

Ricerche di **Storia Politica**

PETER STEINBECH

The resistance movement during the nazi dictatorship in Germany

This is the original version of the article published by «Ricerche di storia politica», issue 1/2002, pp. 39-60, with the title *Il movimento di Resistenza durante la dittatura nazista*



PETER STEINBACH

The resistance movement during the nazi dictatorship in Germany

The main opposition groups, their backgrounds and motives

The resistance to National Socialism is considered one of the special links with the Germany of today and one of the roots of her post-war democracy. This partly explains why interest in the subject has featured prominently in the Federal Republic's political culture and political education. But it has also meant that very often, though not always, it has been examined in the light of the current situation. Such narrow approaches have meanwhile largely been superseded by the realization that the decisive criterion for a fair moral assessment of the resistance movement could not be whether those concerned had committed «treason» or broken their «oath of allegiance», or whether they were in duty bound to help prevent the Red Army gaining a victory, as was still being maintained in the 50s, but whether their action was justified by the «authority of their conscience» in the struggle against the Nazi dictatorship and by their readiness to risk their lives.

The increasingly accepted view that the Nazi regime was totalitarian, that it was inimical to rather than based on the rule of law, a system which aimed to exclude whole sections of the population and pursued the «final solution» of the «Jewish question» through the racist and ideological war it unleashed, more and more justified the resistance which, since the 50s, has been marked by official ceremonies in honour of those who, on 20 July 1944, attempted to assassinate Hitler. Through its very existence, therefore, but above all through the crimes committed in its name, the Nazi dictatorship validated every attempt to shun or actively resist it. The almost unanimous judgement today is that the resistance movement embodied a political, but also a moral and ethical, alternative which, after Germany's liberation from National Socialism, smoothed the path to the democratic system adopted after the war. That is why the resistance was often seen as part of a universal human rights movement. This was the interpretation given to it by Hans Rothfels on the 20th anniversary of the attempt to kill Hitler. To him the «source of resistance» was

the willingness and the ability of those involved to advance to a «principled» stance, «to acquire the strength of moral self-assurance which transcends contemplation of doing what is merely politically necessary».

In the 60s and 70s this broader approach also embraced hitherto frequently neglected factions, such as young people, small religious groups, women, Jews and prison inmates. It produced a differentiated view of resistance, which henceforth was seen to contain elements of protest, conflict and dissidence and focused attention on the practical opposition in everyday life leading to an inflationary definition of resistance well beyond the exploration of a new aspect of the history of individual self-assertiveness and resistance between 1933 and 1945 and turning it into a legitimate politico-historical slogan and war-cry. Historians like Karl Dietrich Bracher, theologians like Eberhard Bethge, and legal scholars like Arthur Kaufmann were quick to spot and warn against this trend.

However, researchers in the 60s also revised the picture of a resistance movement seeking to establish a liberal constitution in the western mould, a picture which was extensively propagated in commemorative political speeches and presented the opponents of the regime as an integral part of the historical process leading to the Basic Law (constitution of the Federal Republic of Germany). This revision in many cases produced crude distortions which ultimately seemed to verify the conclusion that the resistance movement offered no decisive alternative to the Nazi regime but was merely a continuation of the old animosity towards the party-dominated, despotic state that had been responsible for the failure of the Weimar Republic. In contrast, Andreas Hillgruber pointed out that the military and civil resistance was largely the result of a process which had required many of those concerned, especially the officers among them, to abandon political positions which they had initially shared, at least partly, with the National Socialists. To him the resistance not only manifested a gradual elevation to positions of principle but quite specifically revealed in the struggle against the Nazi regime both an «incongruity» and a «product» of the times.

However great their fear that the seizure of power by the Nazis meant the «legalization of revenge», many contemporaries only gradually became aware of the regime's hegemonic aspirations. In subjugating the country the Nazis turned increasingly and openly against alleged «enemies», against supporters of opposition groups whom they vilified as manifestations of the hated Weimar system. Very soon new categories of crime were introduced and the system of concentration camps rapidly expanded. Within but a few months persecution became the collective lot and opponents of the regime increasingly saw resistance as a task for those who wanted

to maintain contact with a few like-minded friends and thus foster solidarity, less as a means of overthrowing the regime.

This ideological opposition and self-assertive tendency led to the formation of groups and circles - a national characteristic, as Hans Rothfels aptly observed. The Nazis persecuted them because they were seen as a determined challenge to the regime's ideological aspirations. Nonetheless, their resistance was never exclusively directed against the representatives of Nazi rule but also against those who, by toeing the line, wanted to improve their own situation. The fact that the Weimar Republic, too, was rejected or at least treated with indifference or viewed without any deep republican commitment by those who opposed National Socialism was conducive to this tendency.

Resistance from Communists

Supporters of the KPD (German Communist Party) were the first large group of opponents of the regime to be persecuted. They were branded as criminals by a decree issued on 28 February 1933 after the Reichstag fire and deprived of their rights. Their fate makes it blatantly clear that with the destruction of the democratic Weimar state the law too had become an instrument of political domination and was no longer a «protector of the weak». To the Nazis the divisions between Communists, Socialists, Social Democrats and trade unionists were fluid. All «Marxist» newspapers were banned and anyone caught distributing them was found guilty of «resistance» and punished.

