

# Jehovah's Witnesses in Europe



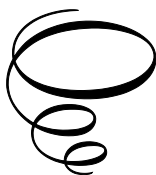
# Jehovah's Witnesses in Europe

*Past and Present Volume I/1*

Edited by

Gerhard Besier and Katarzyna Stokłosa

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Jehovah's Witnesses in Europe: Past and Present Volume I/1

Edited by Gerhard Besier and Katarzyna Stokłosa

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Branch office of Jehovah's Witnesses in Paris (105, rue des Poissonniers);

Natzweiler Struthof concentration camp;

The "Kindergarten" in the Świeradów-Zdrój (Flinsberg) camp.

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## INTRODUCTION

# Jehovah's Witnesses in Western and Southern Europe

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*Gerhard Besier & Katarzyna Stokłosa*

The religious community of Jehovah's Witnesses began during the Great Awakening in nineteenth-century America. Most "awakened" communities were splinter groups of established Protestant religions that favoured congregational independence. Similar to the Reformation of the sixteenth century, the religious awakening was seen as a reaction against rigid church doctrine, the perception of apostasy, the loss of any real eschatological expectations and the lack of charismatic inspiration.<sup>1</sup>

The religious group that became known as Jehovah's Witnesses was founded by clothing salesman Charles Taze Russell (1852–1916), from Allegheny near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He was raised a Presbyterian and joined the Congregational Church at age fourteen. In 1870, Russell attended a service conducted by Second Adventists, who believed that Jesus Christ would visibly return in 1874. As a result, he and a few close associates founded a Bible study group in Pittsburgh. Their objective was to examine both the Old and New Testaments to learn more about Christ's return. In 1876, Russell met Nelson H. Barbour, the leader of a small group of former Second Adventists in Rochester, New York. In his periodical, "Herald of the Morning," Barbour explained that Jesus had not been *visibly* present on earth since 1874, but *invisibly* present. In 1877, they co-authored a book expressing the view that Christ's invisible presence marked the beginning of a forty-year period of harvesting and judgment that would culminate in 1914

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1. Cf. Ernst Benz, *Kirchengeschichte in Ökumenischer Sicht* [Church History from an Ecumenical Viewpoint], Leiden-Cologne 1961, 75–111.

with the establishment of “God’s Kingdom.” Proclaimers of this news would then be glorified, that is, taken into the Kingdom of Heaven.

In 1879, Russell began publishing his own monthly magazine entitled “Zion’s Watch Tower and Herald of Christ’s Presence.” In 1881, he founded “Zion’s Watch Tower Tract Society” in Pittsburgh, which was registered in 1884 as a non-profit corporation in the state of Pennsylvania. In 1896, the name was changed to “Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society,” and again in 1955 to “Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania.” From 1886 to 1904, Russell penned his six-volume masterpiece “Studies in the Scriptures.” Beginning in 1891, he made twelve trips to Europe. In 1900, the first branch office outside the United States was opened in London. In 1897, the first German issue of “Zion’s Watch Tower and Herald of Christ’s Presence” was shipped to Europe via a literature depot in Berlin. The depot was later moved to Bremen. In 1902, the German branch office was opened in Wuppertal-Elberfeld and moved to Magdeburg in 1923. The world headquarters had already been moved in 1909 from Pittsburgh to Brooklyn, New York, and by 1914 Jehovah’s Witnesses were present in 68 countries, spanning all continents. In many of those countries, a branch office was established.

After Russell’s death in 1916 and the internal dissension that followed, he was succeeded by his former legal adviser, Joseph Franklin Rutherford (1869–1942). During the First World War, the Bible Students’ (as they called themselves) view of military conscription varied according to each one’s personal understanding of Christian neutrality and Christian obedience. Some adopted a strictly neutral position and categorically refused all forms of military service; others opted to serve in medical departments or hospitals; and still others performed military service but refused to bear arms. In the United States, those taking the spiritual lead among the Bible Students were falsely accused of conspiracy in 1918 and sentenced to lengthy prison terms in Atlanta, Georgia. But in 1919, the judgments were overturned and the prisoners were released. In the 1920s, the Bible Students came to newly understand the role of governments: they belong to a part of the world that is invisibly ruled by Satan (1 John 5:19; John 12:31). In July 1931, during a convention in Columbus, Ohio, the Bible Students adopted the name “Jehovah’s Witnesses,” which they based on Isaiah 43:10.

From 1932 to 1938, Rutherford directed a restructuring programme to centralise and streamline the religious organisation. Among other things, “elected elders” were replaced by “service committees.” These committees supported a local overseer that was appointed by headquarters. The “Governing Body” in Brooklyn acted as Jehovah’s channel. According to

their understanding, the community was a “theocratic organisation” that served as “God’s channel of communication” to announce “God’s message” of the upcoming “new world.” The Rutherford era saw the introduction of large conventions and statistical reports on the evangelising work, as well as the establishment of local meeting places known as “Kingdom Halls.”

When Rutherford died in 1942, Nathan Homer Knorr (1905–1977) succeeded him as president. In 1943, he launched the “Theocratic Ministry School” and all believers could enrol. In 1959, he set up a training programme for those who wish to take on additional responsibilities in the religious association, known as the “Kingdom Ministry School.” In 1962, Jehovah’s Witnesses acknowledged that governments play an additional second role: they constitute the “superior authorities” that God’s allows to exist and to which Christians must subject themselves (Romans 13). Under the presidency of Knorr, who was a skilled organiser, Jehovah’s Witnesses became a worldwide religious denomination with over two million members (1977). After Knorr’s death, vice president Frederick W. Franz (1893–1992) took the lead in the organisation. In 1966, Franz co-authored the book “Life Everlasting – In Freedom of the Sons of God,” which identified the year 1975 as the end of six thousand years of human existence. Franz was succeeded by Milton G. Henschel (1920–2003), who served as the new president (until 2000).

