

Opposition and resistance in Nazi Germany

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For Ann and Emily – with love

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1

Opposition and resistance from Social Democrats, Communists and industrial workers

The three largest groups participating in resistance against the Nazi regime were the Social Democrats, Communists and industrial workers. The Social Democratic Party (SPD) was banned in 1933 along with all other political parties, but its exiled leadership and activists inside Germany continued to oppose the Nazi regime. A much greater level of active resistance to Nazi rule was offered by the Communist Party (KPD), which undertook extensive underground resistance against Nazism after its suppression in 1933. Industrial workers were a third group to offer resistance to the Nazi regime.

Social Democratic opposition

Before 1933, the SPD was supported by a million members and five million voters, located primarily in working-class areas. When Hitler gained power, the SPD organised anti-Nazi demonstrations. In March 1933, SPD members of the Reichstag (the German parliament) bravely voted against the Enabling Act, the law which gave Hitler unlimited constitutional power. In May 1933, the funds of the party were seized. In June 1933, the SPD was forced to disband. With all avenues of legal opposition closed off, the leadership of the SPD fled into exile, residing in Prague (1933–37), Paris (1937–40) and eventually in London (1940–45).

The SPD quickly established a very sophisticated underground organisation to oppose the Nazi regime, consisting of the exiled leadership, newspapers and party activists. A very important SPD resistance group was known as Red Shock Troop (Roter Stosstrupp), which was on the socialist fringe of the party. By the end of 1933, the group had 3,000 members, consisting primarily of university students based in the Berlin area. The group set up a newspaper called *The Red Shock Troop (Der rote Stosstrupp)*, which appeared every 10 days. The editorials of the newspaper constantly suggested that the Nazi regime would be overthrown by the revolutionary action of German workers. In December 1933, however, the leaders of Red Shock Troop were arrested by the Gestapo (the Nazi secret police) and imprisoned in a concentration camp.

Nevertheless, the SPD's Berlin regional committee took part in a number of other resistance activities against the Nazi regime between 1934 and 1937. Using funds supplied by the exiled SPD leadership, a newspaper entitled *Socialist Action (Sozialistische Aktion)* was circulated widely throughout Berlin. In January 1935, however, the Gestapo arrested the leaders of the committee. By the end of 1938,

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the continued success of the Gestapo in finding and arresting SPD underground resistance groups led the exiled SPD leadership to conclude that underground resistance activities, including the production of anti-Nazi pamphlets and newspapers, were too dangerous and so they were ended.

From 1939, therefore, the remaining SPD activists concentrated their efforts on collecting information on the state of public opinion in Nazi Germany. The reports produced by SPD local secretariats (known as the SOPADE reports) revealed that, while most Germans had been won over to supporting the Nazi regime, most Social Democrats had reluctantly accepted the Nazi regime as a 'fact of life' and had turned inward, towards the home and the family.¹

Overall, the SPD came to accept there was no way of overthrowing a powerful and repressive totalitarian regime, supported by a strong police force and the majority of the people, by undertaking underground propaganda. As a result, the SPD leadership came to the conclusion that the Nazi regime could be overthrown only by a coup led by the German army.

New Beginning

On the left of the SPD, a very small fringe group known as New Beginning (Neu Beginnen) also engaged in resistance activities. The group took its name from a pamphlet written in 1932 by Walter Löwenheim (using the pseudonym 'Miles'). The members of New Beginning met secretly in private houses and flats to discuss what the future direction of German politics might be. The leaders of New Beginning believed that left-wing disunity was one of the key reasons why Hitler had come to power. As a result, the group felt a left-wing coalition, consisting of Social Democrats and Communists, was the best means of combating Nazism. Yet the SPD leadership dismissed the idea because they felt that the Communists' desire for a 'dictatorship of the proletariat' was incompatible with the Social Democratic desire for a democratic government based on free elections.

During 1935, a number of the most active members of New Beginning were arrested by the Gestapo. Yet the group, in a much depleted form, continued to operate. In the autumn of 1938, New Beginning was decimated by a further wave of arrests by the Gestapo. The reason why the group survived for so long was because its members had attempted to conduct their opposition through discussions in private.

Communist resistance groups

The KPD and groups associated with it led the underground resistance against the Nazi regime. However, the Communists who resisted Nazism faced a multitude of dangers, and most died in the struggle. From 1933 to 1939, 150,000 Communists were detained in Nazi concentration camps and a further 30,000 were executed.²



A photomontage by John Heartfield, which appeared in the Communist magazine *AIZ*. Heartfield had changed his name from Helmut Herzfeld in 1916 as a protest against the extreme nationalism in Germany at the time. This poster was produced shortly after the Reichstag fire in 1933 when the Nazis blamed Communists for starting the blaze. Heartfield is clearly pointing to Hermann Göring as the real culprit.