This was the first Nazi definition of «resistance». Any form of opposition or ideological or political independence was seen as rebellion and as a breach of the law and thus a criminal offence. The regime's opponents, on the other hand, rarely used the term «resistance». At first the Communists failed to recognize the abnormality of the early Nazi terrorism, which was designed to isolate and immobilize possible enemies, but also to confront the public with the horror of tyranny and render them defenceless. Indeed, they usually saw little more in «Hitlerite Fascism» than a continuation of the «Fascism of Papen and Schleicher». Thus they regarded Hitler's assumption of power as a transient phenomenon. What they were waiting for above all else was the collapse of the capitalist system which they believed would strengthen their position.

It was the mass arrests following the arson attack on the Reichstag and the immediate confrontation with a rapidly growing and increasingly effective machinery

of oppression which caused the KPD to abandon the idea of a mass or even «lawful» protest and demonstrative resistance. Although party leaders later constantly stressed the KPD's supposedly pre-eminent role in the resistance, what the Communists actually achieved, and especially their influence on the movement as a whole, was less impressive, despite the fact that a very large number of them were persecuted and killed.

The main positions of the KPD in Weimar days remained the same long after 1933. The «Social Fascism» theory, according to which the Social Democrats were at least as large if not a greater threat than the National Socialists, was not corrected until 1935, though this did not heal the political wounds resulting from the «fraternal struggle» between the Social Democrats and trade unions on the one side and the Communists on the other. The KPD's leaders, who with few exceptions had been imprisoned or emigrated, were chiefly concerned with demonstrating the incredibility of Nazism's hegemonic aspirations and especially its ideological intentions for the nation. This is why they attached so much importance to public protest and defiance, with the result that the Gestapo were quickly able to step in and smash most of the Communist resistance groups by 1935/36. This explains how the Communist resistance was sapped and had to be constantly reorganized in increasingly conspiratorial groups able to operate largely independently of their exiled leaders.

However, the inflexibility of the illegal and exiled KPD leaders, who were under the influence of Stalin's lackey Walter Ulbricht and were able to get rid of more tractable Communists such as Willi Mü nzenberg, ultimately stood in the way of a self-critical assessment of the «general line of the Social Fascists» thus justifying the position of those critics in small Socialist groups and in the SPD (Social Democratic Party) who sought to link democracy and Socialism as an expression of their desire for a western-style freedom. Hence they never sought political support from Stalin but first in Prague, then in Paris, Stockholm, London and the United States, took up the cause of western democracy in the confrontation with Nazism.

Resistance from Social Democrats

Resistance from Social Democratic quarters, too, was from the outset ineffectual because Reich Chancellor Franz von Papen's «Prussian blow» of 20 July 1932, which, in breach of the constitution, removed the minority government led by the Social Democrats, had killed any chance of their being willing to defend the republic against a possible coup. Moreover, the unions were seeking an arrangement with those

actually holding the reins of power and therefore declared themselves politically neutral.

Thus after 30 January 1933 mass resistance from the Social Democrats and the unions would have had hardly any chance of success. Indeed, it might even have suffered the same fate as that of the Austrian Socialists a good twelve months later when they rose up against what they termed the «Austro-fascist» authoritarian regime of Engelbert Dollfuss and were defeated with heavy losses.

In addition, the efforts of many Social Democrats to find a strategy that would keep them on the side of the law while defending the republic also had a paralyzing effect on the party. They upheld the principle of parliamentary democracy, as manifest in the courageous parliamentary speech by Otto Wels, chairman of the Social Democratic Party, when they rejected the «Enabling Law», but they hardly had the «fantasy» to see the consequences of Nazi tyranny, as Wilhelm Hoegner, then a young member of parliament, would later complain. Another point to remember is that in the spring of 1933 the Social Democratic Party was going through a serious crisis. Some leading functionaries were trying to find common ground with the new regime in the field of foreign policy in order to avoid further persecution. Others, including Julius Leber, a young member of the Reichstag who had been imprisoned since the end of January 1933 and only released following a mass demonstration, criticised the party leadership and prepared to go underground. Others still, such as Reichstag deputy Toni Pftilf, were so depressed by the attitude of the party leadership that they committed suicide. Leber, who together with friends like Carlo Mierendorff and Theodor Haubach later joined the Kreisau Circle, complained that the Social Democrats of the Weimar era, though realistic and rational, had failed to develop any vision of the future. He spent many years in prison, where he suffered torture, but the Nazis were unable to break his resistance (He was executed shortly before the end of the war).

Unlike the Communist resistance, which tended to be outward-looking, that of the Social Democrats was more a question of developing partisanship. Social Democrats met for discussions and tried first of all to find out why the Weimar Republic had failed, but later also to consider the development of new forms of political cooperation with Socialist groups, to work out a Social Democratic programme, and to mark the contours of a new order. These aims were reflected in the formation of resistance groups with names like «New Beginning», «Red Force» and «Socialist Action». They also discussed the creation of a new communications network that could not be controlled by the National Socialists, as well as preparations for the underground struggle against the regime.

Particularly important were the many groups formed by members of small Socialist «bridging parties», such as the «Socialist Labour Party» (SAP), the «International Socialist Militant League» (ISK) or the «KPD (Opposition)». They were able to influence the exiled SPD leadership under Erich Ollenhauer, as well as post-war allied plans, but not least the discussion of the SPD's programme which was to be part of the party's post-war development.

This revealed the possibility of anti-totalitarian resistance from the Left. It was an alternative to the anti-democratic resistance of the Communists and detracted from the aspirations of all «anti-Fascists» who rejected westernstyle liberal democracy and continued, during the resistance and above all whilst the leaders were in exile, to support the aims and policies of the Soviet Union and thus caused the failure of the «National Front» of all enemies of Fascism and National Socialism that had been proclaimed in France and in the Spanish Civil War.