Until 2000, Governing Body members occupied administrative positions (e.g. the presidency) in the legal corporations used by the religious community. In October 2000, however, they resigned from the boards of all legal entities. This was to emphasise that positions within the legal framework of Jehovah’s Witnesses do not correspond to any spiritual hierarchy.

By adopting the name “Jehovah’s Witnesses,” the community sought to indicate that above all else they (following Jesus’ example) are witnesses of Jehovah God. They are thus part of a long line of faithful witnesses that began with Abel and reaches up to the present. The “great apostasy” from the pure worship of Jehovah had started early in the history of Christianity (according to their interpretation). Because of such apostates, “the Kingdom was shifted from heaven to earth. [...] pagan doctrines continued to infiltrate Christianity.”<sup>2</sup> Among the teachings identified by Jehovah’s Witnesses as false was the Trinity doctrine. It was rejected as unscriptural. As the on-

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2. WTS (ed.), *Jehovah’s Witnesses – Proclaimers of God’s Kingdom*, Brooklyn, New York 1993, 33, 38. Jehovah’s Witnesses are not alone in viewing the entire organised church structure as apostasy. The concept is common in Christianity; cf. Rudolf Sohm, *Wesen und Ursprung des Katholizismus* [The Nature and Origin of Catholicism], Leipzig <sup>2</sup>1912. The actual idea of religious degeneration has pre-Christian origins.

ly-begotten Son of God, Jesus Christ is the second greatest personage in the universe and therefore subordinate to God. Because he was faithful to his commission to bear witness, he died on a “torture stake” and Jehovah rewarded him with immortality in a spiritual body and kingship in heaven. Jehovah’s Witnesses believe that Christ has been exercising rulership from heaven since 1914. The “Holy Spirit” is Jehovah’s impersonal force through which he operates and accomplishes his will (Genesis 1:2).

Jehovah’s Witnesses base their teachings solely on the Bible, considering it the written Word of God. Beginning with Moses, forty human writers were commissioned to record God’s message to mankind over a period of 1,600 years. The Bible therefore does not contradict itself and is completely true and accurate down to the minutest detail. It teaches what Jehovah’s Witnesses must do to please God and receive eternal life, either on a paradise earth or in the heavenly realm. The Bible also reveals God’s purpose for mankind and enables man to calculate when certain events will occur.

Before the thousand-year reign of peace (Millennium), Jesus Christ, supported by a heavenly army of angels, will fight a final apocalyptic battle against the powers opposing God (battle of “Armageddon”; see Revelation 16:16), in which the earth will be cleansed of all wickedness.<sup>3</sup> Jehovah’s Witnesses will merely spectate in this conflict. After Armageddon, the great majority of Witnesses will remain on earth in a newly established paradise, while a small group – the 144,000 anointed spiritual brothers of Christ – will reign with Christ as kings and priests in heaven. The 144,000 are comprised of faithful individuals who have already died and been raised to life as spirit creatures in heaven, along with a “remnant” that are still on the earth today.

There is no precise information as to when Armageddon will occur. Certain calculations that pinpointed 1914, 1925 and 1975 were incorrect. Accordingly, as in previous millenarian movements, these “delays” resulted in membership losses and splinter groups.

Jehovah’s Witnesses earnestly wish to abide by all Biblical commands and laws. In view of this, they obey God’s command to Noah to abstain from blood (Genesis 9; Leviticus 17; cf. Acts 15). This refers not only to food but also to blood transfusions. Organ transplants are a matter of individual conscience.<sup>4</sup> Although Jehovah’s Witnesses obey the law, pay taxes, comply with compulsory schooling, etc., they remain apolitical (they refuse military service, do not participate in political elections and do not join political

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3. Cf. Brockhaus-Enzyklopädie [Brockhaus Encyclopaedia], 19th Edition, Vol. 9, 487; Evangelisches Lexikon für Theologie und Gemeinde [Evangelical Dictionary of Theology and Churches], 2nd Edition, Vol. 2, 849.

4. Cf. WTE 101 (6), 15 Mar. 1980, 31.

parties). Refinements in teaching have been made regarding their distinct refusal to perform alternative service when it indirectly supports the military. Recently, however, this has become less of an issue because of the increasing shift from conscription to all-volunteer professional armies. Popular annual festivities, Christian holidays (e.g. Christmas, Easter, Whitsun), and personal celebrations (birthdays) are rejected as unscriptural, but family celebrations such as wedding anniversaries are not subject to such censure. Their congregational life consists of regular meetings two days a week (including the “Watchtower Study,” “Theocratic Ministry School” and “Congregation Bible Study”), evangelising to people of other faiths (“preaching”), as well as many different social appointments, celebrations, sports and excursions. In serious cases of ethical misconduct or doctrinal deviation, members are given counsel. In the rare event<sup>5</sup> that an individual stubbornly persists in such a course, a “judicial committee” is formed to examine the situation. Should the individual fail to repent, it may become necessary to disfellowship him from the congregation. However, once such a person recognises his wrongdoing, he may apply for reinstatement. Approximately one third return.

Adults and adolescents enter into the community of Jehovah’s Witnesses through baptism, which involves complete immersion in water. Being submerged symbolises death to one’s former life course and being raised up from the water denotes a new personal dedication to God; subordinating one’s own free will to Jehovah’s will. Any previous baptism in another Christian church is not recognised. Baptisms are usually performed in a baptismal pool during larger gatherings of Jehovah’s Witnesses at the circuit or regional level. Once a year on the 14<sup>th</sup> day of Nisan (according to the Jewish religious calendar), Jehovah’s Witnesses observe a “Memorial” to commemorate the death of Jesus Christ. Only members of the “little flock” – the “remnant” of the 144,000 who will co-reign with Christ in heaven as kings and priests – partake of the bread and wine.

Similar to Lutheran churches that keep a count of their confirmed members, Jehovah’s Witnesses publish the number of active members (“publishers”). The “2015 Yearbook of Jehovah’s Witnesses” records that 8,201,545 “publishers” were actively evangelising in some 239 countries in 2014. The number of active members and interested associates is now reaching the 20 million mark (19,950,019 attended the Memorial in 2014).

