

Forms of resistance in germany



By Khalil Jetha

In the years leading up to World War II (WWII), Germany experienced heightened nationalism, culminating in the ascension of the Nazi Party. The most infamous fascists in history, the Nazis anti-Semitic rhetoric and ultra-nationalist fervor took the former Weimar Republic by storm. Contrary to popular European contention, the Nazis were not as popular among Germans as they would claim. Various pockets of resistance sprang up to Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Regime, though opposition was met with harsh retribution. The German dictator's resilience and severe punishments drove the indigenous resistance underground. By the time Germany had invaded Poland and set the stage for war, several small but highly organized and regimented groups had developed. Among the resistance groups were leftist organizations, anti-fascist circles such as religious institutions, military groups, and intellectual and political assemblies. They all differed in organization, character, and the degree of their reach and impact in the resistance movement; however, each one played its own significant part in the formulation of a popular movement. Resistance took the form of political opposition during Hitler's rise to power before being driven underground; after the start of the war, resistance became armed, organizing several assassination attempts on the Fuhrer's life.

Forms of Resistance in Germany

The first opposition to Hitler and the Nazis came from Communist and other leftist groups. Largely political in their mobilization, they were "the core of early opposition"; Communists in particular had the benefit of Marxist indoctrinations such as a coherent sense of resistance, which allowed them

to establish a framework for underground opposition that would serve as a model for future groups (Rothfels 45).

Communists were the most vocal because like the fascists, they were radical in nature; the Communist proclivity for revolution earned them a unique enmity among Nazi circles. Other leftist groups, however, were perceived as more passive and were easily quelled by nationalist fervor. Groups such as “the Social Democratic, the Democratic and the Centre Party [surrendered] to the illusion that political opposition would be legally possible” in Nazi Germany (Rothfels 45). Though vocal with their opinions, most leftist parties were exemplary of European appeasement. Where the Communists were convinced that Hitler was attempting to create a new society, Socialists and others viewed the rising regime as “a mere temporary setback compared with a normal democratic order” (Rothfels 45). There were a few in the leftist opposition that welcomed Hitler to power, relying on assumptions of Nazi inefficacy in leadership. They were counting on Hitler to be exposed for the political madman he was; unfortunately, the German public welcomed Hitler’s initiative and unwavering policies.

Anti-fascist circles such as the Catholic and Protestant groups were arguably the most pervading form of opposition to Nazism, as they had existed at all phases of the Nazi ascension. Unlike political groups, religious groups did not have to rely on “techniques of plot and stratagem” in their opposition; churchmen in the resistance could “voice their views more or less openly” unlike political and military opposition, who were forced to join the Nazi party in order to facilitate subversion (Hamerow 131). Hitler faced a viable adversary in the Catholic Church, as the papacy in many ways had more

influence over German Catholics than the Fuhrer could hope to exert in several lifetimes. Consequently, Hitler sidestepped a direct confrontation with Catholic opposition, partly because he wanted to be “viewed as a pragmatist and moderate” (Hamerow 133). In addition, Hitler’s attempts at German galvanization would quickly be stemmed if he arrested or assassinated members of the clergy. Catholic clergy in particular were free to oppose Nazis publicly, as the “higher the position of a churchman, the greater the degree of popular support on which he could rely” due to the Nazi fear of “public incitement” that would inevitably follow clerical incarceration (Hamerow 132). In contrast to the Nazi apprehension of Catholic influence, the regime took a more confrontational approach to the Protestant church as “Protestantism was free of any supranational connection or foreign authority” (Hamerow 147). The Nazi regime was therefore able to fully exert its totalitarian influence over the religion, politicizing it and demanding its full cooperation with the state. The polarization of Protestantism incited its adherents, who were most concerned with the protection of the church from the state. Also unlike the Catholic church, “Protestantism and National Socialism seemed to have a great deal in common” as both “denounced the spirit of liberalism”, advocating German unity following the first World War (Hamerow 146). Where few Catholic clergy supported Nazi rhetoric, “many Protestant clergymen expressed some sympathy for the Nazi Party, and quite a few became outright supporters” causing a major ideological rift in the Protestant opposition (Hamerow 146).

