

Introduction:
Resistance to National Socialism
in the Work of
Peter Hoffmann

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There has long been a debate among interested scholars over what constituted 'resistance' against Hitler and National Socialism during the Third Reich. Should individual acts of nonconformity with the wishes or policies of the state be permitted to bear the same label of 'resistance' as acts of those who participated in the conspiracy to assassinate Hitler on 20 July 1944? Was the refusal to accept certain aspects of National Socialism by isolated individuals on a daily basis as much 'resistance' as were the organised attempts to overthrow the Nazi state entirely?

The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines the verb 'to resist' in several ways: actively to oppose or seek to stop the course of; to prevent penetration; to repel, to remain unaffected by; to abstain from. 'Resistance' is defined as refusal to comply; hindrance; impeding or stopping the effect exercised upon another. Of course, formal definitions found in dictionaries do not always take into account meanings that are specifically dependent on a particular context. Moreover, definitions of resistance in a political context have come to reflect primarily the existence of an organised conspiracy, assassination, para-military activity, a *coup d'état*.

Definitions of resistance are also relative to time and place; criticism of the state, dissent from or nonconformity with its policies in a democratic environment are not thought of as constituting resistance in a traditional political or historical sense, but

they may all be considered forms of resistance on different levels in a totalitarian society such as Hitler's Third Reich. So central was *Gleichschaltung* (co-ordination) in the theory of National Socialism, and so brutally explicit was its application, that even the most individual and private forms of dissent or non-compliance with the policies of the government carried with them varying degrees of risk and the potential for grave consequences. For example, some paid with their lives for refusing to utter the greeting 'Heil Hitler', or for remarks that the war might be lost for Germany.¹

The essays in this volume address the question of resistance in its broadest sense to Hitler and National Socialism in the Third Reich. This should not be construed as an attempt to dilute the nature and substance of the kind of resistance undertaken by the relatively powerful and well-placed few in the armed forces and the bureaucracy who were at least remotely in a position in some significant way to alter or to actually destroy the Nazi regime.² Rather the intention is to suggest that there were very different levels of resistance to National Socialism during the Third Reich,³ reflecting in some measure the wide range of position, power and influence among the population as a whole. In that sense, individual acts of non-compliance among ordinary citizens usually reflected the extent to which many of them were realistically capable of resisting certain policies of the Nazi state – for that matter the state in general. For example, one might consider the votes of the majority of Germans in the Reichstag elections of 5 March 1933 for parties other than the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP), a week after the suspension of civil liberties and a month and a half after the beginning of the Nazi reign of terror, as a form of resistance.⁴ The inclination of most to resist in some way could not be expected to include active conspiracy against the Nazi government and the assassination of its leaders. Even if the will to kill them had been present, the average citizen had virtually no access to the important figures of the regime, least of all to Hitler. Peter Hoffmann has alluded to the resistance in Germany as a 'phenomenon of a determined but largely ineffective resistance . . . made up of a variety of forms of behavior, from semi-public gestures to direct anti-government activity at the highest level'.⁵ That he does not believe that only involvement in a conspiracy to do away with Hitler constituted opposition to the regime is evident in his assertion: 'It makes no sense today to demand that every opponent of the regime and of National Socialism had to have been a fanatical potential assassin in order that his opposition be believed.'⁶

The following contributions, and indeed almost anything written

about resistance in Germany during the Third Reich, also reflect the complex nature of the response of individuals, groups, and organisations to the emerging danger and evil which they perceived. Probably for most critics and opponents of Hitler and the Third Reich, National Socialism contained positive elements as well; certainly the majority of Germans were disinclined to return to the liberal democracy of the Weimar Republic. Nevertheless, for virtually all Germans who might fit into this broad categorisation of resistance, nationalism and patriotism inevitably intruded in a more or less complicating manner, impeding or confusing their opposition to all or part of the status quo, particularly during the Second World War. For many, moreover, especially in the Churches, their fear of communism conflicted with their apprehensions about or opposition to the Nazi 'New Order' in Germany and Europe. Thus, the essays presented here also reflect the broad scope of resistance to Hitler, as well as the complexity of its nature.