Because the Social Democratic opponents of the regime concentrated their efforts on developing close circles of friends and thus showed greater restraint, their Nazi persecutors were unable to penetrate as far into this network as they had been able to in the case of the Communist resistance. This explains why far fewer Social Democrats were imprisoned than Communists. Social Democrats had comparatively little difficulty in joining opposition groups such as those around Carl Friedrich Goerdeler and Ludwig Beck because they were regarded by the members of the military opposition, who were in close contact with national-conservative resistance groups, as an important link with the Labour Movement which, because its leaders were assumed to have access to the population at large, they considered would ensure the success of a possible attempt to overthrow the regime.

Resistance from the Catholic Labour Movement

Only rarely does one find in literature on Labour Movement groups opposed to the Nazi regime references to members of Catholic workers' associations, who met as early as the 19th century with a view to forming an interdenominational Christian workers' organization. In the late 20s the journals of the Catholic Labour Movement (KAB) left no doubt that they rejected «Fascism», which they described as «opposed to God, absurd and inorganic». Following the big Nazi election victories of 1930 and 1932 the KAB leadership prepared members for the struggle with National Socialism and, after Hitler's seizure of power, declared that the elimination of the Reichstag also meant the «elimination of social ideas» and that the «nonsense about a national

emergency» was «nothing more than an invitation to indulge in «treason and revolution».

Leaders of the KAB opposition were Bernhard Letterhaus, Nikolaus Gross, Joseph Joos and Otto Müller, all of Cologne. But to them the confrontation with the Nazi regime meant standing up not only for the workers' interests but also for the Faith and their organization's «loyalty to the Church». They thus became part of a current of opposition within the Church. They opposed the regime because they did not want the KAB to be incorporated in the «German Labour Front». Letterhaus increasingly assumed the role of spokesman and soon made contact with other Catholic opponents of the regime such as Josef Wirmer, and people who were in favour of an independent unified trade union, such as Jakob Kaiser, Adam Stegerwald and Ernst Hadermann, but especially with Wilhelm Leuschner. Letterhaus was one of the most vociferous critics of the bishops for having agreed to the Reich concordat of 20 July 1933. He even invoked the Pope, who in mid-October 1933 had protested against the «use of every available means to suppress Catholic clubs and organizations».

The KAB's political centre was Ketteler House in Cologne. Some members of this circle were soon in very close contact with the Berlin resistance groups, but also with Alfred Delp, a Jesuit in Munich, who was one of the Kreisau Circle around Graf Helmuth James von Moltke and Peter Graf York von Wartenburg. The main subject of their many talks was the question of a unified trade union. Soon, however, some members of the group began to actively support plans to overthrow the regime, which culminated in the attempt on Hitler's life on 20 July 1944.

The manifestations of the KAB's resistance, which in many respects were like the open protests by active Catholics, such as «pilgrimages», could not be compared with the open demonstrations of the Communists or of the ideological discussions in Social Democratic circles. For the resistance from members of Christian trade unions, associations of Catholic apprentices, the KAB and Catholic youth associations was in many cases identical to the determination of Catholic Christians in general to resist the Nazi regime by openly demonstrating their faith. Thus motives and aims were in unison, and precisely this fact paved the way for contacts with opponents of the regime who saw Christian substance in their resistance.

Resistance from trade union members

Not only the Communists and Social Democrats but also some leaders and members of the trade unions were in danger since they too were regarded as

Marxists by the National Socialists. But members of the trade union movement were always conscious of the need to work out a compromise with employers, despite the changing political environment, and as a matter of principle not to oppose government institutions which were the guarantors of collective bargaining and the welfare state. The fact that some union leaders also wanted to show their readiness for compromise and cooperation with the Hitlerite government, too, proved to be particularly disastrous. They suffered as a result of this terrible miscalculation - in Nazi camps and prisons, but also because of the sense of impotence and the great loss of time which could have been used for union discussions on a new order.

Nonetheless there was union-inspired opposition in some factories which, in spite of the fact that the labour force in general were surprisingly submissive to the Nazis, could count on support from individual workers and functionaries, though without offering them an ideological base. This explains why the lines dividing union and political resistance among the labour movements were always fluid. Only the determination of several union leaders, in opposing the regime and the organization of most workers in the «German Labour Front», to bring out the contours of a new unified trade union and thus help overcome the political differences between the former party-oriented unions led to cooperation with other groups.

These discussions produced fresh contacts among leading unionists which brought together different groups and resulted in Wilhelm Leuschner becoming the outstanding figure in the underground movement. He was soon in close touch with the Berlin circles around Goerdeler, Beck and, later, Stauffenberg, and the intention was that if an attempted coup proved successful he should become if not the Reich Chancellor then at least Vice-Chancellor. Leuschner thus formed an important link between the military resistance in Berlin and those individuals and groups who were considered representatives of the labour movements. They included, apart from the Social Democrats Leber, Haubach, Mierendorff and Reichwein, Jakob Kaiser, Ernst Hadermann and Bernhard Letterhaus, to name only a few. They, like Leber, had even tried to get in touch with Communist groups in order to enlarge the «mass basis» of the resistance, which regarded itself as a «resistance movement without a people».

