communist - so I said nothing. Then they came for the Social Democrats, but I was not a Social Democrat - so I did nothing. Then came the trade unionists, but I was not a trade unionist. And then they came for the Jews, but I was not a Jew - so I did little. Then when they came for me, there was no one left who could stand up for me." The Holocaust Museum in Washington DC is just one of those who, in Novick's phrase "prudently omits" Communists from Niemöller's homily.

But prudence and political calculation have influenced our knowledge of the Holocaust from the beginning...For a long time after the war, the fate of European Jewry was hardly mentioned, partly because, as the cartoonist Art Spiegelman's father says in Maus, his survivor's tale in cartoon format, "No one wants anyway to hear such stories," and partly because in camps liberated by British and American troops including Dachau, Belsen and Buchenwald, only a minority of the prisoners were Jews. In Ed Murrow's famous 1945 broadcast from Buchenwald the words Jew and Jewish are never spoken.

In her first book, Beyond Belief, Deborah Lipstadt (the historian sued for libel by David Irving) wrote that even when confronted by the evidence, many correspondents were reluctant to admit to themselves and their readers the reality of genocide. She attributes some reluctance to anti-Semitism. Novick, who teaches history at the University of Chicago, suggests a different reason for postwar reticence: with the realignment of the cold war, talk of the Holocaust was inimical to US interests. In 50s America few besides Communists shouted "Remember the six million!"

Below are some quotes of Rev. Niemöller, taken from <http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/GERniemoller.htm>

Martin Niemöller, statement at a press conference in Naples (5th June, 1945)

No honest man or woman in Germany feels responsible for these things. Good Germans took Nazism as a new religion. These people are shocked by the revelations which have shown that Nazism was not idealism, but a means to the performance of criminal acts...

In war a German feels bound to join the ranks without question. Three of my sons were called up. I could not hold back. I wrote from the concentration camp to Admiral Raeder, C. in C. of the Navy, asking to be allowed to return to the submarine

service or to do any other service in the Navy. I heard nothing for several months, and then a reply came, not from Raeder but from Keitel, head of the Wehrmacht. He thanked me, but regretted I could not be employed on active service.

Martin Niemöller, sermon (January, 1946)

We must openly declare that we are not innocent of the Nazi murders, of the murder of German communists, Poles, Jews, and the people in German-occupied countries. No doubt others made mistakes too, but the wave of crime started here and here it reached its highest peak. The guilt exists, there is no doubt about that - even if there were no other guilt than that of the six million clay urns containing the ashes of incinerated Jews from all over Europe. And this guilt lies heavily upon the German people and the German name, even upon Christendom. For in our world and in our name have these things been done.

Martin Niemöller, letter to Dr. Alfred Wiener (1956)

I have never concealed the fact... that I came from an anti-Semitic past and tradition... I ask only that you look at my life historically and take it as history. I believe that from 1933 I truly represented the Lutheran-Christian outlook on the Jewish question - as I revealed before the court - but that I returned home after eight years' imprisonment as a completely different person.

An extremely useful source is [Prof. Harold Marcuse](#) from UC Santa Barbara, who presents his continuing studies on Rev. Niemoeller famous phrase at his web-pages [here](#).

Asking three questions : *What did Niemoeller really say? Which groups did he name? In what order?*

Prof. Marcuse replies :

I still haven't been able to come up with a definitive answer to the first question, but do have some preliminary answers to the other two.

I recommend everybody with a scholar attitude (and perhaps a knowledge of German language) to visit Marcuse's pages which are perhaps the most extensive

online source on the question. Particularly the questions of Niemoeller's pre-war antisemitism, ardent German nationalism and anti-Communism are considered there to some detail.

Returning to the wording of the famous phrase I [quote](#) further

Franklin Littell, "First they came for the Communists..." in: Christian Ethics Today, vol. 3, no. 1 (February 1997); on-line version (updated May 2001).

Littell cites no sources. (According to Zerner, he personally heard MN say this in the 1940s.) Littell writes:

After the war, active in international church affairs, he made preaching trips across the United States. At that time he brought the message of concern for others, often driving the point home with a confession of his own blindness when the Nazi regime rounded up the communists, socialists, trade unionists, and, finally, the Jews. The quotation is now famous, but often in corrupted form."

In a recent bulletin of the Social Studies School Service, a 23" by 16 1/2" poster is advertised for \$4.95. It begins, "First they came for the Jews...." A beautiful new folder from Yad Vashem, featuring "The World Center for Teaching the SHOAH," has the Niemoeller statement on page 2 as the banner opening; it uses the same corrupted form. An educational video on skinheads and other racist extremists, produced by Jansen Associates, jumbles the sequence of Niemoeller's warning and adds "then they came for the Roman Catholics, and I didn't protest...." In other freely invented materials, we read "Then they came for the gays, and I didn't protest...."

The latter corruption of the text was never seen by Niemoeller: he died before homosexual exhibitionism became a public spectacle. But when we asked him years ago about the addition of the Roman Catholics, he said, "I never said it. They can take care of themselves." (Not particularly friendly, perhaps, remembered today in the modern climate of Catholic/ Protestant rapprochement; but the report has the virtue of telling the truth.) When asked about the re-arranged order, "First they came for the Jews...", he simply laughed and passed it off.

There is a more than pedantic point to insisting that the Niemoeller quotation be truthfully used, if at all. Through the texts corrupted to promote special interests, literally millions of school children and also adults are being taught lies about the Holocaust. The damage is not as serious, perhaps, as the steady infiltration of "Holocaust revision" (i.e., denial). But it does help to create an atmosphere of playing fast and loose with the facts through intellectually dishonest and self-

serving manipulation of the text.

Niemoeller knew the sequence of Nazi assault, because he was there. Any average student of the third Reich should be able to give the record accurately; it is a shocking display of professional incompetence when materials that are supposed to be vetted by specialists can be issued that are simply contrary to the record. Even if a corrupt text appears in print, whether published by an ignoramus or a special pleasure, the literate reader should catch the mistake.

As Martin Niemoeller gave the message, it was true to the facts. "They" didn't "come for the Catholics" any more than "they" came for the Protestants. The true historical sequence, which Niemoeller of course followed, was communists, socialists, trade unionists, and Jews. The assault on the Jews was the culmination of the Nazi dictatorship's ruthless elimination of targeted communities and individuals.

I agree with Prof. Marcuse's [opinion](#) : *I admire N. all the more because he had the stature to overcome the strong German nationalism, antisemitism, and anti-communism that he endorsed early in life. I do not know how much he overcame it emotionally, but in public life he certainly became a defender of Jews and Communists, for the rest of his life, often under the most trying circumstances.*

I believe that knowing the complicated truth does not diminish our respect for Martin Niemöller. He earned his right to be correctly quoted by his whole life.

related links : [Wikipedia](#), [Dachau concentration camp](#) .

Course: Anti-Imperialism, War and Peace

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