Local groups of Jehovah’s Witnesses are called “congregations”; approximately 20 congregations form a “circuit.” A committee known as the

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5. Cf. Rodney Stark/Laurence R. Iannaccone, *Why the Jehovah’s Witnesses Grow so Rapidly: A Theoretical Application*, in: *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 12/2 (1997), 136.

“Governing Body” serves at the world headquarters in New York State and provides spiritual oversight for the worldwide activities of Jehovah’s Witnesses. In recent years, several branch offices have been merged, including those in Luxembourg, Austria, Switzerland and Liechtenstein. The work in these lands is now supervised from the Central European “Bethel” (House of God) in Selters, near Frankfurt. This branch office carries out numerous services for the now enlarged branch area, such as printing literature. The religious community has thus reverted back to its old organisational structure – a Central European office, which in former times was based in Bern.

Jehovah’s Witnesses refer to other churches and denominations collectively as “the Harlot Babylon” – a term used in the Bible at Revelation 17. In making such a judgment, they follow the condemnatory traditions of Protestantism. In the eighteenth century, many Protestants rejected certain institutionalised forms of Christianity (that sprang from the Reformation) as unchristian and fled to America. In these circles, the bleak apocalyptic image of “the Great Harlot Babylon,” “drunken with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus,” which early Reformers interpreted as a symbol for the Roman papal church, was now applied to Anglicanism and the Protestant national churches of Europe.<sup>6</sup> In this respect, Jehovah’s Witnesses follow the Protestant “sect” tradition. Other departures in teaching, such as the rejection of the Trinity doctrine, likewise cannot be deemed original, but are merely part and parcel of the history of Christian minorities. Such groups have always been accused of “heresy” and dismissed as irrelevant by the majority.<sup>7</sup>

In the past, mainstream Christian churches have accused Jehovah’s Witnesses of establishing a “mental-spiritual dictatorship,”<sup>8</sup> falsifying the gospel to fit their special doctrines<sup>9</sup> and being closed to ecumenical dialogue. Since the turn of the century, a new generation of critics are adopting a more

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6. Cf. Benz, *Kirchengeschichte* (note 1), esp. 86.

7. Cf. Walter Nigg, *Das Buch der Ketzer* [The Book of Heretics], Zurich-Munich 1981.

8. Horst Reller et al. (eds.), *Handbuch Religiöse Gemeinschaften* [A Guide to Religious Communities], Gütersloh 1993, 284.

9. Cf. Oswald Eggenberger, *Die Kirchen, Sondergruppen und religiösen Vereinigungen. Ein Handbuch* [The Churches, Special Groups and Religious Organisations. A Manual], Zurich 1994, 141; Hans Gasper/Joachim Müller/Friederike Valentin, *Lexikon der Sekten, Sondergruppen und Weltanschauungen* [Dictionary of Sects, Special Groups and Ideologies], Freiburg-Basel-Vienna 1995, 1181–1183.



moderate tone,<sup>10</sup> particularly since theological arguments now carry next to no weight in public debates – presumably because they elicit little interest and attention in European society.

In their apologetic literature, the main churches also accuse Jehovah's Witnesses of manipulating their members who "had never embraced their new 'belief' in freedom."<sup>11</sup> Moreover, some have even claimed that converts have a predisposition:

"Many who become Jehovah's Witnesses have a narrow intellectual horizon and some suffer from neurotic defects. Because of their mental structure, such persons easily slip into the unrealistic frame of mind that is characteristic of Jehovah's Witnesses. This tendency is reinforced by natural inclination."<sup>12</sup>

Concerning any endeavours to calculate the beginning of Armageddon, Bible scholars point out that Jesus himself said the time of the end would remain secret (Matthew 24:36; Acts 1:7). Nevertheless, the phenomenon of predictions has a firm place in Judeo-Christian tradition. "Jews and Christians have always tried to uncover multiple meanings in the Scriptures and to find messages in the Bible that can only be unlocked with the right key."<sup>13</sup>

Bearing in mind that the major Christian churches are subject to constant criticism at almost all levels, analogies between the different denominations clearly exist. Major Christian churches are criticised for their dogmatic statements<sup>14</sup> and actions<sup>15</sup> and they have to fight to maintain their traditional place

10. Cf. Hans Krech/Matthias Kleiminger (eds.), *Handbuch Religiöse Gemeinschaften und Weltanschauungen* [A Guide to Religious Communities and Their Beliefs], revised and extended 6th edition, Gütersloh 2006, 388–408.

11. Christian Weis, *Zeugen Jehovas. Zeugen Gottes? Eine Hilfe zur kritischen Auseinandersetzung mit der Lehre der Wachturm-Gesellschaft* [Jehovah's Witnesses. Witnesses of God? A Critical Analysis Aid to the Watchtower Society's Teachings], Salzburg 1984, 13.

12. *Ibid.* See also Alan Rogerson, *Millions Now Living Will Never Die: A Study of Jehovah's Witnesses*, London 1969.

13. Carsten Peter Thiede, *Bibelcode und Bibelwort. Die Suche nach verschlüsselten Botschaften in der Heiligen Schrift* [Bible Codes and Bible Words: The Search for Coded Messages in the Holy Scriptures], Basel 1998, 12.

14. Cf. for example, Burkhard Müller, *Schlußstrich. Kritik des Christentums* [The Bottom Line. Criticism of Christianity], Lüneburg 1995.