Resistance despite sympathy for some Nazi foreign policy objectives

The tragic dilemma for those who resisted the regime because of their conservative traditions and Christian faith was that many of them agreed with some

of the aims of Nazi foreign policy. One demand which helped to set aside the many economic, cultural and social differences and antagonisms was that the Versailles peace treaty should be revised. But the fact that there was common ground between the regime and some elements of the resistance movement does not imply that their opposition was of secondary importance. It rather shows that they wanted to suppress modes of conduct and convictions which cannot be explained merely by fear and passiveness, conformity and indifference, or acquiescence in persecution and tyranny. Rüdiger von Voss said the officers and conservative groups opposed to the regime had to «overcome» standpoints that had originally been shared with the Nazis even. Their opposition stemmed in many cases from moral outrage at the way people were persecuted and deprived of their civil rights, from their criticism of the government's preparations for war, its risky foreign policy decisions and irresponsible economic policy, or from their belief in values which conflicted with Nazi ideology and thus caused them to challenge the regime's hegemonic aspirations.

These values and traditions permitted many different shades of resistance and enabled those concerned to take a detached view of current phenomena, to plot against the regime and take the necessary risks. Hence the real significance of the resistance associated with 20 July 1944 was that «an elite group who had helped conceive and establish the existing order» were able to take this action conscious that by turning against the Nazi leadership they were placing their lives in danger.

Many of these resistance groups, because of their official functions, were constantly having to find a balance between cooperation and confrontation. They were walking a tightrope, as it were, between conformity and resistance, between submission and self-assertiveness. In this predicament hardly any of them could escape the shadow inherent in their compliance with the demands of the regime, whether through silence or weakness born of indifference, through caution or indeed calculation. Hardly any could identify themselves with the principles which justified resistance, and thus made it possible, without an inner struggle, without the feeling that they were placing friends and relatives in danger, and without isolating the "just" who testified to their faith, their convictions and their intentions.

Resistance from Christians

Because the Nazi leadership sought to extend its domination to the individual's fundamental beliefs and thus to his perception of himself and his fellow-creatures, indeed of God, they provoked resistance from many of the faithful and their

churches. They wanted to resist because of their faith and therefore had to bear conflicts not only between community and party, state and Church, Christians and National Socialists, but also within their churches. As Eberhard Bethge said, the Church often found itself caught up in a struggle between members who took a fairly positive view of National Socialism and those who defended the autonomy of their faith as deriving exclusively from the holy scriptures against the claims of the state and «German Christians». Bethge defined five stages of resistance deriving from the unconditionality of the faith: «Ordinary passive resistance» was followed by «open ideological opposition from the churches or people like Graf Galen, Niemöller and Wurm». «Knowledge» of preparations for action to overthrow the regime was the third stage. Then came the «active preparations for the period afterwards», as manifest, for instance, in the thoughts and actions of the members of the Kreisau Circle. The final stage of resistance was «active conspiracy» - without cover from institutions the individual was alone in doing «that which lay outside the range of normality».

The origins of Church and Christian resistance are to be found in the traditions of the authoritarian state, the desire to defend and safeguard the Church as an institution, as well as the lines of conflict stemming from the Weimar Republic. Both the Protestant and the Catholic Church had a difficult and by no means wholly positive relationship with the Weimar Republic. People with conservative political views who were firmly opposed to the treaty of Versailles because of its foreign policy implications, especially the Protestants among them, were at first fascinated by Hitler's successes abroad. Church and republic, faith and democracy could not form a strong combination until such time as tolerance and pluralism were accepted as the prerequisites and foundations of humanity. Within the Protestant Church in particular, therefore, many were involved in a ramified dispute as to the course to be followed. Indeed, the fronts which in the post-1933 era marked the conflict between «German Christians» and «Bekennende Kirche» (Confessing Church) had begun to appear at the time of the Weimar Republic. The «German Christians» wanted to link the gospel with National Socialist ideology and thus bring the Church into line with regime policy.

These efforts were opposed by pastors and laity, who believed in the sole authority of the Bible - both Old and New Testament - and objected to Jews being persecuted in accordance with a Church «rule on aryan». They formed the «Pfarrernotbund» (an organization which supported persecuted pastors) and the Confessing Church. This struggle between «German» and «confessing» Christians thus broke out as early as May 1933. It was mainly a dispute about absolute belief in Christ without concessions, whether in a politically motivated or nationalistically

corrupt sense. Today we know how difficult was the task faced by the defenders of uncompromising confession, and how effective the influence of authoritarian political concepts. Especially those groups around Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who when war broke out joined the Abwehr (Intelligence Bureau) and was able until his arrest to work with the plotters around Hans Oster and in connection with 20 July 1944, refused to compromise, whereas many members of the Confessing Church succumbed over the years to the intermediary role of a «confessing community».

What compromised these groups and in any event proved decisive was the discussion of the «Jewish question». To some it was a challenge to stand up for the «Jewish Christians», to others it would seem primarily as a question from the Jews to the Christians as to whether their common God should not be seen as the crucial proof of their common salvation and the close relationship between Jews and Christians. Thus the «Jewish question» became the litmus test for the Protestant opposition groups - those who, during the consolidation phase of the regime, sympathized with the Jews had to remain in opposition without compromise until the end of Nazi rule. Here the 1934 «Barmen Theological Declaration»¹ became the main justification of Christian self-assertiveness in the «total state». Very soon, therefore, the question arose in the discussions among Christian opponents of the regime whether the Church should not do more than uphold the gospel. As a result, resistance from within the Church emerged as an attempt to defend justice and humanity. These beginnings developed into practical assistance for the persecuted and oppressed, the kind of assistance that was not merely concerned with matters of religious faith but intended as hands-on charity and care for those who «came under the wheels of the state» and who were to be defended by «putting a spoke» (Bonhoeffer) into those wheels.