The majority of dissenters within the armed forces were Germans of noble birth whose families were highly influential prior to the Prussian age prior to the First World War (WWI). Incensed by the Nazi harassment of churches and other conscientious objectors to the oppression of minorities, high-ranking individuals in the German military (though initially admirers of mid 1930s German nationalism) became some of the most prominent figures of the resistance. Officers such as Henning von Tresckow “ realized early on that the excesses of the Nazi regime were not excesses at all but its real nature” (Fest 174). Many military groups organized during Hitler’s first expansion into Western Europe, encouraged by the seeming impossibility of waging a two-front war against the Soviet Union and Great Britain. It was “ at the time of the dispute over the western offensive” that Tresckow “ attempted in total despair to organize a revolt” (Fest 174). Though unsuccessful in rallying other high-ranking officers, Tresckow was later stationed at the Russian front, where his plans “ for a coup began to take shape” (Fest 174).

Like its military counterparts, political activists and intellectual groups were taken aback by nationalism and Hitler’s ability to inspire the German population. The old wealth of Prussia and the new civilian intelligentsia formed circles of resistance who were disgusted with the dissolution of Prussian society. The Kreisau Circle was one of the more daring groups of intellectual resisters. Organized in the summer of 1940, the circle comprised of a group of men “ between thirty and forty” who came “ together in a circle whose [center] was Graf Helmuth J. von Moltke, the great-grand-nephew of the Field Marshal in the Bismarck era and” an “ implacable anti-Nazi” (Rothfels 108-109). Their meetings and correspondence with key military

figures such as Tresckow culminated in the several assassination attempts on Hitler, particularly following the American involvement and successful British bombing campaigns of 1944.

An Assessment of Opposition Groups and Individuals

The Communist political structure was one orchestrated for revolution. Their natural “ advantage of a schooling in revolutionary technique” earned them Nazi hostility and special attention in the early years of the Nazi regime (Rothfels 45). Recognizing the Communists as the most prevalent threat in Nazi Germany, Hitler saw fit to make them “ the first party to be outlawed” (Rothfels 45). The greatest threat to Hitler’s unification of Germany was the proletariat empowerment threatened by the Communist party; with waning support from the Prussian bourgeois, Hitler and the Nazis could ill afford further splintering among the lower and middle class Germany citizenry. Furthermore, the Communist organization was one that was accustomed to resistance and the threat of imprisonment. In keeping with Marxist tradition, the Communists regimented themselves in such a way as to keep resistance alive no matter the possible incarceration their members would face. Though they were eventually caught, the Communist laid the groundwork for future resistance cells’ organization. Arguably the most important contribution the Communists provided was their separation of groups; the Communist example showed others that “ members [of a resistance cell] should in no circumstances have knowledge of the activity of any other cell but their own” (Rothfels 45).

Catholic and Protestant circles, though not as highly regimented or as revolutionary as the Communists, were equally concerned with the Nazi ascension of the 1930s. Many Catholics “ mentioned the persecution of the Jews as the primary motive for their opposition,” while others “ emphasized the elimination of civil rights, the arbitrary, dictatorial style of the government, and the assault on the churches” (Fest 326). The Catholic Church in particular had the power to reach citizens inside Germany. “ Not being part of the state apparatus,” Christian opposition (especially the Catholic Church) was freer to criticize the regime (Hamerow 131). The Nazis had an especially difficult time curbing Catholic opposition, as its moral dictates were supranational in origin as previously discussed. Protestants, on the other hand, did not enjoy the standoff of power as the Catholics. Though the Catholic Church had the ability to intervene morally on a greater level, it sought reconciliation over confrontation in the fashion of then British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain’s infamous policy of “ appeasement.” Though more of an underground movement than the Catholic opposition, Protestant “ clerical resisters could, indirectly at least, articulate political dissent in the guise of pastoral stricture” (Hamerow 131). While several small groups of Protestants remained among the Nazi faithful, the majority of the clergy was against fascist ideology and played an instrumental part in communicating with the various military opposition circles in play.