15. Cf. Tilman Moser, *Gottesvergiftung* [Poisoning God], Frankfurt am Main <sup>8</sup>1995; Karlheinz Deschner/Horst Herrmann, *Der Anti-Katechismus. 200 Gründe gegen die Kirchen und für die Welt* [The Anti-Catechism: 200 Arguments Against the Churches and for the World], Hamburg 1991; Edgar Dahl (ed.), *Die Lehre des Unheils. Fundamentalkritik am Christentum* [The Teaching of Damnation: A Fundamental Critique of Christianity], Hamburg 1995; Reimer Gronemeyer, *Wozu noch Kirche?*

in society with repeated acts of self-assertion.<sup>16</sup> To the outside observer, the Christian denominations are more closely aligned than they would care to admit. Therefore, the commissioners for sects and ideologies (church officials in Germany who investigate cults and worldviews) from the two main churches, and other interested parties, put forth considerable efforts to draw a clear line between their institutions – the “Churches” – and “sects.”

To give this distinction social relevance, the apologetic argument focuses primarily on criminal and family law. In Germany, it is sometimes alleged that Jehovah’s Witnesses are not *rechtstreu* (law abiding), and the same sentiments are expressed in other countries although the terminology may differ. However, after decades of using this tactic, the shock value began to wane once legally relevant reports were published on the moral failings of the established mainstream churches. Thus, for some years now the Roman Catholic Church has been in “its worst moral crisis in half a century.”<sup>17</sup> More than 11,000 children were abused by priests and monks in the United States, and some 3,500 in Ireland. Germany is only beginning its investigations and the Roman Catholic Church has had to accept that such offences must be tried in secular courts and cannot be relegated to ecclesiastical jurisdiction:

“Repentance before God does not absolve the secular authorities [...] of their worldly responsibilities. Prosecutors and courts will have the last word on abuse scandals.”<sup>18</sup>

Naturally, injustices committed by *one* religious community do not excuse those of *others*. However, there are three differences in the case of Jehovah’s Witnesses: (1) Allegations against them have long been publicised; these are typically repeated although rarely substantiated in the numerous studies and legal battles.<sup>19</sup> (2) In contrast to mainstream churches, Jehovah’s Witnesses do not benefit from the support of prominent, influ-

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[Why Are There Still Churches?], Berlin 1995; Winfried Kuhn, Sind Sie reif für den Kirchenaustritt? Wie Sie sich mit gutem Gewissen von der Zwangsabgabe Kirchensteuer befreien. Mit Selbsteinschätzungstest [Are You Ready to Leave the Church? How to free yourself from compulsory church taxes in good conscience. Self-assessment test included], Frankfurt am Main 1997.

16. Cf. for example, Gerhard Besier, Finanzierung kirchlicher Bildung [Financing Religious Education], in: Heiner Barz (ed.), Handbuch Bildungsfinanzierung [Manual of Educational Funding], Wiesbaden 2010, 287–303.

17. Michael Naumann, „Die keusche Hure“ [“The Chaste Whore”], in: Cicero. Magazin für politische Kultur [Cicero. Political Culture Magazine], May 2010, 9.

18. Ibid.

19. Cf. Gerhard Besier/Erwin K. Scheuch (eds.), The New Inquisitors, Bergisch Gladbach 2003, 265–346.

ential personalities rallying to their defence. (3) No other religion besides the two state churches (in Germany) has a department of “commissioners for sects and ideologies” that continually reports to government on the alleged or actual misconduct of their religious competitors. The informers are one-sided and, although focussing on semi-criminal behaviour, have a different set of underlying beliefs.<sup>20</sup> The government appears satisfied with their input, although it ought to stay out of the arena of religious competition. In a constitutional democracy, the government recognises neither church, state religion, nor state ideology. The government’s role is not to seek religious truth, but to guarantee religious freedom, which it recognises as an individual human right, as well as a prerequisite for the public and social expression of religious beliefs and practices. These standards comply with international, European and constitutional law.<sup>21</sup> The European Court of Human Rights has always dealt with violations of religious freedom and cases of unlawful discrimination against small religious communities. Judicial decisions from the German Federal Constitutional Court, as well as from the highest courts of many other nations, have adhered to the standards set for democratic constitutional States. Where necessary, they have corrected their approach to religious freedom, adjusted the religious and ideological neutrality of the State and improved the relationship between the State and religious communities.<sup>22</sup> This has not happened to the same degree in every European country. There are no European laws governing religion to form a basis of appeal. In their efforts to “combat cults,” the commissioners for sects and ideologies in western countries have taken advantage of the very different political climate in Central and Eastern Europe by closely cooperating with “managed democracies” such as Russia or Belarus. One result of this new strategy against smaller religious communities is the establishment of

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20. Cf. Hans Krech/Matthias Kleiminger (eds.), *Handbuch Religiöse Gemeinschaften und Weltanschauungen* [A Guide to Religious Communities and Ideologies], commissioned by the Board of the United Evangelical Lutheran Church of Germany (VELKD), Gütersloh 2006.

21. Cf. Eike Wolgast, *Geschichte der Menschen- und Bürgerrechte* [History of Human and Civil Rights], Stuttgart 2009.

22. Cf. Heiner Bielefeldt, SPECIAL Workshop: Universal Human Rights and Religious Traditions, in: Peter G. Kirchschläger/Thomas Kirchschläger, *Human Rights and Religions*. 6<sup>th</sup> International Human Rights Forum Lucerne (IHRF) 2009, Bern 2009, 255–260. See also the legal rulings on religion from the Federal Constitutional and Federal Administrative Court in: Gerhard Czermak (in cooperation with Eric Hilgendorf), *Religions- und Weltanschauungsrecht. Eine Einführung* [Religious and Ideological Rights. An Introduction], Berlin-Heidelberg 2008, 263–265.

the “European Federation of Centres for Research and Information on Cults and Sects” (FECRIS).<sup>23</sup>

A religious community that believes in the imminent end of the world and the second coming of the Messiah does not usually write its own story. The case was different with Jehovah’s Witnesses. While the major churches accepted the phenomenon of the “delayed parousia” early on and adapted to this world accordingly, Jehovah’s Witnesses believed differently. Early writings dealing with their history always tend to explain why they took a different route, why they made different decisions and why divisions resulted.

