



# *Trutzlied* or *Trostlied*? A Hymnist Looks at Martin Luther's “Ein feste Burg”

SUSAN PALO CHERWIEN

During the opening credits of the 1941 movie *49th Parallel*, the camera flies over the Canadian Rockies, over the wheat fields of Saskatchewan, then over the eastern cities of Canada, all to the lovely, folk-like melodies of the film score by Ralph Vaughan Williams. From a large map of North America, the screen zooms in on the Gulf of St. Lawrence, and the scene shifts to the lapping waters of the gulf itself. A German U-boat slowly surfaces, and low trombones play the opening notes of “Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott” (“A Mighty Fortress Is Our God”).<sup>1</sup>

## A CONFESSION OF FAITH

When Martin Luther penned the text of “Ein feste Burg,” he designated it “Der 46. Ein trost Psalm” (“The 46th, A Psalm of Comfort”), under which designation it was published without tune on a broadsheet in Augsburg in 1529. In this text, Luther was not translating the psalm. Luther was not even paraphrasing the

<sup>1</sup>*49th Parallel*, directed by Michael Powell (UK: Janus Films, 1941), was released in the United States as *The Invaders*. It was produced as a propaganda film to encourage the United States to enter the war in Europe and starred Leslie Howard, Laurence Olivier, and Raymond Massey. “Ein feste Burg” and motifs drawn from it are used throughout the film score to denote the German submariners.

*“A Mighty Fortress Is Our God”—this hymn, beginning, in Luther’s words, as a song of “comfort,” morphed though history into a song of triumphalism, nationalism, and militarism. Can it be saved? Should it be saved? Can we still sing it?*

psalm—he was troping on it, primarily on verse 1, and brought in additional imagery from Eph 6:11, Rev 12:9, and John 12:31, among others, to apply the psalm to the times as he saw them. Ulrich Leupold writes, “Luther’s hymns were meant not to create a mood, but to convey a message. They were a confession of faith, not of personal feelings.”<sup>2</sup>

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*So, how, four centuries later, does this hymn come to be sounded out on low trombones symbolizing the evil of the 1940s German military?*

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In the melody, Luther used the dance rhythms common to the music of his era, as in the music of the meistersingers such as Hans Sachs, and the hymn tune shows some similarities to Luther’s 1523 broadsheet ballad “Eyn neues lyed wyr heben an” about the martyrdom of two Antwerp Augustinians.<sup>3</sup> Nikolaus Selnecker, one of the authors of the *Formula of Concord*, is quoted by many writers as having written that, during the Diet of Augsburg in 1530, Luther daily stood at his window in Coburg Castle, looking skyward while playing his lute and singing “Ein feste Burg” for comfort “because his enemies wanted to devour him.”<sup>4</sup>

Pages and volumes have been written positing the probable place and year of the composition of “Ein feste Burg”: before the Diet of Worms, prior to Speyer, or at Coburg. Church historian Reinhard Staats makes a case for the hymn’s creation contemporaneous with Luther’s *Beweis daß diese Worte Christi (Das ist mein Leib) noch feststehen wider die Schwärmgeister* (1527). The occasion was Luther’s dispute with Ökolampad and Zwingli over the Lord’s Supper, and Staats cites twenty textual and contextual parallels between the two texts, especially the word *Wörtlein*.<sup>5</sup> Staats calls “Ein feste Burg” a *parergon*, an accessory or auxiliary work, to “Beweis” and suggests that this is a hymn that should be prayed.<sup>6</sup>

So, given the dance-like character of the melody, the fact that Luther designated the hymn to be a “Trost Psalm” and played it on the lute for comfort and strength, how, four centuries later, does this hymn come to be sounded out on low trombones symbolizing the evil of the 1940s German military and state as a U-boat rises from the waves?

<sup>2</sup>Ulrich Leupold, ed., “Introduction to the Hymns,” in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 53 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1965) 197.

<sup>3</sup>*LW* 53:211. To get a sense of the music in Luther’s time, see the short film “Martin Luther: Composer & Musician,” produced by Musick Monument for 500 Years of the Reformation, at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=5FGXDc3chqI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5FGXDc3chqI) (accessed July 27, 2014). For a setting of “Ein feste Burg” alone, in a setting for virginal and voice, enter the film at 10:50.

