

REVIEWS

Confident Interpretations of Silence

David Conley Nelson. *Moroni and the Swastika: Mormons in Nazi Germany*. Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 2015. 432 pp. Hardcover: \$29.95. ISBN 978-0806146683.

Reviewed by Jonathan Green

David Conley Nelson's *Moroni and the Swastika*, although based on the author's doctoral dissertation, is not at heart a scholarly book. It is, rather, a polemical work dressed up in academic regalia. While its footnotes and bibliography give it the appearance of scholarly earnest, its primary commitment is not to placing events in historical context, or to giving a balanced account of primary sources and secondary literature, or to weighing the evidence for or against a given proposition, but to launching accusations against Mormons in Nazi Germany and LDS Church leaders in the United States.

Nelson advances two theses in this book. He first contends that, unlike other sects of comparable size in Nazi Germany, both individual Mormons and the Church as an institution enthusiastically collaborated with the Nazi government to an extent that subjects them to a degree of culpability for the crimes of Nazism; and second, that the Church has distorted postwar commemorations of the Nazi era in order to conceal its collaborationist past. According to Nelson, Mormons in Nazi Germany did not risk persecution or live in a climate of fear, due in part to the Mormons' and Nazis' appreciation of each other's similar worldviews. The Church's dealings with the Nazi government represented "pandering obedience to a godless, tyrannical state" that inflicted an enduring "mark on the Mormon psyche" and subjected postwar Mormon emigrants from Germany to "collective guilt" (343–44). Nelson's argument rests on a comparison with the experiences of other sects under Nazi rule, for which Nelson did not undertake original comparative research. He relies instead on the work of Christine Elizabeth King, principally her 1982 book *The Nazi State and the New Religions: Five Case Studies in Non-Conformity*, which compares the survival strategies employed by Mormons, Christian

Scientists, Seventh-day Adventists, the New Apostolic Church, and Jehovah's Witnesses.

Nelson's contrast of Mormon collaborationism over and against other sects' doing "only what was necessary to survive" (98) represents a gross distortion of King's research (who nevertheless provides a back-cover blurb for *Moroni and the Swastika*). In reading King, one discovers not Mormon uniqueness but rather a broad similarity in attempts at compromise and accommodation among all sects, with the important exception of the Jehovah's Witnesses, who chose the path of resistance and suffered mightily for it. After Hitler came to power in 1933, "All sought to explain and justify themselves to the Nazis, even the Witnesses, and all hoped that their expressions of good will could save them from trouble."¹ The four sects that avoided conflict with the government all emphasized that their members were law-abiding citizens and sought to point out areas of shared belief. While Nelson is indignant over the removal of Jewish terminology from Mormon devotional material, all the sects did so in accordance with Nazi policy; King finds that the Mormons were no better or worse than the others in their treatment of Jews. All the sects refrained from criticizing Nazi policies, and members of each sect made positive statements about the Nazi government to their co-religionists abroad. All the sects, but particularly the Mormons and Christian Scientists, benefitted from international visitors who demonstrated the sect's political influence. The survival strategies of each sect took particular forms: "Mormons continued to forge cultural links with the government, Adventists offered increased co-operation in the state charity and welfare schemes, and the New Apostolic Church organized church parades to incorporate the S.S. and S.A. uniforms and flags."² Nelson's silence regarding the New Apostolic Church is telling; in King's view, the New Apostolic Church was the most emphatic supporter of Nazism among the sects, but Nelson avoids any mention of it. In her conclusions about the five sects, King writes, "For all of them, the survival of their movement was of paramount importance. For all of them there were costs attached to their choice."³

King thus finds the Mormons unique not in their survival strategies but in their success at employing them so as to be largely ignored by the Nazis. For King, this result is surprising, as the Mormons, a millennial sect identified with the United States and represented by a visible missionary force, had much to fear in 1933 from a Nazi government that was hostile to religion in general and to smaller sects in particular. A sect's survival, King notes, did not depend on a rational analysis of a sect's teachings but rather on the personal views of top Nazi officials. The Mormons' survival, in King's view, remains to a certain extent mysterious. (King is, however, not a particularly astute student of Mormon history; in her view, the Nazis were impressed by the Church's "sophistication and wealth,"⁴ which she surmises took the form of substantial payments from the American Church into German welfare programs, for which no evidence survives and at a time when the financial condition of the Church in the United States was perilous.)