The Nazi attack on the KPD

The German Communist Party, set up in 1919, had been the largest (outside the Soviet Union) before 1933. The strongest areas of Communist electoral strength were Berlin, Hamburg, Stuttgart, Leipzig, the industrial areas of the Ruhr and Saxony. When Hitler was appointed Chancellor on 30 January 1933, the largest street demonstrations against his new regime were led by Communists.

However, the KPD was the first organisation to experience the full vigour of Nazi terror. The burning of the Reichstag (allegedly started by a young Dutch Communist, Marinus van der Lubbe) on 27 February 1933 provided the Nazi regime with an ideal excuse to step up its persecution of Communists. On 6 March 1933 (the day after the last democratic election in Nazi Germany), the activities of the KPD were declared illegal. The party's leaders assumed that Hitler's regime, which they dubbed a 'puppet of big business and the army', would soon run into political and economic difficulties, thereby paving the way for a Communist revolution. This proved a fatal error of judgement.

In a matter of weeks after Hitler came to power, the Nazi regime eagerly set about the task of destroying the KPD as a political force. Nazi blackshirts (that is the SS, the Nazi Party's special security force) launched a series of daring and brutal raids on the working-class suburbs of major German cities, during which duplicating machines, typewriters and propaganda material were seized. The

aim of these raids was to demoralise Communists and to deter them from mounting resistance. Pro-Communist newspapers were closed down and thousands of Communists were carted off to concentration camps. Of course, members of the KPD had expected Nazi brutality, but not on anything like such a scale. It soon became clear that the Nazi regime had inflicted a major defeat on Communism in Germany. Those leaders of the KPD who were not arrested by the Nazis fled into exile to Prague, then to Paris and finally ended up in Moscow after 1941.

After 1933, therefore, the KPD was forced to change from a mass party with 360,000 members into a clandestine anti-Nazi underground organisation. However, those Communists brave enough to engage in the resistance against the Nazi regime faced a lonely, hopeless struggle, followed by the inevitable knock on the door from a member of the Gestapo, detention in a concentration camp and, in most cases, execution.

The extent of Communist resistance

It is difficult to establish the exact extent of Communist resistance, but the following figures offer a rough guide. In the summer of 1933, 50 per cent of KPD members still paid contributions to the party. In 1933, the Berlin Supreme Court heard 1,000 cases concerning resistance activities brought against members of the KPD.³ One estimate suggests that between 1933 and 1935 around 10 per cent of KPD members (some 36,000 people) were active within the underground resistance. In 1935, the Gestapo estimated there were 5,000 active members of the Communist resistance in Berlin alone. Most of those involved in the Communist resistance were of two predominant types: skilled members of the working class, operating in factories, and unemployed workers living in inner-city areas.

The activities of the Communist resistance

The most important activity of the Communist underground was the distribution of anti-Nazi literature. Communist leaflets and newspapers were circulated in beer halls and workplaces in working-class areas. The leading Communist newspaper, *Red Flag (Rote Fahne)*, and a number of regional Communist newspapers were printed and distributed widely throughout Germany from 1933 to 1935. In the same period, the KPD produced and distributed over a million anti-Nazi leaflets. A great deal of this literature focused on the brutal acts of terror undertaken by the Nazi authorities against members of the working class. According to Gestapo reports, 1.2 million Communist anti-Nazi pamphlets were seized in 1934, and 1.67 million were discovered by the Nazi authorities in 1935.⁴

The underground network of the KPD

The maintenance of an extensive underground network required a major organisational effort. The key posts within the Communist resistance were filled by paid party activists, who were supported by illegal subscriptions collected in factories and working-class areas. These Communist activists used false names

and forged papers. The chief aim of a member of the Communist underground was to keep one step ahead of the Gestapo. This proved an increasingly difficult task. Indeed, most Communist activists did not elude the Gestapo for more than six months. Of the 422 people who had been salaried KPD officials in January 1933, 219 had been arrested, 125 were in exile, 24 had been killed by the Nazis and 54 had left the party by the end of 1935. The number of Communists arrested by the Gestapo for resistance activities fell from 14,000 in 1935 to 3,800 in 1938.⁵

The KPD rethinks its strategy

In the late 1930s, as Hitler moved from victory to victory in foreign policy and unemployment fell, many workers became reluctantly resigned to accepting the Nazi regime as a fact of life. A large section of the working class had not been won over to Hitler's regime, but had been effectively neutralised as a real danger to the survival of the regime.

By the late 1930s the underground Communist resistance network had been greatly reduced by the activities of the Gestapo. As a result, the exiled leadership of the KPD decided to rethink the tactics of resistance. At the Berne Conference, convened in January 1939, the exiled KPD leadership undertook a major policy review, which resulted in a demand for the creation of a 'Popular Front' consisting of all anti-fascist forces inside and outside Germany.

