

## RESISTANCE TO THE NAZI REGIME

• **Summary:** Accepting a narrow definition of resistance as 'active participation in an organised attempt to undermine the Third Reich' three types of resisters are identified:

- (a) those who became disillusioned with the Third Reich,
- (b) those who acted out of necessity and
- (c) those who resisted because of political, religious or moral principles.

## Different Definitions of Resistance

• 'RESISTANCE' HAS BEEN DEFINED in different ways. Hans-Adolf Jacobsen says:  
*... [it] must comprise all that was done despite the terror of the Third Reich, despite the suffering and martyrdom, for the sake of humanity, for the aid of the persecuted. And the word resistance in some cases applies, too, to certain forms of standing aside in silence.*

• This implies that a German resisted Hitler if, for example, (s)he continued to buy from a Jewish shop despite a boycott organised by the Nazi Party or if (s)he gave pieces of bread to one of the millions of starving forced workers brought to Germany from eastern Europe during the Second World War. It could even include failure to join a Nazi organisation.

• Obviously a variety of courses of action were open to a German who was opposed to the Third Reich and who wanted to do something about it: but how many of them really amounted to 'resistance'? Ian Kershaw argues for a more narrow definition. He has distinguished 'dissent' (the spontaneous voicing of anti-Nazi opinions) and 'opposition' (actions only directed against limited characteristics of the Hitler state) from 'resistance'. The latter he defines as the 'active participation in organized attempts to work against the regime with the conscious aim of undermining it or planning for the moment of its demise'.

• According to this view, resistance was about action not words, organisation and planning not spontaneity, the rejection of everything Hitler stood for not just part of it. Resistance was nothing less than a meaningful contribution to the destruction of the Third Reich.

• Whilst Jacobsen's definition is very broad, Kershaw's criteria are very exacting indeed. After all, how many ordinary Germans could ever have hoped to destroy a whole modern state system? But still his definition helps remind us that while no small number of Germans at some time or other made signs of defiance towards the Third Reich as they went about their daily round, others were filled with such a passionate desire to oppose Hitler that resistance became the whole purpose of their lives. This essay will deal with some of Germany's more passionate resisters. Who were they, and how did their stories compare?

### A. Resistance through disillusionment

• **Teenagers:** From 1934 on, reports compiled by the police in the Ruhr and Rhineland described the existence of groups of largely working-class youths who dressed distinctively (often in cheesecloth shirts and leather shorts), who went on outings together and who were 'at daggers drawn' with the Hitler Youth (*Hitler Jugend*). These groups were called *Kittelbach Pirates*, *Navajos* and, most famously, *Edelweiss Pirates*. These working-class youth were easily distinguishable from other youngsters by their colourful manner of dress (shorts, checkered shirts and neck scarves) and irreverent behaviour. The Edelweiss Pirates were known to attack Hitler Youth units as they patrolled parks and other areas. According to historian A. Kenkmann, most of the teenagers involved here originally had been happy to join the *Hitler Jugend*. They only became Pirates when the *Hitler Jugend* proved unable to meet their needs. Often there were very personal reasons for this. For instance, some teenagers had had arguments with *Hitler Jugend*

leaders, others had been refused promotion within the organisation, others again belonged to families which could not afford the necessary Nazi uniforms.

The example of **Hans Steinbrück** is particularly interesting. He was a member of an Edelweiss Pirate group during the Second World War, and as a result was hanged in November 1944. Originally, however, he had been a leader in the Hitler Jugend and in due course tried to join the secret political police in Düsseldorf. Stupidly he started passing himself off as a secret policeman before his application had been approved and as a result he was not only rejected, but put in prison for a short while. Only after his release did Hans begin a career of resistance to the Third Reich. It culminated in him leading attacks by armed gangs on government buildings in war-torn Cologne. In other words, Hans only rejected the Hitler state after it had first rejected him.

• **The Military:** Rather more famous resisters also started out in league with National Socialism. **Claus von Stauffenberg** (below) was the army officer who planted the bomb which nearly blew up Adolf Hitler on 20 July 1944. This member of the Schwabian nobility had enjoyed a very conservative upbringing. In an essay written at school, he identified only one profession as really honourable: fighting for your nation. Not surprisingly he joined the army and by 1930 had made up his mind that Hitler's political movement was the best hope for Germany. He participated in the campaign against Poland in 1939 and wrote home as follows: 'The population is an unbelievable rabble; there are a lot of Jews and a lot of cross-breeds.' When military men such as Beck and Treckow, who were already trying to resist Hitler (on the basis of his vulgarity and reckless conduct of the war) contacted von Stauffenberg in 1942, he refused to co-operate with them. For a very long time this man was widely in agreement with National Socialist values and loyal to the Third Reich.