This intention united Protestants and Catholics, many of the latter including resolute opponents of the Nazi regime. For not only the determination of Protestant Christians to invoke the holy scriptures but also the firmness of the Catholic faith represented a challenge to the Nazi leadership. In many instances even prior to 1933 they had withstood the clash with Nazi racist and nationalistic ideology. Opposition on principle was easier for the Catholics owing to their concept of natural law. Whereas Protestants were still striving to keep state and Church separate, the Catholics already had criteria for determining the state's aims and limits, although Catholic political groups also included currents of opinion that were by no means decidedly republican or democratic. They supported the efforts of Church dignitaries to strengthen Church institutions by means of a concordat between the Vatican and the German Reich. Hitler exploited the aim of the official Church to ensure freedom of worship and religious education in this way. Through the concordat he was able to

immobilize large sections of the Catholic Church and pave the way for the self-dissolution of the Centre Party, thus stripping the Catholics of political power, and not least the incapacitation of Catholic organizations. The Church leaders had thus, as they later recognized and in some cases admitted, succumbed to a crude deception.

A serious problem for the early Catholic resistance groups was that, on the one hand, the Church had to safeguard its autonomy as an institution and thus as a firm support for the faithful, but on the other to counter the aggressive anti-Church ideology of the Nazi leadership in many different ways, and in particular to prevent the persecution of priests and avert the threat to parish life which had been increasing since 1935. Many of the clergy resolutely supported the aims of the Catholic Church and Christianity, clashed with some bishops whom they accused of accommodating the Nazis, inwardly rejected the concordat, and thus tried to ensure the organizational cohesion of the Catholic associations. The distinctions between the denominations seemed to become increasingly blurred, especially in the field of youth work.

The number of German Catholic priests who were often directly confronted by the Nazi regime exceeded 10.000. Several hundred were imprisoned and about 100 murdered. In the Catholic as in the Protestant Church, resistance is only conceivable as various types of behaviour. Konrad Repgen said that the spectrum ranged from non-conformity via protest (e.g. the conflict following the removal of crucifixes from schools and kindergartens) to participation in the regime's overthrow. The Catholics' «withdrawal of loyalty» to the Nazi regime, which was used as both a threat and a weapon and could be increased from a scattered via a partial to a general dimension, thus becomes visible as the political consequence of a resistance born of the faith. Withdrawal of loyalty was bound to result in resistance, especially because of the «total state's» aim to politicize all spheres of life and to extend Nazi domination to all nonpolitical areas of the community.

In 1935 the Nazi leadership increased its pressure on the Catholic Church. Many priests were taken to court for alleged currency irregularities or «moral lapses». The regime exploited the widespread, long-standing anti-clericalism in Germany. The continuation of the ruthless racist policy, including the murder of people with mental disorders, was a provocation to the Church's leaders headed by the Bishop of Münster, Clemens August Graf von Galen. In their sermons and also by means of circulars they attacked Hitler's government, invoking the papal encyclical «With Burning Sorrow» (1937), which bore the stamp of bishops Michael von Faulhaber (Munich) and Konrad Graf von Preysing (Berlin). Their protest was taken up by the Protestant clergy, such as Freiburg's Bishop Theophil Wurm, who in an open letter

condemned the destruction of «human life». As a result of their determined resistance the people became increasingly disturbed and this prompted Hitler to have the murdering stopped. It was continued in secret, however, though with other means.

Although Church leaders did not take part in discussions on a possible attempt to remove Hitler, they had from time to time contact with the military and civilian resistance groups around Goerdeler and Beck. The Kreisau Circle in particular were able to establish an important link with the Catholic Church through the Jesuit priest Alfred Delp. He cooperated with Augustin Rösch and Lothar König, likewise Jesuits, on a committee which protested against measures designed to deprive religious orders of their rights and property and played a large part in drafting pastoral letters from bishops to their congregations, especially in defence of human rights. Delp was finally able to influence the social aims of the resistance and was instrumental in bringing Social Democrats and Catholics closer together in the Kreisau Circle.

Resistance from individuals

Resistance stemming from Christian or humanitarian principles was offered not only by institutions or groups of people but time and again by individuals. The violation of human dignity and the persecution of dissenters, but above all the racist threat to fellow-citizens, evoked active solidarity and Christian charity. Time and again individual people helped imperilled Jews, gave shelter to the persecuted or helped them escape. Some of these helpers worked in groups, others alone. To this very day they are among the best known opponents of the regime and include, for instance, the Berlin provost Bernhard Lichtenberg, who even in the mid-30s had protested against the murder of concentration camp inmates and from the time of the anti-Semitic November pogrom had repeatedly prayed for the lives of Jews. He was arrested after being denounced and died on the way to Dachau concentration camp. His was a particularly impressive example of individual opposition and showed the limits of ideological subjugation. On 9 November 1939, Georg Elser, a cabinet maker acting alone, almost succeeded with his bomb attack on Hitler in Munich.

Here we see the basic contours of «opposition from the people», which developed into help for fugitives from the regime, for prisoners and for the families and survivors of its opponents. In the judgment of many opponents who could never have played a direct role in a coup, the Nazi regime embodied the rule of evil, of the «anti-Christian». But this view presupposed belief in God and Christ and led to a

Christian justification of the resistance. Thus people derived from the sense of persecution and danger the strength but also the determination to become martyrs. It was no longer merely a question of the effectiveness of the resistance but of its symbolic dimension. It was this which enabled another resistance fighter, Henning von Tresckow, ultimately to demand the revolutionary act for its own sake. But martyrdom did not only mean having the strength to bear witness but also to live in solitude, as we read in the sonnets of Albrecht Haushofer from Moabit (a prison in Berlin), the diary of Jochen Klepper, the prison writings of Bonhoeffer and Delp, or the last letters of those opponents of the regime who were condemned to death.