There can be little doubt that between 1933 and 1945 the great majority of Germans did succumb to a greater or lesser extent to the propaganda of the Nazi regime, and acquiesced in the state's exercise of total control over every aspect of their individual lives. Peter Hoffmann has argued: 'On the whole, at all times from 1933 to 1945 the majority of German voters, indeed of the entire population, supported the government, albeit with varying degrees of willingness.'⁷ Although many no doubt felt apprehensive about aspects of National Socialism and its policies, relatively few were able to muster the courage or the will to resist the state on any level, particularly after the first two years of Nazi rule. Popular opposition 'remained scattered, isolated and easily controlled' by the police, while the conspirators who planned the overthrow of the regime and the arrest or assassination of Hitler and other leaders lacked unity, favourable access, popular backing at home, and diplomatic support abroad. Hoffmann has concluded: 'This resistance was therefore not effective, since it was incapable of changing the regime.'⁸

Of course, success has not been the only, or even the primary, standard according to which the German resistance has been debated, interpreted and judged by scholars. Peter Hoffmann asserts: 'To declare these individual or collective acts of heroism in the struggle against Nazism to have been ineffective is not a judgement on their moral value. Isolated individuals and groups, without hope of being effective, did not make success the criterion for their commitment, any more than did other resisters with better access to the centres of power.'⁹ The actions of those who resisted were

motivated even more by a sense of moral responsibility to demonstrate to themselves, to their communities and to the world that some Germans stood in fundamental opposition to the policies and actions of the Nazi state. In so doing, they took upon themselves the obligation to save Germany from self-inflicted spiritual collapse as well as from physical destruction at the hands of the Allies.¹⁰ That such considerations counted for much more than the prospect of success in the resistance to Hitler is evident in the words of Major-General Henning von Tresckow, one of the conspirators in the 20 July 1944 assassination attempt against Hitler: 'The assassination must be attempted, at any cost. . . . We must prove to the world and to future generations that the men of the German resistance movement dared to take the decisive step and to hazard their lives upon it. Compared with this object, nothing else matters.'¹¹ Without a strong idealistic component in the motivation of individuals and groups, it is questionable whether their actions can or should be labelled 'resistance'.¹² Moreover, this moral imperative has also been a primary motivating factor for many scholars who address the subject in their work.

In one of the earliest studies of indigenous opposition to Hitler and National Socialism, the German historian Hans Rothfels acknowledged the existence of a substantial amount of resistance and the complexity of its composition, motives and history. In this book, first published in the United States in 1948,¹³ Rothfels aimed his conclusions primarily at an American audience at a time immediately after the war when the very notion of Germans in appreciable numbers actively resisting the Nazi regime was not at all palatable to public opinion in any of the victorious Allied countries. During those years and among the generation that followed, there was little distinction in the West between Nazis and Germans; most people simply assumed that all Germans supported everything that Hitler had done and for which he had stood. It is not surprising, therefore, that Allied censorship in occupied Germany from 1945 to 1949 would not permit the publication of works which addressed specifically and directly the question of resistance to National Socialism between 1933 and 1945, and that the first studies did not appear in Germany until after 1949. Thus, Rothfels's book had relatively little impact on the Western audiences that he was trying to influence. While he stressed that he did not wish to deny the responsibility of the German people as a whole for the horrors unleashed in their name by the Nazis, he did try nevertheless to demonstrate that there had been that 'other Germany', which, in a complex variety of ways, had stood in

opposition to Hitler and National Socialism.