After the death of Charles T. Russell and confirmation of Joseph F. Rutherford as his successor, Russell’s conservative supporters broke away from the organisation. In part, they drew on their history to justify their decision to remain “Russellites.” Many of them wrote biographies and short publications – practices that continue in these circles to the present day.<sup>24</sup> In order to prevent a personality cult from forming, the religious leadership never promoted the glorification their highly-esteemed “founder.” Up to this very day, Russell is seen not as the “founder” of something new, but as the “rediscoverer” of original Christianity. Given this fundamental stance, there is still no “official” biography of Russell. Moreover, in view of their eschatological perspective, future expectations had a clear priority over retrospection. However, the desire to pass on “rediscovered truth” to future generations created the incentive needed to finally document the history of the religion’s beginnings. Initially, this was done on an individual basis as Russell’s survivors and friends preserved their memories in writing. Among these early contemporary witnesses was Alexander Hugh Macmillan (1877–1966), who was even shortlisted as a possible successor to Russell. He was also a companion and friend to Rutherford as well as to Rutherford’s successor, Nathan H. Knorr. In the Gilead Missionary School curriculum (launched in 1943 by Knorr), historical records and eyewitness accounts, such as Macmillan’s, occupied a significant place, as students of early Gilead classes have reported.<sup>25</sup> Finally, in 1957, Alexander H. Macmillan published his memoirs in a book entitled “Faith on the March”

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23. Cf. Religion – Staat – Gesellschaft [RSG; Religion – State – Society], 13/2 (2012) [Freedom of Religion or Belief. Anti-Sect Movements and State Neutrality – A Case Study: FECRIS].

24. Cf. for example, Albert O. Hudson, *Bible Students in Britain: The Story of a Hundred Years*, Hounslow, Middlesex 1985; idem, *Bible Students in Britain: The Story of a Hundred Years*, London 1989; Minna Edgar, *Memoirs of Aunt Sarah*, Glasgow 1920; idem, *Memoirs of Dr. John Edgar*, Glasgow 1924.

25. Reported by Max Wörnhard, Bern, 11 Jul. 2012.

(Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey). In 1953, Marley Cole, a journalist who had become one of Jehovah's Witnesses a few years previously after some initial scepticism, began collaborating with Milton Henschel, the then secretary to Nathan H. Knorr. With Henschel's help, Cole wrote a book about Jehovah's Witnesses.<sup>26</sup> Also, the religious association's own book "Qualified to Be Ministers"<sup>27</sup> has an entire series of chapters dedicated to "Modern History of Jehovah's Witnesses." In 1959, the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society published the volume "Jehovah's Witnesses in the Divine Purpose."<sup>28</sup> In 1993, the religious community produced their most comprehensive self-portrayal to date: "Jehovah's Witnesses – Proclaimers of God's Kingdom."<sup>29</sup> It did not, however, fundamentally reflect on how its history relates to the "delaying" of the eschatological judgment of God.

In addition to the above-mentioned publications, there are many others that focus on the history of persecution and repression in certain countries or regions and give particular consideration to the fate of the individuals involved. Another key aspect is the state-church relationship in various countries.<sup>30</sup> In some regions, such as Germany, there is already a wealth of literature about Jehovah's Witnesses; in other regions, such as Spain, much less is known.

This is the first in a series of volumes on the history of Jehovah's Witnesses in Europe and begins with the southern and western European countries. Some of the articles follow the pattern of historical events and are sometimes written in a rather assertive style: using successive narratives that attest to the unshakeable faithfulness of many of Jehovah's Witnesses, despite bitter hardships and severe persecution from opponents. Others report more matter-of-factly on the repression that this religious community experienced in almost all regions of Europe in times past, and which they still suffer today. Some authors examine the history of Jehovah's Witnesses in terms of religious sociology or religious history. At times, several authors may cover the same region in separate essays but with a different methodological approach. Also, the articles differ considerably in scope due to the literature and sour-

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26. Entitled: *Jehovah's Witnesses*—The New World Society, New York-London 1955.

27. Published in New York, 1955.

28. Published in New York, 1959.

29. Published in New York, 1993.

30. Cf. RSG 8/1 (2007), *Die Zeugen Jehovas in Ostmittel-, Südost- und Südeuropa* [Jehovah's Witnesses in Mid-East, South-Eastern and Southern Europe]; 10/2 (2009), *On Religious Liberty in a Democratic Society: Aspects of Law, Religion and Philosophy in Constitutional Theory and Reality*; 11/2 (2010), *Religious Intolerance and Discrimination in Selected European Countries – Part I*; 12/1 (2011), *Religious Intolerance and Discrimination in Selected European Countries – Part II*.

es available. The national perspective was chosen because the regulations enshrined in each nation's state-church law have significantly impacted this religious community – influencing their situation in society rather than in any religious aspect. The historical accounts usually begin around the turn of the twentieth century. This was the time when the first evangelisers (often migrants returning from the United States) appeared, devoting themselves to studying the Bible with others and forming congregations. In some areas, however, the movement did not take root until the mid-1920s (e.g. Portugal, see vol. I/2) or even the 1950s (e.g. France). It is striking that this new religion found it much easier to gain a foothold in Protestant regions than in Roman Catholic regions; Muslim converts are extremely rare. Jehovah's Witnesses usually encountered more difficulties in countries dominated by a single national church than in countries with a pluralistic religious culture. Dictatorships dealt more brutally with members of this "foreign" religion than the democratic constitutional states. Despite the considerable research undertaken, this study is more of an interim assessment than a definitive historical account. Displaying a pioneer spirit, the authors have merely cleared a first path and are aware that further efforts are necessary to fully document the history of Jehovah's Witnesses.

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Gerhard Besier  
and Katarzyna Stokłosa

Dresden and Sønderborg  
in Summer 2015

## BELGIUM

# A History of Jehovah's Witnesses in Belgium

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*Willy Fautré*

The relationship between Church and State in Belgium largely rests on the State's guarantee to recognise religions and worldviews. After Belgium gained independence from the Netherlands in 1830, Catholicism, Protestantism and Judaism<sup>1</sup> enjoyed *de facto* State recognition due to the official status granted to them under French rule (1795–1814). Anglicanism gained formal recognition in 1835. This essentially remained the religious status quo in Belgium until the end of the 19th century.