Several members of the German military such as Tresckow openly defied Hitler and superiors such as the infamous Joseph Goebbels. Following the atrocities of *Kristallnacht* and Goebbels’ open endorsement of anti-Semitic riots, several high-ranking officers such as “ General Fedor von Bock even

asked [fellow officers] excitedly whether someone couldn't just 'string up that swine Goebbels'" (Fest 104). Military resistance had the extreme benefit of being able to relay messages using Nazi equipment; it was the military, after all, that monitored general communications in the first place. Tresckow was one of the first to communicate plans of overthrowing the Fuhrer.

Though his several assassination attempts failed, Tresckow insisted that future "assassinations [had to] be attempted" as what really mattered was that "the German resistance movement [take] the plunge before the eyes of the world and of history" (Fest 173). Largely fragmented, military opposition was held in check, as Hitler's maddening military campaigns were literally unchallenged. With each victory came increased rhetoric supporting Hitler's leadership. Following the "unbroken string of victories, including the last-minute campaigns against Greece, Albania, and Yugoslavia", opposition did not become feasible for military groups until "Operation Barbarossa," the codename given to the invasion of Russia (Fest 179). The Soviet military machine was not one to be taken lightly, as it greatly outnumbered a thinly dispersed German army. What exacerbated "relations between Hitler and the officer corps, which began to deteriorate rapidly" in the Russian front, was the "orgy of executions" in which certain units would partake. Most of the Prussian officers were men of soldiery and honor who would no longer stand for Hitler's penchant for destruction.

The Kreisau Circle shared the Prussian ideals and sentiments of the scattered military opposition. However, the intelligentsia was wary in their relations with military groups. They stood in the way of violence as a catalyst for political change, as "they were too fastidious in their idealism to engage in

anything as messy as bombing, maiming, and killing” (Hamerow 367). To intellectuals like those of the Kreisau Circle, the military was subversive in nature, “betraying the Third Reich [just] as they previously betrayed the republic and [prior to that] the monarchy” (Hamerow 366). There was an inherent distrust among the intelligentsia as they were disgusted at how complacent the military could be amidst Hitler’s rampage, violence, and murder. They accused the military of being duplicitous, acceding to the Nazi regime’s every whim “because Hitler enabled them to play once again a prominent role in public affairs” (Hamerow 366). Unlike the Church and the leftist political groups, the intelligentsia was perceived both as keeping order in planning Hitler’s overthrow as well as cowardly procrastinators who unnecessarily avoided violence, then decided to be a necessity. The Kreisau Circle’s apprehension was based equally upon the possibility of Hitler’s overthrow as well as the future of the movement in the case it failed. Unlike the Communists, intelligentsia and high society circles could ill afford a failed attempt, as it would surely mean their deaths as well as the death of the opposition movement and the reconstruction of Germany. The intelligentsia’s primary concern was that “an unsuccessful uprising against the Nazi regime might cost the lives of people needed to govern postwar Germany” (Hamerow 367). Unfortunately, their excessive deliberation only left the opposition movement entirely reliant upon Allied forces’ intervention.

Conclusion

Several opposition movements sprang up throughout Hitler’s reign. Few were violently revolutionary as not many could forecast the international atrocities of which the Nazis were capable. The most revolutionary and

proactive groups such as the Communists were persecuted and imprisoned in order to set a clear example for Hitler's new Germany; as a result, groups went largely underground following Hitler's ascension to power. Anti-fascist religious groups, the military, and the intelligentsia at times worked on their own. Religious bodies would disseminate their views through sermons and secret messages, where the military capitalized on the escalating Russian front to coordinate assassination attempts. However, the opposition was ultimately quelled, as its fractious nature could not galvanize in order to effectively counter the power of the Nazi party.

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