The substance of Nelson's first argument in *Moroni and the Swastika*, namely that comparison with other sects shows that Mormon attempts to secure good relations with the Nazi state went beyond the needs of survival, therefore rests on a dramatic misrepresentation of its only source of comparative evidence. Not only did the other sects undertake similar steps, but the personal and irrational nature of the outcome made it impossible to know when the efforts had been sufficient. Like King before him, Nelson is unable to document the reasoning behind the Nazi regime's indifference toward the Church. From the perspective of the present, many of the steps taken between 1933 and 1939 by various mission presidents and Church leaders to secure the good graces of Nazi leaders seem clumsy or even appalling, but one of them, or some set of them, or all of them combined made it possible for the Church to avoid most Nazi interference. Nelson is able to claim that Mormons in Nazi Germany did not live in a climate of fear, only by minimizing the several incidents of friction with the government that did occur, downplaying the effectiveness of the Gestapo, and entirely ignoring the statement made by a Gestapo officer to Hamburg district president Otto

Berndt following his three-day interrogation: “When we have this war behind us, when we have the time to devote to it and after we have eliminated the Jews, you Mormons are next!”⁵ Nelson asserts that Mormon accommodation of the Nazi government rested on ideological similarities between the two, but a broader and more balanced study would very likely find that the Church consistently pursued a strategy of political neutrality and good relations with governments of all kinds throughout the twentieth century as the modern Church stepped onto an international stage.

Nelson’s second thesis in *Moroni and the Swastika* is that the Church distorts how the experience of German Mormons during the Nazi period is remembered, using stories of resistance and suffering to hide a collaborationist reality. Nelson adopts the term “memory beacon” from the work of Douglas Peifer, but Nelson’s usage of the term is quite distinct from Peifer’s. For Peifer, memory beacons are “resonant symbols meaningful to the general public” that are rooted less in actual events than in the symbolic function of the past event in the popular imagination; as such, memory beacons are constructed and contested.⁶ In Nelson’s usage, however, the status of a memory beacon is inherent in the historical object itself, with no formation through public imagination required. Nelson refers to the teenaged Helmuth Hübener, who undertook an anti-Nazi propaganda campaign in Hamburg in 1943 and was executed for it, as a memory beacon not because of how he has been memorialized but because of the virtuousness of his resistance. Consequently, Nelson regards treatment of Hübener’s resistance in Mormon literature and by Mormon scholars as attempts to darken or distort Hübener’s “bright, redeeming light” (288) rather than as contributions to the construction of Hübener as a memory beacon in Peifer’s sense of the term. Nelson even maintains that Hübener is not as famous today as the Stauffenberg plot or the White Rose resistance group primarily because of manipulative efforts by the Church and individual Mormons (337), entirely overlooking that the German public imagination, where Mormon influence is negligible, is the primary site for commemorating resistance.

The most original contribution of *Moroni and the Swastika* is the chapter on Mormon authors' and scholars' interest in Hübener, beginning with a 1976 play by Brigham Young University professor Thomas Rogers. The play was well received on campus, but Church and university leaders prevented the play from touring. To a contemporary observer, this resistance is surprising, as one expects a community to celebrate its heroes and is puzzled by a reluctance to do so. Nelson points to various official and unofficial justifications, primary among them a desire to avoid offending Utah's German-American community, including former Nazis living among them. In this context, it is enlightening to consider another statement by Otto Berndt (and again not mentioned by Nelson) made in a letter to the *Improvement Era* in May 1969 (spelling as in original): "If you try to make a hero out of Helmuth Huebner, how do you classify those who did follow the laws of the land? Are they cowards? What would you call them?"⁷ As district president, Berndt had reigned in the worst excesses of Arthur Zander, Hübener's branch president and a vigorous supporter of Nazism, and Berndt insisted in his letter to the *Improvement Era* that he had always been opposed to Hitler and would have aided Hübener if he had known about what he and his friends were doing. But even Berndt, praised as courageous by Nelson, was opposed to making Hübener into a hero, not out of a concern for unreformed Nazis but in consideration of those who had found themselves trapped in a dilemma with no good solutions. Efforts to come to grips with the past such as the decades-long process of German *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* are not nearly as simple as picking out the heroes and the villains.

Distorted readings of comparative evidence and misapplied theoretical frameworks are not without precedent in scholarly publishing, but *Moroni and the Swastika* is further weakened by several flaws of workmanship, with the following intended as representative examples rather than an exhaustive list. Although several key points hinge on the precise wording of a German document, Nelson never provides the original text or identifies the source of his translations. For an excerpt from a biographical profile of Reed Smoot in *Der Stern*, the Church's German-language

periodical (which Nelson implausibly attributes to Smoot himself and incorrectly cites as the issue from 1 March rather than 15 November 1935), Nelson uses the same translation, including the same bracketed word and ellipses (218–19), as appears in Keele and Tobler’s article.⁸ If Nelson is using other scholars’ translations, he should acknowledge their work by citing it.