<sup>4</sup>For example, in Hermann Theodor Wangemann, *Kurze Geschichte des evangelischen Kirchenliedes* (Trep-tow: Julius Bockram, 1855) 145.

<sup>5</sup>Luther: “...also liegt die eiserne Mauer mit einem Wörtlein umgeblasen, das heißt ‘mea’ (mein) [as in das ist mein Leib].”

<sup>6</sup>Reinhard Staats, “Zur politischen Wirkung von Luthers Lied ‘Ein feste Burg’ und eine mögliche Versumstellung,” in *Gott dem Herrn Dank sagen: Festschrift für Gerhard Heintze*, at [bs.cyty.com/kirche-von-unten/archiv/gesch/fs90heintze/Staats-Luthers-Lied.htm](http://bs.cyty.com/kirche-von-unten/archiv/gesch/fs90heintze/Staats-Luthers-Lied.htm) (accessed July 27, 2014).

## THE MOVE TOWARD NATIONALISM

Already by the first centenary of the Reformation in 1617, "Ein feste Burg" was associated with a Protestant triumphalism. Johann Georg, Prince Elector of Saxony, not only struck silver coins<sup>7</sup> and issued a festive broadside<sup>8</sup> to mark the anniversary, but also instructed musicians Heinrich Schütz and Michael Praetorius to prepare a three-day celebration at the Dresdner Hofkirche from October 31 to November 2, 1617. Among the Prince Elector's demands were "eighteen trumpets and two military kettle drums."<sup>9</sup> The festival mass included a setting of "Ein feste Burg" by Schütz for five choirs: two vocal, one strings, one trombones, and the last, trumpets and kettle drums, as per the Elector's wish.

According to Selnecker, "Ein feste Burg" was designated for use on the Fifteenth Sunday after Trinity (present-day Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost) with the lectionary readings from Matt 6:24–34 and Gal 5:25—6:18 ("consider the lilies of the field"), and also on the last Sunday of the liturgical year, Matt 25:1–13, 1 Thess 5:1–11 (the wise and foolish maidens).<sup>10</sup> Later it was assigned to *Invocabit* (Lent 1) and Passiontide. By the time of Johann Sebastian Bach, this Luther hymn was also indelibly linked to Reformation Day, which, in 1667, Elector Johann Georg II of Saxony declared as an annual celebration each year on October 31.

Somewhere in the years between 1727 and 1730, Johann Sebastian Bach reworked a Weimar cantata<sup>11</sup> from *Oculi* (Lent 3, the only Lenten Sunday for which Bach wrote any cantatas, which were proscribed during Lent in Leipzig) in which he had incorporated several stanzas of "Ein feste Burg." In the resulting Cantata BWV 80 for Reformation Day, "Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott," Bach set all four stanzas of "Ein feste Burg," interspersed with additional libretto by Salomo Franck. It was scored for SATB soloists, SATB choir, three oboes, two oboi d'amore, oboe da caccia, two violins, viola, cello, and basso continuo, including bassoon.<sup>12</sup> Sometime after Bach's death, his oldest son Wilhelm Friedemann Bach (1710–1784) added three trumpets and kettle drums. We will meet up with this piece again.

During Bach's lifetime, the Renaissance rhythms of the Reformation-era hymns became ironed out, evened out, and their tempo slowed. The first printed evidence of "Ein feste Burg" in this new rhythmic form appeared in 1738 in Johann

<sup>7</sup>Some of these 1617 silver commemorative coins are in the Rare Books Collection at Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago.

<sup>8</sup>"*Göttlicher Schriftmessiger, Woldenckwürdiger Traum*," British Museum, number 1914.0209.20, at [http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/collection\\_object\\_details/collection\\_image\\_gallery.aspx?partid=1&assetid=248485&objectid=1435362](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details/collection_image_gallery.aspx?partid=1&assetid=248485&objectid=1435362) (accessed July 27, 2014).