In August 1939, however, this policy suffered a severe setback when Stalin's Communist Soviet Union signed a non-aggression pact with Hitler's Nazi Germany. The KPD leadership (a close ally of Stalin's regime) called for 'observance' of the Nazi-Soviet pact but continued to warn of the consequences of Nazi aggression.

The growth of Communist resistance after the invasion of the Soviet Union

It was in the period following the invasion of the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941 that Communist resistance revived. Indeed, the number of anti-Nazi leaflets seized by the Gestapo in 1941 grew from 62 in January to 10,227 in October. During the same period, a number of important underground Communist groups, not officially connected to the KPD but sympathetic towards it, began to engage in resistance activities. They operated in a number of German cities and factories.

The Uhrig group

The Uhrig group, led by Robert Uhrig, operated during 1941 and 1942 in Berlin, with about 100 active members. The Uhrig group took the view that the Soviet Union, the only Communist state in Europe, must be defended from Nazi aggression at all costs. To support this view, the Uhrig group flyposted billboards throughout Berlin with anti-Nazi slogans urging workers to engage in sabotage. In September 1941, the group won support from 70 workers based in a large Berlin arms factory (the Deutsche Waffen- und Munitionsfabrik). The Uhrig group also produced a monthly news sheet called *Information Service*

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(*Informationsdienst*), which gave news of 'the true military situation in the Soviet Union' and publicised Nazi war crimes.

The Uhrig group wanted to weaken German public support for the war against the Soviet Union. However, Uhrig and over 200 supporters of his group were arrested by the Gestapo in February 1942 and 100 of them were subsequently executed. This was a severe blow to Communist resistance in the Berlin area. Even so, 67 separate factory groups closely connected with the Uhrig group continued to engage in resistance activities.

Home Front

Another Communist resistance group worthy of mention is Home Front (Innere Front), located in the Berlin and Hamburg areas. The leading figures in Home Front (Wilhelm Guddorf, John Sieg, Martin Weise and Jon Graudenz) had all been active members of the KPD before 1933. In fact, many of them had been on the editorial staff of *Red Flag*. In 1941, Home Front produced a fortnightly anti-Nazi underground newspaper described as 'a fighting sheet for a new, free Germany', which aimed to 'expose the lies of Nazi propaganda'. This newspaper was circulated in a number of factories in Berlin. Home Front also produced a number of anti-Nazi pamphlets highlighting Nazi war crimes on the eastern front.

Home Front was made up of well-educated KPD members and drew support from like-minded Marxist intellectuals and professionals. However, its propaganda activities quickly came to the attention of the Gestapo. In the autumn of 1942, several members of Home Front were arrested, including Guddorf and Sieg.

The Red Orchestra

Another group of Communists who also engaged in resistance activities was dubbed by the Gestapo the Red Orchestra (Rote Kapelle). It was led by Arvid Harnack and Harro Schulze-Boysen. The members of this group had not been members of the KPD, but they were generally sympathetic to Communism and the Soviet Union. The main activity of the Red Orchestra was passing on secrets of the German war effort to the Soviet government. This was possible because many of the members of the Red Orchestra were employed in the Nazi ministries concerned with the economy and the air-force. The Gestapo eventually discovered the identities of the leading members of this group, who were put on trial and executed.

The Baum group

The Baum group (named after its leader, Herbert Baum) consisted of around 30 pro-Communist Jews, aged between 20 and 30, all of whom worked at the Siemens plant in Berlin. The Baum group produced a monthly news sheet entitled *The Way Out (Der Ausweg)*, which described itself as a 'paper of the anti-fascist struggle'. The group urged German soldiers to 'fight with us for the overthrow of the Hitler regime'.⁶

The most daring act carried out by the Baum group was to break into an anti-Soviet exhibition, organised by the Ministry of Propaganda, on 18 May 1942 and

set fire to a number of exhibits. Within days of this incident, the Gestapo rounded up all the members of the Baum group, who were subjected to appalling torture before they were executed. In a further act of reprisal against the group, the Nazis arrested 500 Berlin-based Jews, who had no connection with the Baum group, and executed them.⁷

The revival of KPD activity

The destruction of most of the Communist anti-Nazi groups by the Gestapo during 1942 was a severe blow. Indeed, the crackdown on the Communist resistance by the Nazi authorities was unrelenting. However, the defeat of the German army at Stalingrad in February 1943 led to a revival of resistance activities by the KPD leadership, exiled in Moscow.