Resistance stemming from conservative traditions

The «conservative resistance», too, is generally regarded in the sociological sense as a delimitable section of the whole movement. This is problematical because it was never solely a single, clearly definable social group but the demonstration of a principle resulting from traditional conservative attitudes. It manifested itself in the reemerging conventional associations, groups and circles who sought through discussion to obtain clarity, then in a radicalism which many critics are to this day unable or unwilling to accept. Dolf Sternberger said early on that the term «conservative» also had a philosophical dimension which presupposed the freedom of perception in its «incorruptibility». Some «conservative» critics of the regime did not go beyond a kind of «inner emigration», while others strengthened the foundations of their non-conformity by striving to establish independent standards and alternative systems to National Socialism. Not even this was sufficient for a small group of opponents of the regime, who instead invoked «duty» and «law» as the binding norms which, in Sternberger's words, produced a «zeal» to achieve the «loftier aim of the whole». «Conservative thinking» thus became a matter of principle which enabled those concerned to act without consideration for themselves, indeed for their own families. In order to be consistent with these principles their thinking and action had to be linked with «the idea of the whole, with the idea of the state, so as to put them in a stronger position against the powerful and glorious, against the authorities».

This rigorism was evident in the groups who met at the home of the Solfs for the «Wednesday tea party», in Freiburg around Adolf Lampe and Gerhard Ritter, in various youth associations, in Munich around Sperr, in many towns, but also in groups around Arvid Harnack, and finally and no doubt ideally in the group of friends

around Graf Moltke and Graf Yorck von Wartenburg, the Kreisau Circle, as was the awareness of an elite of high-ranking officials, university professors, and officers - including many «civilian officers» - that in their respective spheres of activity they had to assume a higher responsibility than just slavishly being obedient to the regime.

Though at first they may only have felt disturbed by the policy of the Nazi state or the conduct of its representatives, the awareness of the criminal character of the regime's policy and of the war was soon to constitute a challenge to some of them. So from being critically aloof they wanted to influence political developments in order to change reality. Not all groups and circles of the resistance wanted to resort to violence to overthrow the regime. Often their original intention was to alter the regime's character by influencing its policy-making and the aims of the country as a whole. This explains the large number of petitions and memoranda, the extensive correspondence and the ramified travel and contacts of the regime's opponents. Many of these links were the result of professional, military, personal and not least kindred relationships.

This distinguished the core of the «conservative» opposition from the efforts of political and Church opponents of the regime to offer resistance and assert themselves and later created the impression, not least owing to the Nazi interpretation of the action of those involved in the 20 July 1944 assassination attempt, that a «small clique» of ambitious aristocrats and officers keen to pull off a coup had plotted together in the last hour, as it were, before the war ended. That interpretation was false because the first plans for Hitler's assassination and the overthrow of the regime had been developed before the Second World War and proved that the opposition was born of principle and not of mere circumstance.

Precisely in the conditions prevailing in the «total state» great importance attached to mutual trust, comradeship and friendship because these were the prerequisites for the reliability without which resistance would not have been possible. Sometimes, therefore, one even gets the impression that the aim was to make them even closer by means of newly formed friendships or blood relationships intensified by other means. It was such links, having been strengthened in various ways, that in many cases lasted beyond 20 July 1944. Without them resistance was hardly imaginable. All the more tragic for many resistance fighters was the plight of their families, even young children, who were persecuted and deprived of their rights on the strength of a «family liability» imposed by the regime. After 20 July 1944 the wives of most of the would-be assassins were imprisoned or put in concentration camps. The youngest children were as a rule placed in homes controlled by the SS.

The aim obviously was to destroy all family ties and force a new identity on the children.

Resistance during the war

The beginning of the Second World War created a new environment for resistance to Hitler. During the war the Nazi regime became increasingly repressive, and as the terror on the «home front» had been mounting since 1942/43 following the military defeats at Stalingrad and in North Africa, the prospects of a successful coup deteriorated accordingly. The motives and methods of the resistance became more diversified still. Whereas some tried in their daily lives to help people persecuted on political and racist grounds, individual officers and «civilians» intensified their desperate and perilous efforts to remove the Nazi regime by force. Resistance from the Labour Movement, too, revived, especially after the invasion of the Soviet Union.

Particularly the Hitler-Stalin pact of August 1939 had paralyzed the Communists, but it had at the same time rendered them less dependent on the Soviet Union. Thus now that they were no longer controlled from the outside the first signs of a separate «National Communism» began to appear. Their total rejection of the Nazi regime and their clear aloofness from Stalin even led in 1944 to contacts between them and the groups around Leber and Stauffenberg. Particularly successful was the resistance group around Arvid Harnack and Harro Schulze-Boysen, the «Rote Kapelle» (Red Band), in Berlin. It had well over 100 members who made and distributed pamphlets, helped persecutees, but also spied on behalf of the Soviet Union. No wonder, therefore, that in the SOs the members of this group were described as «traitors» and their resistance played down on «moral grounds» because they allegedly only sought to substitute one dictatorship for another. Hans Rothfels was quick to disagree: «Perhaps their aims and methods differed from those of the other groups», he said, «but their philosophy and attitude didn't».