A generation later, in the 'Foreword' to his *magnum opus* *Widerstand Staatsstreich Attentat. Der Kampf der Opposition gegen Hitler*, Peter Hoffmann alluded to 'a calmer atmosphere' then prevailing than that which followed the Second World War, one in which a more sensible and productive discussion of the German resistance could take place.¹⁴ In addition to the far greater availability of primary source materials, including perhaps an increased willingness of some persons who were key witnesses to the events between 1938 and 1945 to talk, Professor Hoffmann was clearly looking to Germany and to what by the end of the 1960s was an audience somewhat more receptive to an airing of the issue of resistance by Germans to Hitler. Prior to that time, Germans were preoccupied by the psychology of defeat, economic distress, occupation and denazification; the fact that many had resisted the Nazis must have been a particular embarrassment to the millions who had enthusiastically supported them, and probably discouraged public interest in the resistance.¹⁵ In the 1950s and 1960s, surviving resisters were regarded by many in Germany as traitors, and accordingly resistance was not a popular topic among academics, publishers, educators and the public at large. However, public opinion polls taken from 1951 to 1970 in the Federal Republic were also revealing a somewhat more positive attitude toward those who had been involved in resistance, set against a declining negative attitude.¹⁶ Peter Hoffmann's work represents, therefore, the first comprehensive examination of the theory and practice of resistance in Germany on the level of conspiracy, assassination and *coup d'état*, which, in conjunction with other seminal scholarly works on the history of the Third Reich, began to confront Germans with their recent past on a large scale during the late 1960s, a generation after the end of the Second World War and the immediate post-war period.¹⁷

That Peter Hoffmann has devoted much of his scholarly energy to the question of the resistance to Hitler and National Socialism in Germany is not surprising. It is too facile simply to conclude that he is a German driven by the need to demonstrate to the world that not all Germans were Nazis, that some opposed Hitler's crimes and that Germans in general are capable of human decency. That many German authors might want to do this is both understandable and desirable, as long as the crimes of the Third Reich and responsibility for them are not denied. In his work, Peter Hoffmann clearly portrays the criminal nature of the Nazi regime, while the tragedies of the relatively few who did resist, particularly although not

exclusively on the level of conspiracy and assassination, are contrasted sharply with the indifference or acquiescence of the many in all ranks of German society: 'Whereas the Resistance was representative of all German society in sociological, economic and political terms, it was not representative in quantitative terms. . . . Broad support, actual or potential, among the population was lacking for the actions of the Resistance as well as for its ideas.'¹⁸

There are personal, family ties to the German resistance which in part explain Peter Hoffmann's ongoing interest and scholarship in this area of research. His father, the late Dr Wilhelm Hoffmann, was a *Bibliotheksrat* (academic librarian) at the *Landesbibliothek* (State Library) in Württemberg from 1931, and its director after 1945. The Hoffmann family had long been acquaintances of the Weizsäcker, the Stauffenbergs and the Bonhoeffers among others in Württemberg – that is, with some of the leading families who were representative of the German conservatives to whom Peter Hoffmann has devoted much of his attention in his work on resistance. Wilhelm Hoffmann met Adam von Trott zu Solz several times during the war. Trott secured for the elder Hoffmann the necessary visas for travel to Switzerland on library business; at the same time, Hoffman acted as a courier for the conspirators to make contact with the British there. Dr Eugen Gerstenmaier, apparently with the knowledge and consent of Trott, confided to Wilhelm Hoffmann that an assassination attempt against Hitler would take place in July 1944. In that month Trott gave Hoffmann a pistol and asked him to see that it reached his (Trott's) wife in Berlin. Presumably intended for Frau von Trott's suicide in the event that the impending assassination attempt against Hitler failed, Wilhelm Hoffmann entrusted the weapon to his brother-in-law, who was travelling to Berlin and who turned it over to Hans Schönfeld, a member of the conspiracy who was employed by the World Council of Churches. Thus Peter Hoffmann's father was intimately connected with the resistance against Hitler during the Second World War. Despite the obvious risks, he assisted the conspirators in their efforts and generally enjoyed their confidence.