The National Committee for a Free Germany

The KPD set up the National Committee for a Free Germany (Nationalkomitee Freies Deutschland), which used a large radio transmitter (donated by Stalin) to broadcast directly to the German people, using the title Radio Free Germany. The broadcasts of Radio Free Germany urged all Germans to turn against the Nazi regime and promised that a post-Hitler Germany would be based on democratic ideas. The Committee also established a newspaper, *Free Germany (Freies Deutschland)*, edited by Anton Ackermann, a member of the exiled KPD leadership. The National Committee for a Free Germany gave encouragement to resistance fighters to unite against the Nazi regime.

The last months

The crackdown against KPD figures intensified still further after the 1944 bomb attack on Hitler. On 18 August 1944, Ernst Thälmann, the KPD leader before his arrest in 1933, was executed in Buchenwald concentration camp, along with 24 former Communist Reichstag deputies. Even during the latter stages of the war, members of the Communist resistance were still hunted down by the Gestapo, and many were arrested and executed. Members of the Communist resistance, facing denunciation by their fellow citizens, had nowhere to run and nowhere to hide from the searchlights of the Gestapo.

It is only in recent years, with the ending of the Cold War, that full credit is finally being afforded to the brave heroes and heroines of the Communist resistance against Nazism. In spite of all the danger, Communist resistance never ceased inside Nazi Germany, which is a testimony to the self-sacrifice Communists were willing to endure in their desire to rid Germany of Nazi tyranny.

Resistance by industrial workers

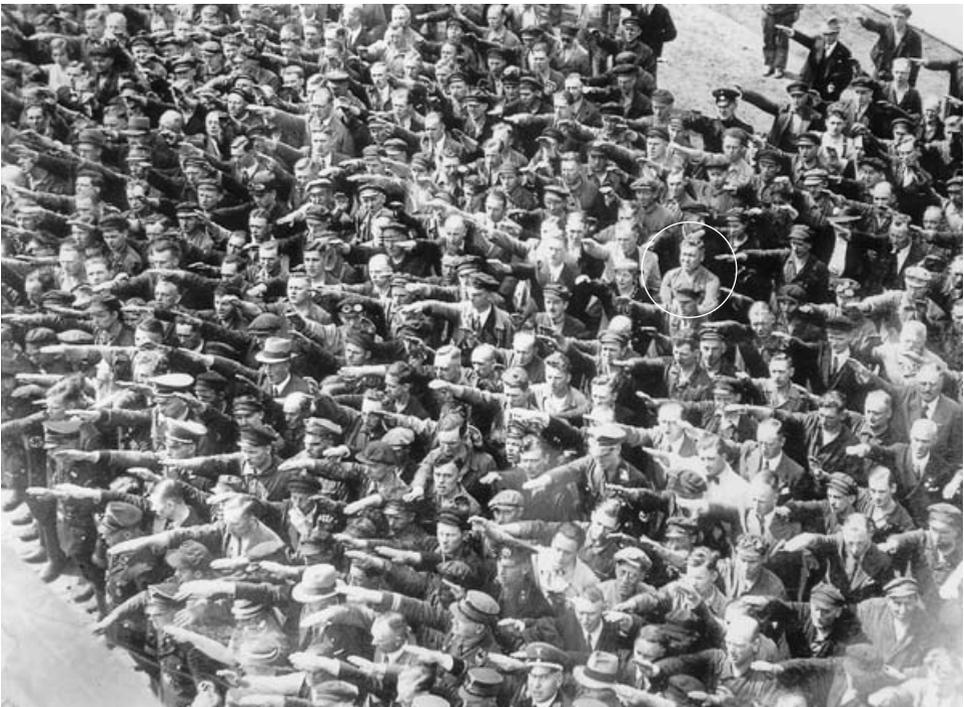
There are also numerous examples of resistance from industrial workers. This took a variety of forms, including absenteeism from work, sabotage of industrial machinery, the refusal to serve in the German army and to give the Hitler salute. Gestapo records show widespread worker protests over rises in food prices in

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1935. There is also evidence of strikes by workers who built the motorways in the mid 1930s and many examples of deliberate slow working in armaments factories.

The most remarkable attempt by an individual worker to bring down the Nazi regime was undertaken by Georg Elser, a joiner from Württemberg. Elser had always voted for the KPD in elections and was aggrieved over the destruction of workers' rights by the Nazi regime. On 8 November 1939, he planted a bomb in a Munich beer hall at which Hitler was due to give a speech. However, due to bad weather and good luck, Hitler's plane to Munich was delayed and he arrived late for his speech. In fact, the bomb Elser had planted exploded at the exact time when Hitler would have been speaking if he had arrived on time. Elser was arrested and subsequently executed for attempting to assassinate the Nazi leader.⁸

A more organised form of opposition to the Nazi regime was undertaken by factory workers (based in Hamburg and many other industrial towns in central Germany), most of whom were sympathetic to the KPD. Towards the end of the war industrial unrest greatly increased. From January to the end of June 1944, for example, 193,024 foreign workers were arrested for taking part in strikes. Even so, the much hoped for 'workers' uprising' did not take place.