Nelson’s omitting the original text when discussing German documents is made all the more worrisome by frequent flaws concerning basic matters of German language, culture, and geography. The city is not “Bamburg” (80), but Bamberg; Bielefeld is not in the “northern Rhineland” (81), but in Westphalia; the Erzgebirge is not a town in Saxony (238), but a mountain range on the Czech border; and the Hansaviertel is not a “suburb” of Berlin (239), but a neighborhood near the middle of the city. The usual translation of “Schreibtischtäter” (113) is not “desk genocide,” but rather “desk offenders” or “desktop criminals”; in the context of the Holocaust, the word refers to the politicians and bureaucrats who set the machinery of genocide into motion and oversaw its logistics.

A particularly egregious example of misreading the German linguistic and historical context concerns the letter issued by the German-Austrian Mission in 1934 to acknowledge the dissolution of LDS Scout units in compliance with Nazi demands to either transfer the units to the Hitler Youth or to shut them down. (Nelson twice states [131, 255] that the Scouting program or a Scout troop had been surrendered to the Hitler Youth, but this is false; the troops were disbanded rather than transferred intact to the Nazi youth organization.) The letter, archived in English translation, uses the closing formula, “With the German salutation,” and Nelson thinks he has discovered a conspiracy to manipulate the historical record: “The letter’s closing appears to have been an after-the-fact, euphemistic redaction of mission historical records by sensitive LDS Church archivists. It is doubtful that the original letter contained the words, ‘With the German salutation,’” rather than closing with *Heil Hitler*. He interprets this use of *Heil Hitler* in the imagined original letter as signaling the Mormons’ capitulation to the Nazi regime in a second way (134). But this is madness: “With the German salutation” is a literal translation of *mit deutschem Gruß*, a widely used valediction

formula recommended by epistolary style guides of the 1930s. Interpreting archival documents is, of course, no simple matter, but the challenge must be met with the appropriate scholarly caution rather than by imagining the evidence to confirm one's theory, stretching the interpretation of the imagined facts beyond what even existing evidence would support, and conjuring up a case of archival malfeasance to explain the lack of evidence for one's thesis.

Speculation, invented motives, and confident interpretations of silence appear in *Moroni and the Swastika* with disconcerting regularity. While looking for a place to live in Berlin in August 1937, Ida Rees, wife of mission president Alfred Rees, noted in her diary that one residence they inspected belonged to a Jewish man, and they "would have to keep his housekeeper." Ida Rees made no further comment on the matter, but Nelson treats this very silence as evidence of her callous disregard for the plight of Jews in Nazi Germany, leaping to the deduction that the "need to employ his servant seemed to be a greater consideration than the owner's fate" (194). While this allegation is already based on an absence of evidence, Nelson then treats his deductive leap as evidence for a general rule of behavior: "A Mormon mission matron did not express concern for Jews in those days; such an intemperate observation could have hindered her husband's task." Nelson's capacity for speculation treats the emotional lives of historical figures as a blank canvas. During the controversy over the Hübener play at BYU, a reporter asked Thomas S. Monson about his thoughts on the matter, and Monson responded, with a sentiment similar to Otto Berndt's in his letter to the *Improvement Era* though less elegantly expressed, "Who knows what was right or wrong then? I don't know what we accomplish by dredging these things up and trying to sort them out." Nelson adds to this that Monson was "obviously irritated by what he considered to be the reporter's impertinent questioning" (327), a detail found nowhere in the sources Nelson cites; Monson's alleged irritation and offense at the reporter's impertinence appear to be fabrications on Nelson's part.

To give just one more example of the frequency and tenor of speculation in *Moroni and the Swastika*, Nelson notes, "No evidence indicates that the LDS Church directly influenced" Neal Chandler's

play based on the Hübener incident, *Appeal to a Lower Court*, which was published in *Sunstone* in December 1990 (331). Chandler, best known for his short story collection *Benediction*, dramatized the events of 1943 from the perspective of a fictive ecclesiastical leader who combines elements of both Arthur Zander and Otto Berndt. Seeking to explore universal implications and moral dilemmas, Chandler invented names for all his characters and eliminated the specific context of Nazi Germany. Nelson, however, sees Chandler's failure to mention Zander by name as evidence that the playwright sympathized with Zander and desired to protect the reputation of a recently-deceased Nazi. As there is no evidence that the Church directly asked Chandler to leave Zander unnamed, Nelson regards Chandler's play as evidence of a general unwillingness among Mormon authors to criticize ecclesiastical leaders (even a Nazi like Arthur Zander, who was also a former branch president). This passage is just one of many in *Moroni and the Swastika* that treats Mormon authors or scholars as inherently untrustworthy.