Wilhelm Hoffmann was also among the first publicly to raise the question of German resistance in print during the immediate post-war period in Germany, albeit rather briefly. In his book *Nach der Katastrophe*,¹⁹ published in 1946, he made observations about Germany during the Third Reich that to some extent must have helped to prepare the ground for Peter Hoffmann's research efforts a generation later. Wilhelm Hoffmann stressed the ability of the Nazis to use German nationalism as a cover for their criminal

intentions, making it difficult for the majority of Germans to distinguish between their patriotism and National Socialism, or overtly and actively to object to the policies of the Nazi state. If in the occupied countries of Europe during the war there was no conflict between the desire for freedom and nationalist feelings, in Germany there clearly was. Hoffman senior also pointed to a major weakness of the resistance, namely its inability to formulate a clear and unified idea of what would follow the overthrow of the Nazi regime. Thus, there was no concept developed of a future order which, even given the visible brutality, and the preparations for war and the hardships these caused, might have offered an alternative to the status quo around which substantial numbers of Germans might have rallied. Peter Hoffmann has built on all these themes in his own work on the resistance.²⁰

As a young student pursuing his doctorate at the University of Munich, Peter Hoffmann was inclined to pursue his research in the history of Germany in the nineteenth century; his *Doktorvater*, the renowned Professor Franz Schnabel, was at the time perhaps the leading authority on that period. His dissertation dealt with the diplomatic relations between the Kingdoms of Bavaria and Württemberg during and immediately after the Crimean War.²¹ As he was finishing his graduate studies, Peter Hoffmann was approached by the 'Stiftung Hilfswerk 20. Juli 1944'²² and invited to undertake a definitive history of the resistance. He already possessed an interest in the topic in any case, and might also in some small way have been attracted to it as a result of his knowledge of his father's activities during the war. Moreover, the assurance of the 'Stiftung' that it possessed large quantities of hitherto unused documents, papers, etc., was also an inducement to move into this field of scholarly activity. The result, of course, was his definitive volume, referred to above, first published in 1969.

Certainly a hallmark of Peter Hoffmann's scholarship on the resistance in Germany has been its comprehensive nature. He has written to a varying extent on most of the themes, individuals and groups upon which the essays in this volume focus. He has studied the ubiquitous nature of the police and security authorities in the Nazi state. The question of morality versus narrow class self-interest as a motivating factor among the conservative élite has been another question receiving his intense scrutiny. He has looked at the complexity surrounding the disappointing failure of the *Wehrmacht* as an instrument in the resistance against Hitler between 1938 and 1944. The attitude of the Allies toward resistance inside Germany, particularly in conjunction with their war aims, as well

as their role in its ultimate failure, have been topics that he has addressed in several important publications. Peter Hoffmann has also considered the uneven and at times selective nature of the resistance, within a general context of compliance with the regime, on the part of the Protestant and Catholic Churches. He has examined the generally heroic but futile efforts of socialist and communist resistance against the Nazi state, especially during the early years of the Third Reich, and has subsequently taken up the question of popular disaffection and nonconformity with aspects of National Socialism. Finally, few scholars have treated the theme of Jewish resistance within Germany, an immensely sensitive and difficult one because the natural weakness of such activity was the result of the uniquely vulnerable position of the German-Jewish community before and after 1933. However, Peter Hoffmann has placed particular emphasis on Nazi atrocities against the Jews as a factor provoking the resistance by German conspirators during the Second World War.

Clearly, the emphasis in Peter Hoffmann's work over the years has been on the history of the organised conspiracy to assassinate Hitler and to topple the Nazi regime; however, he has placed this within the context of the wider history of resistance in the Third Reich by also undertaking a detailed examination and assessment of other forms of opposition. He has recognised that resistance in the 'broad sense' began even before 1933, has argued that in the 'true sense' it commenced after 1933 and has focused on 'the real hallmark of resistance' that began in 1938, namely the active conspiracy to destroy Hitler's regime outright.²³ In some respects, therefore, the essays in this volume stand in a dialogue with him on the nature and course of resistance to Hitler and National Socialism in Germany. Some papers supplement topics on which his scholarship has led the way, while others complement his work by expanding upon matters which he has already considered in greater detail in his writing.