Hamburg 1936. Shipyard workers giving the Hitler salute as a ship is launched. One man in the crowd risked arrest, imprisonment or death by keeping his arms folded as a gesture of defiance.

In many German industrial areas there is evidence of workers engaging in resistance activity. In Dortmund prison, for example, of the 21,833 prisoners serving time for political opposition to the Nazi regime, the overwhelming majority recorded their occupation as 'industrial worker'. The same is true of the prison records of other penal institutions in Germany during the Nazi era.⁹ Most of the factory workers who engaged in resistance against the Nazis either were members of, or had sympathy towards, the KPD.

The Anti-Fascist Workers' Group of Central Germany

One of the most organised factory groups was known as the Anti-Fascist Workers' Group of Central Germany. This group engaged in acts of sabotage and passed on information to workers, gained by illegally listening to broadcasts made by the BBC. The members of this group were arrested in a series of Gestapo raids in late August 1944.

The Mannheim group

Another leading factory group which engaged in anti-Nazi propaganda was known as the Mannheim group, based in the Rhineland area. This group produced a monthly newspaper called *The Herald (Der Verbote)*, which first appeared in October 1942. The Gestapo found a copy of this newspaper and arrested most of the leaders of the group in March 1943.

Document case study

Opposition and resistance from Social Democrats, Communists and industrial workers

1.1 The problems of opposition – a report from a Social Democrat, 1934

The weakness of the Opposition is the strength of the regime. Its opponents are ideologically and organizationally weak. They are ideologically weak because the great mass are only discontented, they are merely grumblers whose discontent springs from economic motives. That is probably true of the Mittelstand [middle class] and of the peasantry. The loudest and strongest criticism comes from these groups, but the criticism springs from selfish interest. These groups are least prepared to fight seriously against the regime because they have the least idea of what they should be fighting for . . . Its opponents are organizationally weak because it is of the essence of a fascist system that it does not allow its opponents to organize collectively.

Source: J. Noakes and G. Pridham (eds.), *Nazism 1919–1945, vol. 2: State, economy and society 1933–1939*, Exeter, 1984, pp. 579–80

1.2 Communist resistance – an underground Communist pamphlet, Berlin, May 1942

. . . the Hitler gang and their root, the monopoly capitalist mob, who bear the sole guilt for and are the beneficiaries of the war, must be overthrown by a true popular revolution, expropriated and rendered harmless for ever so that our people cannot be plunged into war for a third time, but that the preconditions can be created for building a new, free Germany. The sooner our people carry out this deed the lesser will be the national catastrophe; the nations which have been attacked by Hitler will, thereby, recognize that the German people and Hitler are not identical with Hitler and his crimes and, instead of exacting revenge, they will extend to us the hand of brotherhood, grant us a just peace and treat us like a nation with equal rights. But woe betide our nation if it does not take part in the destruction of the Hitler beast . . . For Hitler, fascism is war without end and the victory of the Red Army [the army of the Soviet Union] over Hitler's Wehrmacht [the German army] will bring Germany an immediate and just peace. Thus the military defeat of Hitler and his fall are vital for Germany. And it is the duty of every German to help energetically to achieve this goal without delay.

Source: J. Noakes (ed.), *Nazism 1919–1945: a documentary reader, vol. 4: The German home front in World War II*, Exeter, 1998, p. 587

1.3 Guidelines for working in the underground Communist resistance – a Communist pamphlet, 1941

The most important principles for our illegal activity must be reliability, punctuality and caution. Anyone who sins against these three commandments not only jeopardizes himself but all our work . . . Meetings in comrades' flats should be avoided if possible since experience has shown that the blocks are often under surveillance. One should not go straight from home to a meeting place but take a roundabout route in order to spot anyone who may be following. Our organization will only be based on factory cells which should not contain more than three people. Only workers who have proved reliable should be admitted to these cells. Gossips and those partial to alcohol are to be excluded from party work on principle. Inquisitiveness and boastfulness have no place in the party.