At the beginning of the 20th century, about 60 % of Belgium's population lived in Flanders (in the north). Here, the ruling bourgeoisie spoke French, and the working and peasant classes spoke various Flemish dialects. The rest of the population lived in Wallonia (in the south), where the educated classes spoke French and the working classes spoke Walloon dialects. A 60,000-strong, German-speaking minority lived in eastern Belgium.

The majority of Belgians were Catholic, particularly those living in Flanders. In Wallonia, a process of secularisation (fuelled by anticlerical sentiment and resentment towards the Catholic Church) was beginning to gain ground among the working classes, the Socialist and Liberal political parties, and in certain sections of the intellectual élite. Such was the state of affairs when a new religious movement – Jehovah's Witnesses (first called Bible Students) – appeared in Belgium.

This study presents a history of Jehovah's Witnesses in Belgium: from their growing presence in the early 1900s and their development between the two world wars (including their resistance to the Nazi regime), right through

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1. At that time in Belgium there were only about 1,000 Jews and 5,000 Protestants (3,000 of which were foreigners).

to their place in modern society and their relationship with the Catholic Church and with the State in particular.

## 1. Jehovah's Witnesses Before World War I

The first record of Jehovah's Witnesses in Belgium dates back to 1901. An advertisement for one of their books appeared in a Belgian newspaper. It had been placed there by Adolphe Weber, a Swiss citizen with an Anabaptist background. Weber met Jehovah's Witnesses after emigrating to the United States in the 1880s. He answered a newspaper advertisement to work as a gardener for Charles T. Russell,<sup>2</sup> the founder of the "Bible Student" movement (Jehovah's Witnesses). Russell helped him understand the teachings of the Bible Students and Weber was baptised in 1890. He returned to his homeland in the mid-1890s and began distributing Russell's books and spreading the beliefs of the Bible Students throughout several countries, including Belgium.

Weber was followed by Jean-Baptiste Tilmant who lived in Jumet-Gohissart, a coal-mining village near Charleroi (Wallonia). Tilmant came across the advertisement and ordered two volumes of "Millennial Dawn" (later known as "Studies in the Scriptures"), a series of books written by Russell and printed by the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society.<sup>3</sup> The following year, Tilmant gathered some friends who wanted to study the Holy Scriptures and requested help from Weber. In 1903, the first French-language issue of the magazine "Zion's Watch Tower and Herald of Christ's Presence"<sup>4</sup> was published in Belgium, and this early group of followers extended its activities to the north of France, in particular to the city of Denain where a congregation of Bible Students was established.

Around 1910, François Caré spoke with Edouard Verdière, a Protestant coal miner and boxing champion in Liège, about what he had learnt from the Bible Students. Other coal miners disappointed in the Catholic Church for various reasons, joined their Bible study circles and a new group of Bible Students emerged. Although the direction and encouragement from Tilmant ended when he died in 1911, groups of Bible Students were meeting regularly in seven cities in Wallonia by 1912. Weber visited them from time to time and gave his backing. On 31 August 1913, Belgian Bible Students at-

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2. Charles Taze Russell was born to Scots-Irish parents and had been raised a Presbyterian.

3. The Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society was the publishing body used by the Bible Students.

4. This was the original title of what is now known as "The Watchtower" magazine.



tended an international assembly in Paris and listened to presentations from Charles T. Russell, the then president of the Watch Tower Society. In the same year, Joseph Franklin Rutherford, who succeeded Russell as president of the Society on 6 January 1917,<sup>5</sup> visited Belgium and the first large assembly of Bible Students on Belgian soil convened in Jumet-Gohissart. On the eve of the First World War, there were about 70 loosely organised Bible Students in Belgium.

## 2. Jehovah's Witnesses Between the Wars

In 1914, German troops invaded Belgium and annexed the German-speaking part of the country. When the war ended on 11 November 1918, there were only five active Bible Students left in Belgium: two members of Tilmant's family in Jumet, a man called Fontaine in Haine-St-Paul, and two in Liège by the names of Smets and Poelmans.<sup>6</sup> In 1920, 14 people in Jumet and Charleroi, along with another 40 in Liège, attended the only annual celebration of Jehovah's Witnesses – the commemoration of the death of Jesus Christ. Poelmans and Smets, just two from the hundreds of thousands of Flemish migrant workers who had found jobs in the industrial areas of Wallonia, started to preach publicly as Bible Students in Flanders. From Liège, they focused on the coal-mining areas in the nearby province of Limburg and on the major port city of Antwerp. Their work in Flanders really started making progress in 1928 with the addition of André Wozniak, a coal miner born in Germany to Polish parents and living in Genk-Winterslag.

Organisationally, the activities of the Bible Students in Belgium were under the supervision of their offices in Switzerland until 1929, when a branch was officially opened in Brussels. Authority was progressively transferred to Van Eijck, a Dutch Bible Student living in Belgium. Eventually, the activities of the Bible Students in Belgium were overseen directly by the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society in Brooklyn. The Bible Students became known as "Jehovah's Witnesses" in 1931 and on 7 May 1932, the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society was legally registered as a non-profit association in Belgium.

Although only 27 of the 46 Bible Students were actively engaged in their trademark evangelising activity<sup>7</sup> in 1930, Brussels was chosen as the loca-

5. Charles Taze Russell died on a train in Texas on 31 Oct. 1916 at the age of 64.

6. The archive material often provides no first names. When this is the case, only the surname is used.

7. The Bible Students (Jehovah's Witnesses) use the term "publisher" to refer to a member of their community who actively and regularly engages in evangelising work.

tion for an international assembly, which was attended by approximately one hundred people who spoke 12 different languages. It was during this event that André Wozniak decided to become a “pioneer.”<sup>8</sup> Other pioneers from England, France and Switzerland joined Wozniak in Belgium and together they distributed tens of thousands of brochures across the country (196,000 copies in 1933 alone). Of the 15 congregations in Belgium in 1933, three held their meetings<sup>9</sup> in Polish (Liège, Charleroi and Beringen), and three in German (in Genk, Eisden and Roux). At that time, there were more foreign-born members than native Belgians in the movement.