<sup>9</sup>Matthias Hoë von Hoheneck (1580–1645), Oberhofprediger, Dresdner Hofkirche, Festschrift. Quoted in program notes from a concert by Forum Alte Musik Köln, October 13, 2013, reconstructing the 1617 festival mass of the Hofkirche. See [www.forum-alte-musik-koeln.de/data/2013\\_10\\_13.html](http://www.forum-alte-musik-koeln.de/data/2013_10_13.html) (accessed July 27, 2014).

<sup>10</sup>Nikolaus Selnecker, "Vorrede zu Kirchensengen" (1587), quoted in "Hauptlied," in *Encyclopädie der evangelischen Kirchenmusik*, ed. Salomon Kümmerle (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1888) 1:553.

<sup>11</sup>BWV 80a, "Alles, was von Gott geboren," 1715 or 1716, Weimar. For more information, see <http://www.bach-cantatas.com/BWV80a.htm> (accessed August 15, 2014).

<sup>12</sup>See <http://www.bach-cantatas.com/BWV80.htm> (accessed August 14, 2014).

König's *Harmonischer Liederschatz*. In this volume, "Ein feste Burg" appears in the march-like isometric quarter-note form in which most American Christians have learned to sing this hymn. That J. S. Bach utilized this rhythmic form in his BWV 80 (1727–1730) indicates that this transformation was already well established by the time König published his *Liederschatz*.

#### INTO THE GERMAN PSYCHE

By the time the tercentenary of the Reformation approached in 1817, "Ein feste Burg" had been assimilated into the collective German national psyche, a part of its cultural identity and treasure, as seen in its inclusion in Achim von Arnim and Clemens Brentano's *Des Knaben Wunderhorn: Alte deutsche Lieder* (From the Boy's Magic Horn: Old German Songs). This 1805–1808 collection, which both evidenced and contributed to the burgeoning nationalism of the nascent Romantic era, gave "Ein feste Burg" the subscript "Kriegslied des Glaubens" ("Battle Hymn of Faith"). The order of its verses was changed,<sup>13</sup> the stanza "Mit unser macht ist nichts getan" ("No strength of ours can match his might") was replaced, and a fifth stanza (author unattributed) was added.<sup>14</sup>

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For the three hundredth anniversary of the Reformation, a gathering was planned at Wartburg Castle (above Eisenach), where Luther had translated the Bible into German and given the Germans a uniform written language. The *Wartburgsfest* of 1817 turned into a large student gathering, in which the singing of "Ein feste Burg" figured prominently, and Martin Luther was praised in one presentation as a "deutsche Freiheitshelden" (German freedom champion). Weary from the Napoleonic Wars and tired of the vulnerability of individual states, the gathered university students burned "unGerman" books and set forth principles for a unified democratic Germany.

Later in that century, at the end of the Franco-Prussian war in 1870, to honor the victorious returning troops and celebrate the coronation of King Wilhelm of Prussia as Kaiser Wilhelm I, emperor of all Germany, Richard Wagner composed the *Kaisermarsch* (Imperial March), into which he incorporated the hymn "Ein feste Burg."<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup>1. "Ein feste Burg" (1), 2. "Und wenn die Welt" (3), 3. "Gott Ehr und Preis" (new), 4. "Sein Wort sie sollen (4)," 5. "Lob, Ehr und Preis" (new).

<sup>14</sup>Michael Fischer, "Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott," *Historisch-kritisches Liederlexikon* (2007), at [http://www.liederlexikon.de/lieder/ein\\_feste\\_burg\\_ist\\_unser\\_gott](http://www.liederlexikon.de/lieder/ein_feste_burg_ist_unser_gott) (accessed July 27, 2014).

<sup>15</sup>"Richard Wagner - Kaisermarsch für Orchester (1871)," at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=1YSreGSiuvM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1YSreGSiuvM) (accessed July 27, 2014).