Source: Noakes (ed.), *Nazism 1919–1945, vol. 4*, p. 587

1.4 The final letter of a Communist to his father, before execution by the Nazi regime for resistance activities, May 1943

My dear Father

Be strong! I am dying as I lived: as a fighter in the class war. It is easy to call yourself a Communist as long as you don't have to shed blood for it. You only show whether you really are one when the hour comes when you have to prove yourself. I am one, father . . . The war won't last much longer and then your hour will have come. Think of all those who have already travelled down this road that I must go down today and will still have to travel down it and learn one thing from the Nazis; every weakness will have to be paid for with . . . blood. So be merciless! Remain hard! . . . Oh father, dear father, you

dear and good man! If only I did not have to fear that you will collapse under the shock of my death. Be tough, tough, tough! Prove that you have been a whole-hearted life-long fighter in the class struggle. Help him, Frieda, raise his spirits. He must not be allowed to succumb. His life does not belong to him but to the movement! Now, a thousand times more than ever before.

Source: Noakes (ed.), *Nazism 1919–1945*, vol. 4, pp. 588–89

1.5 'Why I tried to assassinate the Führer' – the statement of Georg Elser, 1939

After reaching voting age, I always voted for the KPD [Communist Party] party list because I thought it was a workers' party which certainly supports the workers. But I never became a member of this party because I thought it was enough if I voted for it. I never took part in any actions such as distributing leaflets, demonstrations or graffiti . . . In my opinion the conditions of the workers have deteriorated in various respects since the nation's [Nazi] revolution. For example, I have noticed that wages have been getting lower and deductions getting higher . . . Furthermore, in my view, since the national revolution the workers are under a certain amount of restraint. For example, workers can no longer change their jobs when they want and nowadays, as a result of the HJ [Hitler Youth], they are no longer in charge of their children. And in the religious sphere too they are no longer as free as they were . . . The discontent among the workers which I had observed since 1933 and the war I thought was unavoidable since autumn 1938 [the time of the crisis over the Sudetenland] preoccupied my thoughts. I simply started thinking about how one could improve the conditions of the workers and avoid a war . . . The result of my deliberations was that conditions in Germany could only be improved by removing the current leadership . . . If I'm asked whether I consider the deed I have done as a sin within the meaning of Protestant doctrine then I would have to say no! . . . After all, through my deed [the attempt to assassinate Hitler] I wanted to prevent more blood being spilled.

Source: Noakes (ed.), *Nazism 1919–1945*, vol. 4, pp. 592–94

Document case-study questions

- 1 What insights does 1.1 provide into the difficulties faced by Social Democrats who engaged in resistance activities?
- 2 What does 1.2 tell us about the attitude of the Communist resistance towards the Nazi regime?
- 3 What does 1.3 tell us about the difficulties faced by Communist members of the resistance?
- 4 What conclusions can be drawn from 1.4 about the reasons why this Communist fought against the Nazi regime?
- 5 What insights does 1.5 provide about Elser's motivation for trying to assassinate Hitler?

Notes and references

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- 4 Merson, *Communist resistance*, p. 116.
- 5 *Ibid.*, pp. 182–83.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 243.
- 7 For a detailed analysis of Jewish resistance, see K. Jonca, 'Jewish resistance to Nazi racial legislation in Silesia 1933–1937', in Nicosia and Stokes (eds.), *Germans against Nazism*, pp. 77–86.
- 8 See J. Noakes (ed.), *Nazism 1919–1945*, vol. 4: *The German home front in World War II*, Exeter, 1998, pp. 592–95.
- 9 I. Kershaw, *The Nazi dictatorship: problems and perspectives of interpretation*, 3rd edn, London, 1993, p. 172.

2 Youth protest

Most young people in Germany from 1933 to 1945 were loyal members of either the Hitler Youth (Hitler Jugend, for boys) or the German Girls' League (Bund deutscher Mädel). These organisations attempted to control every aspect of the leisure time of German youth and encouraged unhesitating support for Hitler and the Nazi regime. In March 1939, it became compulsory for all young people to join.

However, it would be wrong to believe the Nazi regime succeeded in winning over the entire youth of Germany. There were some young people who strongly objected to rigid indoctrination and discipline, preferring instead to form nonconformist youth groups and gangs who engaged in acts of protest and defiance towards the Nazi regime. The two most significant youth groups in Germany during the Nazi era were the 'Edelweiss Pirates' (Edelweisspiraten) and 'Swing Youth' (Swing Jugend).¹

The Edelweiss Pirates

The Edelweiss Pirates emerged during the late 1930s, located in the working-class districts of a number of west German towns, most notably Cologne, Düsseldorf, Essen, Wuppertal and Duisburg. The Pirates consisted primarily of 12–18-year-old boys who had no distinctive political ideology but great antipathy towards the grim uniformity of the Hitler Youth and the general lack of freedom in Nazi Germany. In order to stress their free-spirited individuality, and quite natural desire for youthful rebellion against authority, the Edelweiss Pirates wore distinctive checked shirts, which sported a metal badge with an edelweiss flower emblazoned upon it, dark short trousers, a windcheater, a scarf and flashy white socks. The very few girls who joined wore windcheaters, white sweaters and white socks. Many members of the group had much longer hair than was the norm for young people in Nazi Germany at the time. The local Gestapo compiled lists of the fashions worn by the Edelweiss Pirates in order to identify and arrest them. The Edelweiss Pirates were closely related to a number of other subversive youth gangs, such as the 'Raving Dudes', based in Essen, and the 'Navajos', who operated in Cologne. These youth groups also wore checked shirts with either an edelweiss or a skull badge.