The Catholic Church reacted with hostility toward Jehovah’s Witnesses and often used its sway over the dominant political party of the time, the Christian Social Party, to curb their missionary activities: 20 out of 26 foreign-born pioneers were arrested and expelled from the country in 1933. A deportation order was also issued for André Wozniak, however, he just managed to escape expulsion because of a change in government. Emile Schrantz, from the neighbouring Grand Duchy of Luxembourg, was arrested by the police on a number of occasions, though never deported. Hostilities toward Jehovah’s Witnesses were also evident in the German-speaking part of the country, especially from Nazi groups who felt spurred on by Hitler’s ban on the movement in Germany in 1933. Yet, for a short period following 1933, this religious community enjoyed greater freedom in Belgium. When arrested by the municipal police, some judges began to make decisions in their favour, refusing to convict them. At the Brussels World’s Fair in 1935, the Witnesses were even granted a booth with a conspicuous sign bearing their name. They distributed thousands of brochures and magazines in 35 languages. Foreign-born pioneers were again allowed to settle in the country. Fourteen of them were soon working as full-time evangelisers.

Among the pioneers that moved to Belgium in 1936 to support the locals in their evangelising activity was Werner Schutz from Switzerland. Schutz had been arrested and deported from France because of his missionary work there, and he was to play an important role in keeping the activities of Jehovah’s Witnesses going in Belgium during and after World War II.

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8. Jehovah’s Witnesses use the term “pioneer” (formerly “colporteur”) to refer to someone who voluntarily engages in full-time evangelism. They receive no financial payment.

9. Jehovah’s Witnesses do not refer to their religious gatherings as “services.” They distance themselves from much of the ritual and concentrate on teaching. This explains why one of their weekly gatherings is known as the “School” and another is referred to as the “Congregation Bible Study.” They simply use the word “meetings” to refer to their weekly religious gatherings in general.

### 3. World War II: Jehovah's Witnesses Resist Nazi Occupation

On 30 March 1940, shortly before Belgium became embroiled in the war, the Belgian Minister of the Interior announced that all publications from the Watch Tower Society were banned. It was claimed the literature contained teachings that undermined the morale of the population in general, especially that of the army. However, the Belgian government was unable to enforce this ban because a new regime took over just one and a half months later. This new regime imposed the ban.

#### 3.1. Nazi Manhunt for Jehovah's Witnesses

On 10 May 1940, when German troops invaded Belgium, there were about 275 active Witnesses in the country. They had been prepared for such an event through their teachings and recent publications, especially through an article on neutrality in a French issue of "The Watch Tower" and a booklet entitled "Fascism or Freedom."<sup>10</sup> Two weeks before Nazi occupation began, Albin Głowacz, a Polish coal miner who had received 20 boxes of these brochures, distributed them in mailboxes throughout his city. Others took steps to hide their religious literature with the intention of using it at a later time. At their administrative office in Belgium, brochures hidden under the floorboards went undetected by German soldiers as they searched the premises in October 1940. The literature was subsequently moved to more secure hiding places. Léon and Marie Floryn managed to hide 500 books and 4,000 brochures behind the shelves in their grocery shop in Tervuren.

These small incidents only provided a glimpse of what was to come. The Nazis began to earnestly hunt down Jehovah's Witnesses in June 1941. The hunt coincided with the appointment of a new Gestapo commander, who had previously arrested many Jews and Jehovah's Witnesses in Germany.<sup>11</sup> This next part of the study will recount some personal experiences from Jehovah's Witnesses in Belgium during the Nazi regime and reveal how they stood up under this assault.

The Nazis went after the most active Witnesses first. *Emile Schrantz* was arrested by the Gestapo, interrogated and kept in prison for 40 days.

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10. Published in English in 1939.

11. Gestapo commander Frank Müller was killed on 20 Jan. 1943 when his office in Brussels came under heavy machine gun fire from a British aircraft. The pilot was Baron Jean-Michel de Selys Longchamps from Belgium.

Throughout, he did not betray any of his fellow believers. On 6 June 1941, *André Wozniak*<sup>12</sup> evaded the Gestapo by a whisker when he hid at the home of his Polish friend *François Hankus*<sup>13</sup> in Couillet near Charleroi. The next day, Wozniak took refuge in La Louvière at the home of another Polish friend, Albin Głowacz. Feeling unsafe, Wozniak left. Upon returning to his Antwerp flat, he discovered that seals had been put on his door. His wife had been arrested and his landlord had been told to denounce Wozniak upon his return. He fled to the province of Limburg where he visited a number of congregations. Two hours after Wozniak left a house in Waterschei it too was raided by the Gestapo. However, during much of Germany's occupation of Belgium, Wozniak masterminded the underground work of Jehovah's Witnesses from his home in Antwerp.<sup>14</sup> Wozniak was never betrayed, nor was he ever caught by the Nazis.

Though Wozniak managed to escape capture, his host did not. Hankus was arrested, beaten and sent to the prison in Saint-Gilles (Brussels) on the same day Wozniak escaped (6 June 1941). Despite being tortured, he did not reveal the names of other Witnesses, their meeting places or the hidden locations of their religious literature. Instead, he gave them names of Jehovah's Witnesses who had already died. Hankus was next sent from Saint-Gilles to Leuven Central Prison from which he was then transferred to Aachen, Germany (on 31 October 1942). In November 1942 the Nazis then brought him to Natzweiler-Struthof concentration camp (Alsace, France), and finally on 9 March 1943, to Buchenwald, Block 14 – Wing A.<sup>15</sup> By the time Buchenwald was liberated on 3 May 1945, Hankus had spent 1,398 days in captivity.<sup>16</sup>

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12. Wozniak was born in Osterfeld (Germany) to Polish parents on 20 Nov. 1899. In 1935, he served as a "circuit servant" for Jehovah's Witnesses in Belgium (a travelling representative for the religious organisation; an unpaid, voluntary position). As part of this work, he visited both German and Polish-language congregations. In 1940, he became a pioneer.