German hymnal editors, beginning in the early nineteenth century, became so concerned that rising German nationalism could lead to misunderstandings in Luther's text, inserted the word *Gottes* into the last line: "das Reich Gottes muß uns bleiben."<sup>16</sup> German poet Heinrich Heine wrote,

A battle hymn was this defiant [*trotzige*] song, with which [Luther] and his comrades entered Worms [April 16, 1521]. The old cathedral trembled at these new notes, and the ravens were startled in their hidden nests in the towers. This hymn, the Marseillaise hymn of the Reformation, has preserved its potent spell even to our days, and we may yet soon use again in similar conflicts the old mailed words.<sup>17</sup>

Hymnologist Albert Friedrich Wilhelm Fischer in 1878:

["Ein feste Burg"] has forever and ever been valued as the actual *Trutz- und Triumphlied* of the Lutheran church.<sup>18</sup>

From the 1888 *Encyclopädie der evangelischen Kirchenmusik*:

Every German Lutheran Christian feels deep within, every time they sing along with ["Ein feste Burg"], that it has sprung out of the depths of the German national spirit and originally belongs to it, and that only in Luther's mouth could it become what it is: the *Schutz- und Trutzlied* [see below] of the Lutheran church.<sup>19</sup>

In the 1896 *Realencyclopädie für protestantische Theologie und Kirche*:

Above all, the hymn of faithful trust freely based on Psalm 46 ["Ein feste Burg"], the battle song of the prophetic champion of God, full of joyful martyr-zeal, would not have become the Lutheran national anthem of the Germans, the *Schutz- und Trutzlied* of the Reformation were it not for the heavy step...the action of a true hero.<sup>20</sup>

### SCHUTZ- UND TRUTZLIED

*Schutz- und Trutzlied*. That phrase seemed to stem from the mid-nineteenth century, becoming widespread, circulating and expanding until it became the moniker associated with "Ein feste Burg" after 1870. *Schutz- und Trutzlied*. How shall we translate it? Its allure is as much from its crisp teutonic snap, its assonance and rhyme, as from its actual meaning. (It is a strange truth that if something is phrased cleverly enough, we are less likely to question whether it is actually true—"curiosity killed the cat," for example, grabs us by its alliteration.)<sup>21</sup> *Schutz* comes from Middle High German *schuz*, "surrounded with a dike, earthwall."

<sup>16</sup>*Gesangbuch zum gottesdienstlichen Gebrauch für evangelische Gemeinden* (Berlin, 1829) #296.

<sup>17</sup>"Ein Schlachtlied war jene trotzige Gesang..." Heinrich Heine, from *Geschichte der Religion und Philosophie in Deutschland* (1834), quoted in John Julian, *A Dictionary of Hymnology* (New York: John Scribner's Sons, 1892) 323.

<sup>18</sup>Quoted in Fischer, "Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott," *Historisch-kritisches Liederlexicon*.

<sup>19</sup>"Ein feste Burg," in Kümmerle, *Encyclopädie der evangelischen Kirchenmusik*.

<sup>20</sup>Hermann Hering, "Kirchenlied, deutsches," in *Realencyclopädie für protestantische Theologie und Kirche*, 3rd ed. (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1896) 10:421.

<sup>21</sup>Mark Forsyth, *The Elements of Eloquence* (London: Icon Books, 2013) 10.

*Trutz* also comes from Middle High German *trotz*, “defiance, spite,” and is still evident in words like *trotzdem*, “in spite of”; shelter; and spite. So...a comfort and combat hymn? Bastion and battle? Fence and fist? Defense and defiance? Shield and storm? That’s where we’ve come through all these historical vignettes and footnotes: from Luther’s lute-accompanied *Trostlied* (comfort) to *Schutz- und Trutzlied* (defiance)—not only of the Reformation, not only of the Lutheran church, but of the German nation and its culture, language, politics, and military.