The Edelweiss Pirates appear to have grown spontaneously, as a youthful rebellion against the rigid control of the Hitler Youth over German teenagers. Most of them had never joined the Hitler Youth or had left it. One of the chief



The public execution of a group of *Edelweisspiraten* in Cologne, 1944.

slogans used by the Edelweiss Pirates in street graffiti was 'Eternal War on the Hitler Youth'. They operated in small local gangs. In the inner-city areas they congregated on street corners, hung around parts of the city centre or met in local parks. It was difficult for the Nazi authorities to distinguish their behaviour from less politically challenging forms of juvenile delinquency. It seems the young people who joined the Edelweiss Pirates had grown sick of the lack of freedom which the Nazi regime had imposed on German society.

To break free from Nazi discipline, the Edelweiss Pirates went on long hikes, carrying rucksacks. They engaged in camping trips during wartime, when the Nazi regime had placed severe limitations on travel. Once they had pitched their tents, the Edelweiss Pirates would sing extremely funny parodies of Hitler Youth songs and tell each other 'dirty jokes' about the sexual activities of the Hitler Youth. The Gestapo believed that the Edelweiss Pirates engaged in under-age sex orgies on these camping trips, but there is no evidence to suggest that the sexual activity of the Edelweiss Pirates was any higher than that of similar 14–18-year-olds in Nazi Germany.

It was during the war years (1939–45), with a reduction in parental supervision and the severe disruption to local leisure facilities caused by increased Allied bombing raids, that the 'subversive' activities of the Edelweiss Pirates grew markedly. In the cities, they took part in pitched battles with members of the Hitler Youth and daubed subways with anti-Nazi slogans such as 'Down with Hitler – We Want Freedom', 'Medals for Murder' and 'Down with Nazi Brutality'. In addition, the Edelweiss Pirates posted the anti-Nazi leaflets dropped by British and American bombers through the letter boxes of local people. Towards the end of the Second World War, with Germany heading for

defeat, many of the Edelweiss Pirates bravely shielded army deserters and joined with other resistance fighters, especially Communists, to engage in many acts of industrial sabotage. These activities reveal how the youthful rebellion of the Edelweiss Pirates increasingly turned into active resistance against the Nazi regime.

The response of the Nazi authorities to the nonconformist activities of the Edelweiss Pirates was by no means uniform. In some areas, their activities were simply regarded by the local police force as childish pranks. However, during wartime, the Gestapo defined their activities as opposition and placed leaders of the Edelweiss Pirates under strict surveillance. The Gestapo regarded the Edelweiss Pirates as extremely hostile to the Hitler Youth and a growing danger to other young people in Germany. As a result, the Gestapo initiated a major crackdown against the Edelweiss Pirates. On 7 December 1942, 739 Pirates were arrested in Düsseldorf, Duisburg, Essen and Wuppertal. They were placed in a 're-education camp' designed to instil conformity towards Nazi ideas. In October 1944, the SS issued a decree on the 'combating of youth gangs', which led to further arrests of leading Edelweiss Pirates. In November 1944, the leaders of the Cologne Edelweiss Pirates were publicly hanged in order to deter other young people from joining the group.

The increasingly subversive activities of the Edelweiss Pirates justify their inclusion among the active 'resistance' against the Nazi regime. During the latter stages of the Second World War, they were fully aware that their activities carried the probability of arrest and even execution. However, the key motive behind the resistance activities of the Edelweiss Pirates was primarily a strong and normal youthful desire for personal liberty and independence. In essence, they wanted a more open and free society than existed within Nazi Germany, without having any set of clear political ideals of their own. They were rebels without a cause.²

Swing and Jazz Youth

There were other nonconformist youth groups which engaged in protests against the rigid cultural uniformity imposed by the Nazi regime. The two most significant groups in this category were known as 'Swing Youth' and 'Jazz Youth'. The nonconformist behaviour of these youth groups consisted of a powerful desire to listen to banned American music, in particular the swing music produced by big bands, such as the Glenn Miller Orchestra, and the American jazz music of the 1930s, made popular by leading performers such as Louis Armstrong. Heinrich Himmler, the leader of the SS, suggested that all young people who listened to jazz music should be 'beaten, given the severest exercise, and then put to hard labour'.³