Gradually, however, he was compelled to re-think. Von Stauffenberg was horrified by the war-time carnage he saw in Russia. He was outraged by the barbaric way German troops were ordered to treat Slavic civilians. At a conference in Vinnitsa in October 1942, he said it was scandalous that no senior military man would take a stand against the way Hitler was leading the war. His disillusionment deepened in January 1943 when the Sixth Army surrendered to the Russians at Stalingrad. From that time on, von Stauffenberg believed Germany was on the defensive. June 1944 saw first the D-Day landings in France and then a massive offensive by the Russians. To a professional military mind it was plain that to continue the war would only cause a phenomenal loss of life and the endangerment of the German nation itself.

Faced by the barbarity of Hitler's war and its impending failure, von Stauffenberg decided to act. As he put it: 'I could never look the wives and children of the fallen in the eye if I did not do something to stop this senseless slaughter.' Now working in association with a wider group of both military and civilian resisters, he attempted to assassinate the Führer during a briefing at the military headquarters in eastern Prussia. Later the same day, while trying to organise a coup in Berlin, he was shot by troops who had remained loyal to Hitler.

• Steinbrück and von Stauffenberg had very different experiences in the Third Reich. What they shared was the frustration of the hopes and expectations which they had originally invested in it. For both of these individuals, resistance was born of disillusionment.

## B. Resistance by necessity

• Once Hitler was Chancellor, various types of people (for example gypsies and homosexuals) were persecuted with increasing vigour. This was particularly so for **German Jews**. In the first two or three years of the Third Reich they were banned from certain shops, thrown out of various

jobs and had German citizenship withdrawn. In November 1938 concerted anti-Semitic violence swept the country in the form of the 'Crystal Night' pogroms. Thereafter German Jews were stripped of their financial assets. During the war, as German power stretched across Europe, genocide became the deliberate policy of the state. Under the circumstances, for a Jew to conform to the demands of the Third Reich meant at first abuse and imprisonment, later it meant death. So what were they to do?

- When the deportations from Germany began in Autumn 1941, 10-12,000 German Jews went into hiding. By 1943 5,000 were undercover in Berlin alone, and of these 1,402 survived. Of course, sometimes they had been helped by German Gentiles, and in 1971 Yad Vashem in Jerusalem honoured 69 of these kind souls.

- Many Jews in ghettos across eastern Europe tried to organize resistance against the Germans and to arm themselves with smuggled and homemade weapons. Between 1941 and 1943, underground resistance movements formed in about 100 Jewish groups. The most famous attempt by Jews to resist the Germans in armed fighting occurred in the **Warsaw ghetto**. In the summer of 1942, about 300,000 Jews were deported from Warsaw to Treblinka. When reports of mass murder in the killing center leaked back to the Warsaw ghetto, a surviving group of mostly young people formed an organization called the Z.O.B. (for the Polish name, *Zydowska Organizacja Bojowa*, which means Jewish Fighting Organization). The Z.O.B., led by 23-year-old Mordecai Anielewicz, issued a proclamation calling for the Jewish people to resist going to the railroad cars. In January 1943, Warsaw ghetto fighters fired upon German troops as they tried to round up another group of ghetto inhabitants for deportation. Fighters used a small supply of weapons that had been smuggled into the ghetto. After a few days, the troops retreated. This small victory inspired the ghetto fighters to prepare for future resistance. On April 19, 1943, the Warsaw ghetto uprising began after German troops and police entered the ghetto to deport its surviving inhabitants. Seven hundred and fifty fighters fought the heavily armed and well-trained Germans. The ghetto fighters were able to hold out for nearly a month, but on May 16, 1943, the revolt ended (left). The Germans had slowly crushed the resistance. Of the more than 56,000 Jews captured, about 7,000 were shot, and the remainder were deported to killing centers or concentration camps.



### C. Resistance by principled choice

*"First they came for the Jews, and I didn't speak out - because I was not a Jew. Then they came for the Communists, and I did not speak out -because I was not a Communist. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out -because I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for me and there was no one left to speak for me!" -Pastor Niemoller*

- Hans **Steinbrück**, Claus von **Stauffenberg** and surviving German **Jews**: all of these people chose, sooner or later, to resist the course of the Third Reich. Their choices in fact had a common denominator: they were reactions to specific developments in the world around them. That is to say, German Jews reacted to rabid persecution; Steinbrück reacted to his imprisonment; and von Stauffenberg reacted to barbarity and a threat to his country. And yet there were Germans who (unlike the Jews) could have conformed to the expectations of the Third Reich *and still have survived*, but who (unlike Steinbrück and von Stauffenberg) *always* chose to do otherwise.