Thus, Robert Gellately's contribution on the political policing of the Nazi state demonstrates the ability of its authorities to create an effective 'surveillance society' which eliminated the 'relatively safe enclaves in which disobedience might have developed structurally'. Lawrence Stokes and Leonidas Hill consider the moral and ethical component of resistance in conservative circles during the Third Reich, notwithstanding some of the more dubious political inclinations these groups manifested and their general rejection of the liberal democracy of the Weimar Republic. Arnold Paucker and Karol Jonca address the difficult question of the manner in which

the Jewish community sought to resist the Nazi assault on its rights and position in Germany both before and after the Nazi *Machtübernahme* in 1933.

The essays by John Conway, Robert Ericksen and Donald Dietrich present a picture of a resistance to National Socialism in the Protestant and Catholic Churches which was sporadic, selective, and very mixed, one that includes examples of the great personal courage of a few believers on an individual level against a backdrop of institutional reticence, fear, confusion and overall compliance. Ian Kershaw, Ernst Hanisch and Jill Stephenson consider the question of popular non-compliance with and opposition to certain policies of Hitler's regime, specifically levels of resistance against the *Gleichschaltung* of German society by the Nazi state. Whether it was popular opposition to the 'guns versus butter' priorities of the regime between 1934 and 1936, disobedience to Nazi policies which stood in conflict with religious and social customs in the Austrian Alps, or the refusal of German citizens in Württemberg to comply with the 'no surrender' dictates of the authorities during the waning months of the war, these three authors provide examples of the extent, however limited, to which ordinary individuals would go to resist total subordination to the will of Hitler's state. William Sheridan Allen and Eve Rosenhaft provide a broader context for treating the subject of resistance on the Left. Allen looks at Social Democratic responses to National Socialism within the context of a developed tradition of underground movements in Europe, while Rosenhaft considers the legacy of communist resistance in the early years of the German Democratic Republic.

The important topic of the contacts of the German resistance with the outside world, and its dependence on them, is the focus of the contributions by Ger van Roon, Henry Malone and Rainer Blasius. Malone and Blasius discuss the German and British sides respectively of those connections, while van Roon considers parallel ties with resistance groups in Holland. Harold Deutsch and Heinrich Walle address the question of resistance in the German armed forces; Deutsch considers the perennial question of the inclination or disinclination of top military commanders to act to remove Hitler from power in 1938, and Walle presents the story of one naval officer's questioning of and final non-compliance with the overall aims of the Nazi state. Finally, in his concluding piece Michael Balfour raises one of the more important 'what ifs' in the history of the Third Reich, namely what might have happened had the resistance to Hitler and National Socialism been successful in eliminating him from power. In so doing, Balfour proposes reasons

why the resistance in Germany in general, and the conspiracy to assassinate Hitler in particular, ultimately had to fail.

Peter Hoffmann has suggested that it is not possible fully to comprehend the evil of the Third Reich without an understanding of the resistance which it produced. He has written:

The Nazi crimes, and the battle waged against them by a few within Nazi Germany, challenge all human beings to comprehend the nature of tyranny. Hitler's rule cannot be understood without a grasp of the resistance to Nazi crimes, for the very nature of the Third Reich evoked the most uncompromising opposition as well as the enthusiasm of the masses. The relation between National Socialism and the Resistance is a key to comprehending the Nazi system.²⁴

That there is a direct correlation between the essence of a tyranny and the nature and degree of opposition to it, has been a constant thread throughout Peter Hoffmann's work on the German resistance for a generation. Therefore his writing on the subject has been and will remain for years to come a standard for all scholars, because its ultimate contribution has been a fuller understanding of Hitler, National Socialism and the history of the Third Reich.

NOTES

1. For much more on this, see: W. Wagner, *Der Volksgerichtshof im nationalsozialistischen Staat*, Stuttgart, 1974, pp. 277–415.
2. See, for example, H. Mommsen, 'Die Geschichte des deutschen Widerstands im Lichte der neueren Forschung', *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, vol. 50, 1986, pp. 3–38.
3. See, for example, the discussions of resistance on a variety of levels, beyond the confines of organised attempts at *coup d'état*, in: L. E. Hill, 'Toward a New History of the German Resistance to Hitler', *Central European History*, vol. 14, 1981, pp. 369–99; and G. van Roon, *Widerstand im Dritten Reich. Ein Überblick*, 4th edn, Munich, 1987, pp. 11–28.
4. See, for example, van Roon, *Widerstand im Dritten Reich*, pp. 11 ff.
5. P. Hoffmann, *German Resistance to Hitler*, Cambridge, Mass., 1988, p. 55.
6. P. Hoffmann, *Widerstand Staatsstreich Attentat. Der Kampf der Opposition gegen Hitler*, 4th rev. edn, Munich, 1985, p. 54.
7. Hoffmann, *German Resistance*, p. 51.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 60, 71–2.