During the war there was increasing resistance from young people and students, though it is beyond question that only a few of the younger ones firmly resisted coercion by avoiding membership of the Hitler Youth organization. Youth groups were formed in some towns which called themselves «gangs», «hordes» or «bubbles» and were recognizable by their badges or clothing. They, like groups of «Edelweiß Pirates» deliberately sought confrontation with the Hitler Youth, but they also damaged property or even organized attacks on party members and policemen, actions which to this very day remain controversial. What began as a nonpolitical

love of jazz music brought together the members of the «Swing Youth Group», who, on account of their alleged preference for «negro music», were subjected by Himmler to prosecution and «correctional education». These examples show that resistance within the community did not necessarily ensue from any fundamental rejection of the entire Nazi system but could also be a reaction to curbs on personal freedom.

In contrast, a group of young students in Munich had been offering resistance to the regime on chiefly ethical and moral grounds since 1941. Members of the «White Rose», friends of Sophie Scholl and her brother Hans, began to advocate resistance when, as members of student companies, they found out about mass executions perpetrated by the Nazis. They were in contact with groups of students and pupils in south-west Germany and Hamburg and through them disseminated their pamphlets. Following the Wehrmacht's defeat at Stalingrad they apparently believed that the public mood would swing against the regime and perhaps for this reason openly distributed their last pamphlets in the grounds of Munich University. Only four days after their arrest Sophie and Hans Scholl were sentenced to death and executed. Many of their friends, including Professor Kurt Huber, suffered the same fate.

The news of their deeds quickly attracted attention abroad. It now became increasingly clear that an opposition had formed in Germany itself which represented the «other Germany», as Ulrich von Hassell put it. However, the allies did not wish to cooperate with the resistance but instead demanded Germany's unconditional surrender. Time and again the Berlin resistance groups around Goerdeler, Moltke and Beck tried to make contact with the western governments. They were helped by sympathizers in the Intelligence Bureau, but also in the Foreign Office - Adam von Trott zu Solz and Hans-Bernd von Haef ten. The different backgrounds and aims of these groups merged in their belief in the rule of law and their desire to safeguard the existence of the nation-state which was being threatened by war.

Resistance from within the armed forces

After the SA (Brownshirts) had been disbanded and the armed forces required to swear their allegiance to Hitler personally, the Reichswehr was from 1934 onwards by and large loyal to the Nazis. The successful revision of the Versailles treaty, the country's rearmament and the public upgrading of all things military, brought many high-ranking officers over to Hitler's side. Not all allowed themselves to be duped,

however, and from 1937 they noted with growing concern that the government was making preparations for another war.

In 1938 Hitler got rid of officers whose support for him was lukewarm or non-compliant and replaced them with submissive or corruptible men. All the same, he was not able to silence all members of the officers corps who warned about what was going on. Ludwig Beck, Chief of the General Staff, for instance, refused to make preparations for the German invasion of Czechoslovakia. On 16 July 1938 he wrote that «the last chance to save the nation» was at risk and that those responsible would be covering themselves with bloody guilt unless they acted in accordance with their political knowledge and their conscience». Beck concluded his appeal with the words «their obedience as soldiers (has) its limits where their conscience and responsibility prevent them from carrying out an order». He wanted the chiefs to resign en bloc and thus prevent war and national disaster. Beck no longer felt bound by his oath of allegiance but believed in a «supreme authority» which far transcended the «limited scope» of his «military mission» - the «authority of the entire nation».

After his resignation, which he did not present as a public protest, however, Beck soon became the focal point of a group of officers who maintained close contact with civilian resistance groups and who wanted to establish not a military but a new civilian government. Many of their sympathizers were opposed to the plans for war or, after 1939, to the principles governing German occupation of conquered territories. The composition of the military opposition varied. Some of its members were transferred, resigned, allowed themselves to be bribed or invoked their oath and their promise to obey their superiors. Thus there remained only a small number who linked the deep disappointment with Nazi policy and their criticism as officers with the responsibility of the military leader to safeguard the nation¹ 5 existence. They therefore favoured an attempt to remove the iniquitous leadership on grounds of principle. It was most fortunate that convinced opponents of the regime held key positions in the Intelligence Bureau and in the Reserve Army. They had a realistic assessment of the war situation and came to the unequivocal conclusion that Hitler had to be murdered in order to «free the armed forces from their oath».

The options available to the military opposition whereas varied as those of the other civilian resistance groups who were close to the churches or invoked the principles of «conservative philosophy». Differences were to be found in their attempts to influence government objectives or correct the course of political action, also in their efforts to recruit support among conservative elites who were critical of the regime, and to warn other governments of Germany's plans and thus evoke political countermeasures that would make the German side fully aware of the risks

attaching to war. That is why we find in addition to Beck's «memoranda opposition», Goerdeler's 5 «travel opposition», Eugen Gerstenmaier's «briefing opposition», and the «information opposition» of Ernst von Weizsäcker, under-secretary at the Foreign Office.

But gradually groups of younger officers came to the decision to arrest Hitler or kill him - if necessary «like a mad dog». The first attempts were made in the year before the Second World War broke out. When the war was in progress, and particularly after the invasion of the Soviet Union, the conspirators kept on planning attacks. Their implementation was thwarted, however, by the indecision of some of those involved and by surprise postings or unfavourable circumstances right up to the summer of 1944. Goerdeler was often in despair: «Some will act if given orders, others will give orders if action is taken».