Segue to 2005 and white supremacist H. A. Covington’s futuristic novel *A Mighty Fortress* about revolution and the creation of an Aryan homeland in the Pacific Northwest:

As the Tricolor went up, music burst forth from the hidden speakers. A Mighty Fortress Is Our God, by Martin Luther. It was a thundering pæan to God and human dignity, in the proud and ancient tongue of the greatest and most noble nation among the Children of the Sun.<sup>22</sup>

### THE MOVE TO MILITARISM

*Schutz- und Trutzlied*. The stories of “Ein feste Burg” being sung and trumpeted in battle are manifold. King Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden had his troops sing “Ein feste Burg” in the Thirty Years’ War, before the Battle of Leipzig, September 17, 1631, as did Prussian Frederick the Great after the Battle of Leuthen, December 5, 1757. German soldiers in the Franco-Prussian War sang it as they marched and also had their own parodies of its words.<sup>23</sup> Hartmann Grisar, in his book *Luthers Trutzlied “Ein feste Burg” in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart*, reported,

Luther’s hymn was incessantly recommended as a spiritual armor to the Protestant soldiers in the World War [I] by their church authorities and ministers; it was distributed in print everywhere.<sup>24</sup>

Since the late 1800s, “Ein feste Burg” has been played at the British “Trooping of the Colours,” a ceremony of regiments and their insignia from British and Commonwealth armies held since 1748 (recall that the current House of Windsor used to be called the House of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha, while Victoria was from the House of Hanover). When the Massed Bands march, they play the Waltz from Giacomo Meyerbeer’s *Les Huguenots*, which incorporates the Luther hymn.<sup>25</sup>

In the second movement of Claude Debussy’s *En blanc et noir*, which the composer has designated “*Lent - sombre*” (Slow - somber, dark), Debussy pays homage to friend Jacques Charlot, a French soldier killed in World War I. There are reminiscences of distant drums, of reveilles, and, to depict the forces that killed his

<sup>22</sup>Harold A. Covington, *A Mighty Fortress* (Bloomington, IN: Authorhouse, 2005) 355.

<sup>23</sup>Michael Fischer, “F. Ein’ feste Burg ist unser Gott,” *Historisch-kritisches Liederlexikon*, 2007, at [http://www.liederlexikon.de/lieder/ein\\_feste\\_burg\\_ist\\_unser\\_gott/editionf](http://www.liederlexikon.de/lieder/ein_feste_burg_ist_unser_gott/editionf) (accessed July 27, 2014).

<sup>24</sup>Hartmann Grisar, *Luthers Trutzlied “Ein feste Burg” in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart* (Freiburg: Herder, 1922) 7. I am grateful to Fred Gaiser for pointing me to this book.

<sup>25</sup>“Trooping the Colour 2006,” at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=zofhv9KWoeC](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zofhv9KWoeC) (accessed July 27, 2014). “*Ein feste Burg*” comes in around the first minute.

friend, the German melody "Ein feste Burg."<sup>26</sup> Igor Stravinsky also quotes the hymn in the theatrical piece *L'histoire du Soldat* (The Soldier's Story)—mockingly, throughout, and in more fullness in Part X: *Chorale*.<sup>27</sup>

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Deeper and deeper the hymn moves into the German national identity, imperialism, and militarism. Even German-American Lutheran theologians became caught up in the martial imagery and thrust of the hymn's changing *Geist* (spirit). *Unser Erbteil*, a commemorative publication out of Concordia Seminary, Saint Louis, in 1917, opens with an 1883 German poem comparing the hammering of the Ninety-Five Theses to the Easter dawn of a new day of victory:

*Da erwacht so manches Herze  
das im Todesschlummer lag,  
Viele tausend Seelen grüßen  
freudig ihren Ostertag.*<sup>28</sup>

There so many hearts awaken  
That in sleep of death did stay,  
Many thousand souls are greeting  
Joyfully their Easter day.

*Aber diese Sonnenstrahlen  
hält kein Papst, kein Teufel auf:  
Mit erstreutem Glanz durcheilen  
sie die Welt im Siegeslauf.*

But these rays of day's new dawning  
Pope, nor devil hold at bay,  
With resplendent shine they hasten  
O'er the world in victory.

Among the publication's essays are "Luther der Glaubensheld" (Luther, Hero of the Faith) and "Luthers Rüstung" (Luther's Armor).