13. François Hankus was born on 26 Jan. 1906 in Siemianowice Śląskie [Huta Laura], Poland.

14. Wozniak lived in Molenbeek (Brussels) after the war.

15. In a letter dated 13 Mar. 1953, Marcel Meunier, then a senator, wrote that he had personally known Hankus in Buchenwald: "Hankus was suffering from rheumatoid arthritis and bronchitis. I remember well how his fellow prisoners had to lay him on a stretcher and carry him to roll call."

16. While in detention, his wife hid a Jewish family that was being hunted by the Gestapo. After the war, Hankus resumed his activities as a pioneer in Mons and Tournai. François Hankus died on 14 Mar. 1954 from a combination of cancer and the bronchitis that he contracted during his time in Nazi captivity.



**FIG. 1-1** At the Saint-Gilles prison in Brussels, a number of Jehovah's Witnesses from Belgium were incarcerated and tortured (by courtesy of Célestin Floryn)

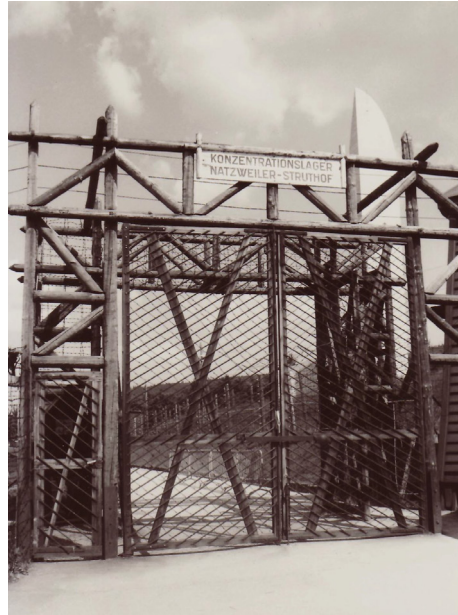
*Albin Głowacz* was arrested on 8 June 1941.<sup>17</sup> The Gestapo was clearly in hot pursuit of Wozniak and sought to destroy the network of contacts which kept the various congregations of Jehovah's Witnesses in touch with each other – including Głowacz. Głowacz was successively detained in Saint-Gilles (Brussels), Leuven and Aachen, where he stayed from October to December 1942. He was then transferred to Natzweiler-Struthof. In March 1943, he (like Hankus) arrived in Buchenwald and was assigned to work in the Gustloff-Werke armament plant.

Like other concentration camps, Natzweiler-Struthof was a work camp, so one day Głowacz and others of Jehovah's Witnesses were ordered to make weapons. Jehovah's Witnesses were and still are conscientious objectors to war and military service. Although already imprisoned, Głowacz and the other Witnesses refused to make weapons. They said they were willing to do anything else, but not this kind of work which would do harm to others. The guards pointed machine guns at them, giving the impression that they were about to execute all the objectors en masse. Fortunately nothing happened. Seven months later, Głowacz was transferred to Ravensbrück where he stayed until May 1945.

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17. Albin Głowacz was born in Poland on 1 Mar. 1909. He arrived in Belgium in 1933 and was baptised as one of Jehovah's Witnesses on 1 Mar. 1935. In 1938, he gave up his job in the coal mines to become a pioneer. He died in Tournai (Belgium) on 25 Jul. 1973 as a consequence of the harsh working conditions in the coal mines and the hardships he suffered in German concentration camps.

On 7 June 1941, *Léon Floryn*<sup>18</sup> went to Hankus' home with 400 brochures and 24 books in his luggage, but left for Brussels the moment he heard of the Gestapo's crackdown. While Floryn was gone, the Nazis searched his home in Tervuren and confiscated 20 Bibles, 500 books and 4,000 brochures, including copies of "Fascism or Freedom." The Gestapo arrested him on 8 June 1941 at 5 a.m. Floryn was first sent to the prison at Saint-Gilles (Brussels) where he was beaten with an iron rod. Because he refused to give the Gestapo the names of other Jehovah's Witnesses, they stripped him and beat him again. When they saw the appalling state of his back as a result of the beat-



**FIG. 1-2** A number of them continued their imprisonment at Natzweiler-Struthof concentration camp in Alsace (by courtesy of Célestin Floryn)

ings, they allowed him to rest for a few days. When his captors returned to resume questioning, he said that he did have *one* name to give them. However, the triumphant smiles were soon wiped off their faces when he went on to say: "My name is Floryn and not Judas [Iscariot]." Because the Gestapo failed to extract any names from Floryn, he was sent to Leuven, and on 31 October 1942 to Aachen in Germany. On 18 November 1942, he was finally transferred to Natzweiler-Struthof where he was detained together with Hankus, Głowacz and *Alphonse Michiels*.<sup>19</sup> On 19/20 March 1943, he was moved

18. Léon Floryn was born in Seneffe (Belgium) on 17 Mar. 1901. He grew up bilingual, speaking both French and Flemish. Floryn was baptised as one of Jehovah's Witnesses on 15 Jul. 1939. During the first year of the war, he sometimes cycled 200 km (125 miles) a day to distribute books and brochures to underground congregations. In 1943, after being in Natzweiler-Struthof, he was sent to Hamburg (Neuengamme). He was freed on 12 Jul. 1945. He died in Mons on 1 May 1986 at the age of 85, three months after losing his wife.

19. Michiels was born on 12 Jul. 1912. He was arrested on 10 Jun. 1942 in Brussels. After being interned in Natzweiler-Struthof, he was sent to Hamburg (Neuengamme)