Pursuing a false hypothesis based on misconstrued evidence and misuse of a theoretical framework are not unknown in scholarly writing, and no book or dissertation is without its flaws. What finally pushes *Moroni and the Swastika* out of the scholarly mainstream and into the realm of polemic, however, is its willingness to indulge in sensationalistic language, up to and including the equation of Mormonism with Nazism. Nelson argues that Mormonism and Nazism shared a common worldview on the basis of Mormons' choosing to "obey the law when the law prescribed penalties severe enough to mandate obedience" (98–99). The logic behind that conclusion remains opaque, and yet Nelson sees in it justification for referring to the Scouting program as the "boot camp" that "drilled the future shock troops of Mormonism" (124), over whom a mission president serves as a "divinely anointed *Oberführer*" (187), a military rank found in the Nazi SA and SS but not in the regular army. Soldiers in the German Wehrmacht, on the other hand, are referred to as "Hitler's stripling warriors" (340). However poor in taste, these comparisons are no mere rhetorical flourishes. Nelson sees the activities of Alfred Rees from 1937 to 1939 not just as attempts to secure the Church's position but as a mission

president's "vigorous effort to ally the Mormon Church with the Nazi government" (198). Nelson even makes the grotesque assertion that Rees's compliance with the prohibition of Jewish terms in devotional materials was intended "presumably as a united front against Judaism" (204). Such a speculative accusation may be acceptable in some quarters of religious polemic, but in mainstream scholarship it requires documentary evidence.

But grotesque comparisons are not uncommon in *Moroni and the Swastika*. According to Nelson, "Latter-day Saints were every bit as authoritarian and intolerant of internal dissent among ordinary members as were the National Socialists regarding rebellion within their ranks" (97), thereby eliding the differences between a stern talk from a mission president—in the one case of internal dissent that Nelson discusses (63)—and torture, execution, or slow death in a concentration camp. For Nelson, the iron fists of Mormonism and Nazism are so similar that resistance to the one entails resistance to the other. Helmuth Hübener, according to Nelson, was "constrained by both Nazi state and Mormon religious regimes" (336). Nelson likewise treats Max Reschke, branch president in Hannover, as a hero both for defying the Nazis by helping a Jewish couple escape the depredations of *Kristallnacht*, and for defying the Church by entering into an adulterous relationship with a family friend and fathering a child with yet another woman, leading to his excommunication. About Reschke's attitude to the Nazi state and the LDS Church, Nelson writes, "He defied both of them, risking physical death in one case and spiritual damnation in another" (264), thereby suggesting a moral equivalence of stunning repulsiveness between rescuing Jews from Nazi persecution and engaging in an illicit affair.

In the Mormon response to National Socialism, there is a great deal that deserves careful consideration and due analysis, as the issues raised at the time are still highly relevant to a church that aspires to political neutrality even as its teachings and policies have political implications that play out differently in every country in the world. While the case of Nazi Germany is unique, it will not be the only time that the Church will have to determine the correct strategy for engaging with a totalitarian or persecuting

regime. *Moroni and the Swastika* is not the book upon which to base a reconsideration of Mormon dealings with government powers, however. Its treatment of its sources is too unreliable, its attribution of motives is too fanciful, and its aim is too firmly directed toward condemnation without understanding.

Notes

1. Christine Elizabeth King, *The Nazi State and the New Religions: Five Case Studies in Non-Conformity* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1982), 184.

2. *Ibid.*, 194.

3. *Ibid.*, 200.

4. *Ibid.*, 84.

5. Alan F. Keele and Douglas F. Tobler, "The Fuhrer's New Clothes: Helmuth Hübener and the Mormons in the Third Reich," *Sunstone* 5, no. 6 (1980): 24.

6. See Douglas Peifer, "Commemoration of Mutiny, Rebellion, and Resistance in Postwar Germany: Public Memory, History, and the Formation of 'Memory Beacons,'" *Journal of Military History* 65 (2001): 1015–16.

7. Otto Berndt, letter published in "Bufs and Rebufs" in response to "The Church in Germanic Lands," *Improvement Era* 72, no. 5 (1969): 100–01.

8. Keele and Tobler, "The Fuhrer's New Clothes," 29 no. 25.

Guilty as Charged? Mormonism in Nazi Germany

David Conley Nelson. *Moroni and the Swastika: Mormons in Nazi Germany*. Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 2015. 432 pp. Hardcover: \$29.95. ISBN 978-0806146683.

Reviewed by Saskia Tielens

Moroni and the Swastika arose, in part, as a response to a query put to the author about the persecution of Mormons in the Third Reich. David Conley Nelson describes how his stepson, raised on the stories of Mormon persecution and Latter-day Saints'