The Gospel makes Luther joyful; it makes him strong, so that in his "*Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott*" he soars up to a heroism of faith such as has never been seen since.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>26</sup>Claude Debussy (1862–1918), *En blanc et noir*, at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ab6H-ul3Q5w](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ab6H-ul3Q5w) (accessed July 27, 2014). "Ein feste Burg" comes in around 3:50. I am grateful to Victor Gebauer for leading me to this piece.

<sup>27</sup>Igor Stravinsky (1882–1971), *L'histoire du Soldat*, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mDVlsm8MY-U> (accessed July 27, 2014).

<sup>28</sup>A. L. G., "Wittenberg, 1517" (1883), in *Unser Erbteil: eine Gedächtnisschrift auf das 400-jähriges Reformationsjubiläum, den 31. Oktober 1917* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1917) 1.

<sup>29</sup>"Das evangelium macht [Luther] froh, es macht ihn stark, so daß er sich in seinem "*Ein feste Burg ist unser*

During the Third Reich in Germany, Luther's hymn was printed in *Soldatenliederbücher*, played at military funerals and in festive state gatherings, since Luther was one of Adolph Hitler's German cultural heroes,<sup>30</sup> and the hymn had come to represent the German language, German culture, and German national spirit. During World War II, "Ein feste Burg" announced war reports on the radio in Germany, in the Bach cantata setting to which son Wilhelm Friedemann had added those trumpets and kettle drums. A German-American pastor wrote:

As a four year old, I heard the opening of this Cantata with its magnificent trumpets almost every day, and sometimes several times a day, sitting in front of the "Volksempfänger," a simple one-wave "people's radio."...I was so enchanted, so smitten by the music, I soon started to whistle with it. I did not know or care that it was used as the signal to broadcast the Nazi's military and war news....For quite some time, my mother would break into tears....I did not know that my father's death—"Ltd. Major Otto Arndt, killed in action"—was announced on one of those broadcasts.<sup>31</sup>

After the Barmen Declaration of 1934, the *Deutsche Christen* (German Christians, aligned with the state) took on "Ein feste Burg" more and more as their signature hymn, while, as a result, the *Bekennende Kirche* (Confessing Church) sang it less and less. As a part of the *Gleichschätzung*, the bringing into consistency of all aspects of the state, religion, and party, hymnal editors began the de-Judaizing of all hymns, replacing *Alleluia* with *Lobet den Herrn* and *Hosianna* with *Hilf, o Herr uns*. "Ein feste Burg" was altered to remove the phrase "der Herr Zebaoth" and replace it with "der Retter in der Not."<sup>32</sup>

In the year 1943, Jewish composer Viktor Ullmann and librettist Peter Kien wrote an hour-long opera—from inside the fences of Terezin, a Nazi concentration camp. Titled "Der Kaiser von Atlantis" ("The Emperor of Atlantis"), it tells the story of Kaiser Overall who is killing so many people that Death decides to go on strike since his job has been usurped by the Emperor. Soon no one dies, and the Kaiser realizes that he has no power. He asks Death to return to his work, and Death agrees, if the Kaiser will be the first to go with Death. Motifs and snippets of "Ein feste Burg" weave in and out of the opera. The melody is sung fully under the

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*Gott*" zu einem Glaubensheldentum emporschwingt, wie es nie wieder geschehen ist." Otto Hattstädt, "Luther als geistlicher Liederdichter," in *Unser Erbe*, 47. (The English translation is my own.)

<sup>30</sup>Hitler wrote, "Among them must be counted the great warriors in this world who, though not understood by the present, are nevertheless prepared to carry the fight for their ideas and ideals to the end....To them belong, not only the truly great statesmen, but all other great reformers as well. Beside Frederick the Great stands Martin Luther as well as Richard Wagner." For this translation, see Adolf Hitler, "The Beginning of My Political Activity," in *Mein Kampf*, at [http://www.hitler.org/writings/Mein\\_Kampf/mkv1ch08.html](http://www.hitler.org/writings/Mein_Kampf/mkv1ch08.html) (accessed July 27, 2014).