- Some **churchmen** resisted by virtue of their religious principles.

Refusing to be subsumed under a pro-Nazi organisation called 'the German Christians', in Autumn 1933 some 6,000 Protestant clergymen led by **Martin Niemöller** set up 'the Confessing Church'. Members of the Confessing Church helped approximately 2000 Jews escape to freedom. They also assisted political dissidents and fellow Christians persecuted by the regime. Bonhoeffer even liaised with members of the military resistance, some of whom were involved in the July 20th bombing of the Wolf's Lair. He helped draft memoranda on a future democratic government in the event that the regime was toppled. Bonhoeffer also compiled evidence of SS crimes, and coordinated contacts with foreigners abroad to gain support for a number of resistance groups. Bonhoeffer's actions indicate a level of concern that superseded particular theological assertions.

As for the Catholic Church in Germany, the Vatican was over-hasty to accept the Concordat in July 1933. Some senior members of the Catholic clergy did prevent junior priests speaking out against Hitler's government. Even so, during the years of the Third Reich, between a third and a half of all priests were persecuted for placing Christian beliefs ahead of National Socialist political doctrine. In 1941, for example, Father Lichtenberg was arrested in Berlin for preaching about the need to extend compassion towards Germany's Jews. He died in prison two years later.

• Equally remarkable were the actions of the 'White Rose Group'. Led by Hans and Sophie Scholl (below), this collection of **students** at Munich University wrote five bitterly anti-Nazi leaflets during



1942 and 1943 which were distributed around the country. The pamphlets relied on moral arguments to persuade Germans to embark on passive resistance against the government and to sabotage the war effort. In one particularly memorable passage, the group pointed out that crimes without parallel were being carried out against Jews in Poland. They added that anyone who did not try to prevent them was guilty too. On 18 February 1943, Hans (aged 24) and Sophie (aged 22) were caught tipping between 1,500 and 1,800 leaflets down the main staircase of Munich University. They were tried by a People's Court and executed. Munich's ordinary citizens were deeply shocked.

• The people discussed here were motivated by different beliefs. Yet each of these individuals had a core of principles so strong that it always dictated resistance to the Third Reich.

### Conclusion

• All of the figures populating this brief essay resisted Hitler. Each one had their own story about the decision to do so. Distinctions between those who took a stand after becoming disillusioned with the Third Reich, those who acted out of necessity and others who resisted because of political, religious or moral principles are highlighted. But whether we want to talk about von Stauffenberg's self-sacrifice, the courageous actions of the Scholls or the readiness of German Jews to start fresh lives in foreign lands, each and every one of them deserves the utmost understanding and respect. They are the bright lights in a dark period of German history.

## Tasks

### **Lesson 1:**

• What practical difficulties face historians studying opposition and resistance in the Third Reich?

You may wish to consider:

(a) How does Kershaw's definition of "Resistance" differ from that of Jacobsen?

(b) What would your definition of "Resistance" be? Try if possible to strike a balance between the two extremes of Jacobsen and Kershaw.

• Using this pack to help you, make a glossary of twenty key words / phrases, complete with definitions, which you will aim to include in any written discussion of this topic.

### **Lesson 2:**

• Produce a written answer to this question:

"To what extent did the nature and extent of opposition to the Nazis change as a result of the impact of war on Germany?"

### **Lessons 3&4:**

• Compare why, how and with what effectiveness these groups opposed the Nazis:

(a) The Military

(b) The Church

(c) Young people

(d) The Jews

TIP: use your glossary from the previous question to focus your answer more effectively.

### **Extension / Homework:**

• No attention has been given in this pack to the opposition of the Communist (KPD) party or of the Social Democratic Party in Exile (SOPADE) during the Nazi years. Produce your own notes on this topic, covering such things as (a) why they opposed Hitler; (b) what they did; (c) the effectiveness of their opposition.

### **Discussion points:**

• Imagine that you are drawing up a law which outlines the circumstances in which resistance to the state is justified. What would your exact wording be? (you could start "Resistance to the state is justified when...").

• To what extent do you think individuals have a duty to oppose a tyrannical regime, even if the consequences are almost certain death?

• "If there is nothing you are willing to die for, your life is worthless" – Do you agree?