From 1941/42 the plotters received in the persons of Henning von Tresckow and Claus Schenk Graf von Stauffenberg not only men who were committed to the cause but officers who had access to Hitler's immediate vicinity. Tresckow initially supported the Nazis because he thought they would «destroy all class distinctions» and create a new «community». But the persecution of dissidents, the «Church war» and above all the persecution of Jews, soon opened his eyes and evoked the remark that «the rule of law and totalitarianism have switched places». As from 1938 he, like Beck, opposed the Nazi regime's «wild west policy» and was no longer deluded by Hitler's political and military successes. And even whilst serving in the Soviet Union as chief of staff of the Army Group Centre, he never lost sight of his aim of eliminating the «tyrant» Hitler.

When Tresckow was transferred from Berlin to the eastern front in 1943 his place as leader of the military resistance was taken by Stauffenberg, who was six years younger and physically handicapped as a result of severe war injuries. Born in Swabia in 1907, he came from a Catholic aristocratic family and very soon showed a strong sense of social responsibility. Although he had no fundamental objection to the Weimar Republic, he saw nothing particularly attractive about it either. Like his fellow officers, he welcomed Hitler's seizure of power, and it was only during the war that he became fully aware of the criminal nature of Nazi policy.

He needed longer than many of his later fellow conspirators to throw off his fascination with the regime's political successes. Stauffenberg was one of the most able of German officers. Some of his superiors thought him the «only brilliant» staff officer, and fellow officers even called him the «new Schlieffen»². Up to 1943 Stauffenberg was involved in many military operations of the German Wehrmacht. In 1943 he was severely wounded in North Africa and flown out. In October of that year he was posted to General Army Office with the rank of chief of staff. There he was at

first under the command of General Friedrich Olbricht, who since 1938 had been one of the main instigators of the military opposition and was in close contact with other like-minded officers in Berlin. It was he who drew up the plans for the «Valkyrie» operation to place government authority in the hands of the «military opposition» after Hitler had been removed. Stauffenberg was soon told about the plan. Not long afterwards Olbricht accepted his younger officer as head and new driving force of the military opposition, which was now urging action, especially since the country's military defeat was considered certain.

At the beginning of July 1944 Stauffenberg was appointed chief of staff to the commander of the Reserve Army, General Friedrich Fromm. This function gave him direct access to Hitler but without, like Tresckow, loss of direct contact to the other plotters at the General Army Office, which was on the same floor as the offices of the commander of the Reserve Army in Bendlerstrasse, Berlin. When repeated plans to kill Hitler proved abortive and the Gestapo arrested close confidants of the military opposition, such as Julius Leber, Stauffenberg decided to act as quickly as possible. On 20 July 1944 he was able to detonate a bomb during a meeting held by Hitler in the Führer's East Prussian headquarters «Wolfsschanze» (the wolf's lair) near Rastenburg. As he was urgently needed in Berlin for the «Valkyrie» operation, he had to leave the Wolfsschanze before the bomb was due to explode. This was a great risk to his own life, but it also jeopardized the plan to overthrow the regime. Later it was often said that the attack was the work of amateurs. This was not true. It was not human failure but a string of coincidences, which Hitler ascribed to providence, that thwarted the attempt.

Stauffenberg was able to escape from the heavily fortified area around the Wolfsschanze after the explosion and return to Berlin, where he at first refused to believe the news that Hitler had survived. That is why he continued, almost in desperation, to try and persuade high-ranking officers of the army district commands to take sides with the assassins. Moreover, it was not possible in Berlin to achieve the principle objectives of operation «Valkyrie». Soon the headquarters were surrounded by SS units. When Hitler spoke on the radio in the evening, thus removing any a doubt that he had survived the attack, the coup collapsed. That same night Stauffenberg and his direct accomplices Olbricht, Albrecht Ritter Mertz von Quirnheim and Werner von Haeften, were murdered on Fromm's orders. Beck, who had been forced to commit suicide, failed in the attempt and was then shot by an army sergeant.

Immediately after the assassination attempt the SS and Gestapo began to round up the plotters. This developed into the «Operation Lightning», a plan which the Nazis had apparently drawn up long before with a view to eliminating the leaders of

all potential opposition groups. In the weeks that followed several thousand people were arrested. Those involved in the assassination and their closest supporters were, with very few exceptions, sentenced to death by the People's High Court and, in some cases in the final weeks of the war, murdered.

The officers in the plot had always consciously regarded themselves as the «sword of the resistance», in other words they mainly wanted to provide broader scope for the resistance movement as a whole and thus political options. This was not difficult since they shared much ideological, political and religious ground with the «conservative» resistance groups. Although they differed on certain aspects of a new political order, foreign policy priorities and the transition of power, the common aim to end the Nazi regime outweighed all other considerations. The imminent military defeat, the political isolation of the German Reich, the desire to save the German nation-state, but not least the will to stop the Nazi brutality, explained the attitude of many of the resistance fighters.

They saw in the Nazi regime a totalitarian system which had betrayed the principles of Christianity, of humanism, of solidarity and of the Enlightenment. This common focus of their criticism and rejection united them, though their individual motives and ideas differed. In the common cause there was always a diversity which could not be homogenized or synchronized. That diversity was the manifestation of a political self-perception which sought to establish not a uniform pluralism within the resistance movement but a new consensus. This aspiration embodied a thoroughly new kind of political philosophy and ideas for shaping the future. In the ten years after the removal of the Nazi regime it was this attitude which finally overcame the conflicts of the Weimar era and led to a new kind of political cooperation on the basis of compromise which did not leave the fundamental decisions on the country's political future to a random majority but made sure that they would be consistent with unshakeable constitutional principles.

Peter Steinbech, *Università di Karlsruhe*