<sup>31</sup>Pastor Dr. Otfried Arndt, "Predigt über eg 312: 'Ein fest Burg ist unser Gott' und die Bach-Kantate Nr. 80," October 31, 2006, First English Lutheran Church, Baltimore, MD, at <http://www.predigtpreis.de/predigtdatenbank/predigt/article/predigt-ueber-eg-362-ein-feste-burg-ist-unser-gott-und-die-bach-kantate-no-80.html> (accessed July 27, 2014). I first became aware of these war broadcasts through the fine liner notes by Dr. Andreas Bomba, for the Hänssler-Verlag recording of Bach Cantata 80: "Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott," Bach-Ensemble and Helmut Rilling, 1999.

<sup>32</sup>*Gesangbuch der deutschen Christen* (Weimar 1941), in Fischer, "Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott," *Historisch-kritisches Liederlexicon*.



closing words: "Come, Death, be our honoured guest: Our hearts await you... Teach us to keep your holiest law: You shall never again take the name of Death in vain."<sup>33</sup>

### CAN WE STILL SING THIS HYMN?

Perhaps now we have a glimpse into how Ralph Vaughan Williams came to assign the melody "Ein feste Burg" to a German U-boat arising from the waves; but even with that history, I am full of questions, big questions, like can we sing this hymn in the church today without all the layers of imperialism, nationalism, and militarism that have accrued to it over the centuries?

True, Luther himself chose to use the word *Waffen* (weapon). Luther chose to use the word *Feld* (field), chose to use battle imagery. It's there from the outset. But all the layers of meaning that cling to it can't be ignored. Its history and misuse shouldn't be overlooked. Can we still sing this hymn, knowing what we now know?

Ironically, in verse 9 of Ps 46, we sing the words:

[God] makes wars to cease to the ends of the earth;

[God] breaks the bow and shatters the spear;

[God] burns the shields with fire.

Was Luther possibly looking to the end of all war and strife by troping on this psalm? Who knows. But how do these words affect us today?

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*Words affect us. They shape our beliefs, our self-image, our ideologies, our concept of God, of others. And words that are sung, and sung in community, are even more powerful, because music carries words deep into the human psyche.*

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Words affect us. They shape our beliefs, our self-image, our ideologies, our concept of God, of others. And words that are sung, and sung in community, are even more powerful, because music carries words deep into the human psyche where they shape who we are, what we are becoming. By being brought into the physical world, into the body, words become incarnate. Do we understand why totalitarian regimes want first of all to control what people are singing together? Do we understand why the Singing Revolution in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania was unstoppable? Because we are shaped by what we sing without our knowing it. As a poet of hymn texts, it is my task to care about the words that we sing together, to care about what we are being shaped into by the words that we sing.

And so I wonder if it is good, if it is healthy, if it is in keeping with the spirit of

<sup>33</sup>Viktor Ullmann, Peter Kien, *Der Kaiser von Atlantis*. The piece had one rehearsal in Terezin, but the SS forbade further performance, sensing that the role of Kaiser Overall seemed to mock Hitler. Ullmann and Kien were both transferred to Auschwitz where they died in 1944. A BBC video of excerpts shot at Auschwitz can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dbFOKJMLhhs> (accessed July 27, 2014).

Christ to continue to sing “Ein feste Burg” as we do. Most of us have let go of other hymns over the years: warlike hymns such as “Onward Christian Soldiers” and “The Son of God Goes Forth to War”; hymns that belittle other cultures like “From Greenland’s Icy Mountains” and “Hills of the North, Rejoice”; or both, “Fling Out the Banner.” We are constantly assessing what words are good to put into our mouths, into our bodies, into each other and the universe—what words are good and noble and true.

I am not suggesting that there are no times in life for resistance. There are times when warriors are needed, when courage and fortitude must be called up. Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s great dilemma of conscience in the 1930s and 1940s testifies to us that life is not so simple. But I must return to the question: Into what are we being shaped by singing “Ein feste Burg” as we so often do, especially so inseparably bound to celebration of the Reformation on Reformation Sunday? (And should we even still inject a celebration of division into the liturgical year? Are we still fighting the Pope, the Anabaptists, the Zwinglians, or the Turks?) When we sing, “If they should take our house...,” who is the “they” that we are thinking of?