9. Ibid., p. 60.
10. See: H.-A. Jacobsen (ed.), *July 20, 1944: The German Opposition to Hitler as Viewed by Foreign Historians – An Anthology*, Bonn, 1969, pp. 6–7.
11. F. von Schlabrendorff, *Revolt Against Hitler: The Personal Account of Fabian von Schlabrendorff*, G. von S. Gaevernitz (ed.), London, 1948, p. 131.
12. See, for example, R. Pommerin, 'Demokraten und Pazifisten oder Rowdies und Rebellen? Die Einschätzung der "Edelweißpiraten" im britischen Außenministerium 1944/45', *Geschichte im Westen*, vol. 2, 1987, pp. 135–44.
13. See H. Rothfels, *The German Opposition to Hitler*, Hinsdale, Illinois, 1948. The German edition was published one year later as *Die deutsche Opposition gegen Hitler; eine Würdigung*, Krefeld, 1949. (New and enlarged edn, ed. H. Graml, Frankfurt am Main, 1977.)
14. Hoffmann, *Widerstand*, p. 12. In 1968 Hans Rothfels strongly recommended the publication of this volume to the Piper-Verlag in Munich. Although he was still the leading German authority on the resistance in Germany at the time, Rothfels insisted that there was still much to be said on the subject. The book first appeared in English under the title *The History of the German Resistance 1933–1945*, published simultaneously in the United States and Great Britain by the MIT Press and Macdonald and Jane's Publishers, respectively, in 1977. It was first published in French as *La résistance allemande contre Hitler* by Éditions André Balland in Paris in 1984.
15. See Hoffmann, *German Resistance*, p. 1.
16. See Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach, *Der Widerstand im Dritten Reich. Wissen und Urteil der Bevölkerung vor und nach dem 40. Jahrestag des 20. Juli 1944*, Allensbach, 1984.
17. There were two important studies on the resistance published in Germany during the 1950s between the work of Rothfels and Hoffmann. However they consider only special aspects of the overall topic. They are G. Ritter, *Carl Goerdeler und die deutsche Widerstandsbewegung*, Stuttgart, 1954; and E. Zeller, *Geist der Freiheit. Der Zwanzigste Juli*, Munich, 1952. Like Hans Rothfels, they emphasise the moral basis of the opposition to Hitler.
18. Hoffmann, *German Resistance*. p. 71.
19. See W. Hoffmann, *Nach der Katastrophe*, Tübingen–Stuttgart, 1946, pp. 60 ff., 111 ff.
20. For Hoffmann's views on the inability of most Germans to avoid confusing their nationalism with National Socialism see, for example, his *German Resistance*, pp. 52 ff. The problem of the failure of the resistance to formulate a unified program of what was to follow the Nazi regime was naturally linked to the question of its foreign contacts and the inherent problems associated with them. See, for example, his 'Peace Through Coup d'État: The Foreign Contacts of the German Resistance 1933–1944', *Central European History*, vol. 19, 1986, pp. 3–44.

21. It was published as *Die diplomatische Beziehungen zwischen Württemberg und Bayern im Krimkrieg und bis zum Beginn der italienischen Krise (1853–1858)*, Stuttgart, 1963.
22. There was very little official, institutional support for the survivors, widows and children of the German resistance during the first years after the war. The 'Stiftung', partly funded by the West German government, undertook this kind of assistance.
23. Hoffmann, *Widerstand*, p. 10.
24. Hoffmann, *German Resistance*, p. 3.

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