

Wolfgang Benz

Resistance in National Socialism

As a generic term, resistance (Widerstand) refers to mindsets, attitudes, and activities which were directed against National Socialism as an ideology and practiced system of rule. Understood in its broadest sense, this includes both anti-fascists who had fled abroad as well as the conspirators of 1944, even if in exile the former had little or no opportunity to undertake anything as decisive against Hitler's regime as those involved in the assassination attempt of July 20 1944. Resistance thus also covers persons who refused to bow to the allurements or the coercion of National Socialism: persons who retained their intellectual independence, their democratic or constitutional convictions, and the values and norms of their milieu, for instance those of the labor movement, the official Churches and other religious organizations, or a specific Weltanschauung.

However, in a narrower sense, a distinction needs to be drawn between the critical to cool attitudes towards the regime expressed in a refusal to cooperate and self-assertion on the one hand, and the conscious endeavor to change circumstances on the other. Opposition to the tyrannical regime was not tantamount to an active commitment to a cause and the risking of one's life this entailed. But this was precisely the danger facing persons who produced and distributed leaflets, daubed slogans on walls, and acted as couriers to regime opponents living abroad, or belonged to a circle of conspirators planning to overthrow the dictatorship and establish a new state and social order.

Defining resistance generates problems which also determine the culture of remembrance. For a long time the notion prevailed in the Federal Republic that there had been a "resistance without the people," for it was believed that only a few members of traditional elites had resisted, while "the people" had remained steadfast in their enthusiasm for the regime. In contrast, solely Communist activity was glorified as anti-fascism in the GDR. In response to these exclusivist views, the concept of "Resistenz" was introduced to incorporate all oppositional attitudes into resistance (Widerstand), for example expressing a denial to conform by refusing the "Heil Hitler" greeting or listening to foreign radio broadcasts. "Resistenz" was defined as covering the following characteristics: "any effective defense, limiting, or stemming of the penetration of Nazi domination or its demands, irrespective of motives, reasons, and the social or political forces involved" (Martin Broszat). This definition from the early 1980s has failed to gain general acceptance. The most serious objection was that without taking into account the motives almost any instance of everyday behavior which did not conform to the ideas and practices of the regime falls under this "extended concept of resistance (Widerstandsbegriff)." As a consequence, anyone who was not continually acclaiming the Nazi regime was offering resistance (Andreas Hillgruber).

To capture the reality of what took place in the "Third Reich" and fully appreciate the diverse forms of opposition, resistance must therefore not only be defined as an attitude but also as action based on a categorical rejection of National Socialism. Whether motivated by ethical, political, religious, social, or individual principles, the aim of this action was to contribute in some way to bringing down the regime. Prerequisite and immediate cause for undertaking action was an attitude of dissent to the Nazi regime (Ian Kershaw) or "dissentience based on a Weltanschauung."

ung” (Richard Löwenthal). This dissent became resistance (Widerstand) when such an attitude intensified into the intention to change prevailing circumstances. Resistance in its proper sense was every “conscious attempt to confront the Nazi regime” (Christoph Kleßmann) and accept the personal risks this entailed.

German resistance to National Socialism is one of the most thoroughly researched aspects of recent German history. For many years the focus was on the elite opposition that had formed relatively late and whose actions subsequently played a key role in forging a sense of identity in West German postwar society: conservative elites, military and diplomatic circles, the “men of July 20 1944,” the Kreisau Circle, and the Goerdeler Group, (and?) also the Munich “White Rose” student group. Earlier resistance by Communists, leftwing Socialists, and Social Democrats, the opposition expressed by intellectuals, artists, and morally committed individuals, or acts like the one-man assassination attempt by Georg Elser on November 9 1939 – all these first gained recognition and attention later.

Among the social groups who claim for themselves to have resisted the regime both in attitude and deed are the Christian Churches, although it was invariably only individuals who resisted on the basis of Christian motives (for instance, the clergymen and theologians Julius von Jan, Paul Schneider, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Martin Niemöller amongst Protestants, or Max Josef Metzger, Augustin Rösch S. J., Bernhard Lichtenberg, and Father Rupert Mayer amongst Catholics). The only religious group that was uncompromising and unstinting in its resistance to National Socialism was the Jehovah’s Witness.

The activities of Communist groups after the change in tactics ordered by the Comintern and, in particular, during the Second World War were the focal point of the culture of remembrance in the GDR and were associated with figures such as Georg Schumann (Leipzig), Bernhard Bärtlein (Hamburg), Robert Uhrig and Beppo Römer (Hamburg, Mannheim, Leipzig, Munich), and Anton Saefkow and Franz Jacob (Berlin). Youth opposition was represented by the Herbert Baum group, which was then also reclaimed for a Jewish resistance that had had little or no chance to evolve under the prevailing conditions of Nazi Germany.

Germans resisted National Socialist rule out of political or religious conviction, out of a realization of the regime’s inherently destructive nature, out of horror and shame at the crimes committed in the name of a German state, out of decency and compassion with the victims, and a host of other motives. If the majority lapsed gradually from an attitude of enthusiastic affirmation into a state of resignation, while however remaining loyal to the regime in thoughtless submissiveness, a not inconsiderable minority had consistently refused to cooperate with the regime. Others crossed the threshold from opposition to resistance, to a resistance pursuing the political goal of removing the Nazi dictatorship. In terms of historical events, this resistance may have failed, for Nazi tyranny only collapsed with German military defeat. However, for the new postwar beginning, resistance, no matter under which ideological premises or social conditions it was acted out, was as an example of political morals and thus became one of the most important instances of historical memory in Germany.

Berlin, April 2006

First published in:

Deutsche Geschichte im 20. Jh.: Nationalsozialismus, Holocaust, Widerstand und Exil 1933-1945 Online, De Gruyter/K.G. Saur (2006–2022)