The thought has occurred to me often that maybe returning to the Renaissance dance rhythms of Luther’s original melody would eliminate some of the martial character that the hymn has accrued: the polymetric tune is much less amenable to marching (although one of the soldier songbooks I mentioned has Luther’s hymn in its original form, so...). It is simply a fact that music shapes us, physically, emotionally, spiritually, beyond our likes and dislikes. Different keys, different instruments (and, here, the importance of the trumpets and timpani Wilhelm Friedemann added to his father’s cantata), different rhythms, different movement of musical line—all have effects on us. What if the hymn were less march-like?

If we decide we just can’t let go of the hymn, what about moving it back to Sunday *Invocavit* and letting go of the trumpets and timpani, all the trappings of triumphalism? How would that change the way we and future generations perceive the hymn?

While it is true that other Christian hymns have been used for military and imperial purposes—King Gustavus Adolphus chose also “Nun danket alle Gott” to send his troops into battle, the Crusaders sang hymns into battle, the Ulster Unionists rallied around “O God, Our Help in Ages Past”—I have not been able to find any hymn whose history matches that of “Ein feste Burg” for secular, military, and political co-opting. What does the sound of this hymn from our church doors mean to our Roman Catholic sisters and brothers? What does it mean to our Jewish brothers and sisters who hear it?

It is not my intent to downplay the great contribution that Martin Luther made to the whole church—not just to that part calling itself Lutheran, but to the whole church—in his integrity of biblical and theological thought, in the honoring of the laity, in upholding the nobility of family life, and in the bestowing of a com-

mon treasure of music and liturgy and hymns. But he was a man, and not a god. I truly wish that he had not used the word *Waffen* (weapon) in the second line of "Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott." Would its use and its impact have been different over the centuries? I don't know.

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*Another question haunts me: Of all the excellent and beautiful hymns Luther wrote, is this the one most representative of his thought and spirit?*

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But another question haunts me: Of all the excellent and beautiful hymns Luther wrote, is this the one most representative of his thought and spirit? Or is it the one most well suited to reinforce and enshrine our innate and sometimes cherished tribalistic tendencies? Reinhard Staats, the church historian cited earlier, feels that this hymn should be sung as a prayer. Pastor Dr. Otfried Arndt, whose memories of the radio war news reports were quoted earlier, added in the same sermon:

I am eager to admit that I do not like "Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott"!...it [is] good (and healing) to remember that Luther's first and foremost "Reformation Hymn" was and is "Nun freut euch lieben Christen g'mein" [LBW No. 299 "Dear Christians, One and All Rejoice..."].

And, for the last word, I turn to Jann Schmidt, former president of the Evangelical Church in Germany. Preaching on Reformation Day 2009 in Emden, Germany, Schmidt said,

No, ["Ein feste Burg"] is not a German Christian *Schutz- und Trutzlied*; it is also not a fanfare for the Reformation. It is a hymn that people sing, who are trembling from fear, who have lost the floor under their feet.<sup>34</sup> ⊕

*SUSAN PALO CHERWIEN is a freelance writer and musician. She has written numerous hymn texts that appear in denominational hymnals in the United States and Canada. She is the author of O Blessed Spring: Hymn Texts of Susan Palo Cherwien (Augsburg Fortress, 1997), Crossings: Meditations for Worship (Morningstar, 2003), To God Will I Sing (Augsburg Fortress, 2001), and Come, Beloved of the Maker (Augsburg Fortress, 2010).*

<sup>34</sup>"Nein, ein christlich deutsches Schutz- und Trutzlied ist das nicht und auch nicht die Fanfare der Reformation. Es ist ein Lied, das Menschen anstimmen, die von Angst geschüttelt werden, die den Boden unter den Füßen verlieren." Jann Schmidt, "Predigt im Reformationsgottesdienst der EKD und der Evangelisch-reformierten Kirche," October 31, 2009, at [reformiert.de/tl\\_files/reformiert.de/Bilder/artikelbilder/pdf/Predigt31102009.pdf](http://reformiert.de/tl_files/reformiert.de/Bilder/artikelbilder/pdf/Predigt31102009.pdf) (accessed July 27, 2014).