Those associating with Swing Youth were predominantly teenagers from the affluent upper middle classes, located in big cities, most notably Berlin, Stuttgart, Hamburg, Kiel, Frankfurt and Dresden. They admired American music and popular culture and organised illegal dances, attended by up to 6,000 young

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people. The dances were characterised by what one Gestapo report described as 'an uninhibited indulgence in swing'.⁴

The members of Jazz Youth established illegal clubs at which 'hot jazz' was played. In Frankfurt, for example, the Gestapo closed down one jazz club called the Harlem Club. Members of Jazz and Swing Youth also set up their own swing and jazz big bands. The Gestapo closely monitored the activities of Swing and Jazz Youth during the war. Gestapo reports describe youths with long hair 'down to the collar', who loved to engage in an energetic dance, made popular in America in the 1930s, known as the 'jitterbug'.

In a move designed to clamp down on the nonconformist behaviour of Swing Youth, the Nazi regime imposed a ban in 1940 on public dances. Even so, members of Swing Youth were not deterred and organised private swing parties, while Jazz Youth created a number of illegal clubs, often located in the basement of large private houses.

It was the upper-middle-class affluence of members of Swing Youth which allowed them to purchase fashionable clothes, record players (known as gramophones) and illegal imports of American swing and jazz recordings. The Gestapo reports on swing groups also lay strong emphasis on the hedonistic pleasure which these uninhibited young Germans took in heavy drinking, sexual intercourse and high-energy dancing.

It seems the members of Swing and Jazz Youth were motivated, not by any burning desire to offer political resistance to the Nazi regime, but rather by a natural youthful desire to have a good time. As one member of the Swing Youth later recalled: 'We were not against the Nazis, but they were against us.'⁵ These young people wanted a more open culture in Germany which would allow them to buy American swing and jazz music and to go to dance halls and jazz clubs in order to have a good time.⁶

The Nazi authorities interpreted the admiration shown by Swing and Jazz Youth for American culture as a lack of patriotism, when in reality it was the cultural freedom of America which they admired rather than its political organisation. It seems that a more culturally permissive society was what members of Swing Youth, who were usually located in cosmopolitan large cities, were primarily interested in.

Conclusions

The presence of these counter-cultural groups in Nazi Germany indicates that a very substantial minority of German youth, especially in the large German cities, remained indifferent and sometimes actively hostile to the rigidity of the Nazi state. The desire to express an individual cultural identity exhibited by these youth subcultures is further evidence that Nazism did not have the total grip on German society which its propaganda indicated. Indeed, these non-conformist activities show that the imposition of rigid discipline on German youth was beginning to break down even before the Nazi regime collapsed at the end of the Second World War.

Document case study

Youth protest**2.1 The Edelweiss Pirates – a Nazi Party report, Düsseldorf, July 1943**

Re: 'Edelweiss Pirates' . . . These adolescents, aged between 12 and 17, hang around late in the evening with musical instruments and young females. Since this riff raff is in large part outside the Hitler Youth and adopts a hostile attitude towards the organization, they represent a danger to other young people . . . There is a suspicion that it is these youths who have covered the walls of the pedestrian subway . . . with the slogans, 'Down with Hitler', 'Medals for Murder', 'Down with Nazi Brutality' etc. However often these inscriptions are removed, within a few days new ones appear on the walls.

Source: R. Bessel (ed.), *Life in the Third Reich*, Oxford, 1987, p. 34

2.2 The Edelweiss Pirates – a report by the Reich Ministry of Justice, 1944

The best-known politically hostile group are the Edelweiss Pirates. They organized in the West, namely in Cologne and Düsseldorf, but have subsequently spread over wide areas of the Reich. The Cologne juvenile court judge has recently described their external characteristics in a report. They wear the Edelweiss badge on or under the left lapel . . . The regulation uniform of the Edelweiss Pirates is short trousers, white socks, a check shirt, a white pullover and scarf and a windcheater . . . The boys belong mostly to the 14 to 18 year old age group . . . The leaders, in particular, who are tough and intelligent, come from previous leagues or from political parties . . . Most have an anti HJ [Hitler Youth] attitude, hate all discipline and thereby place themselves in opposition to the community. However, they are not only politically hostile (recently their attitude has reached the point of being hostile to the state) but as a result of their composition they are also criminal and antisocial, so that one cannot make a distinction between the two types of group.

Source: J. Noakes (ed.), *Nazism 1919–1945: a documentary reader, vol. 4: The German home front in World War II*, Exeter, 1998, pp. 450–52

2.3 A Swing Youth dance – a report from a member of the Hitler Youth, Hamburg, February 1940

The dance music was all English and American. Only swing dancing and jitterbugging took place. At the entrance to the hall stood a notice on which the words 'Swing prohibited' had been altered to 'Swing requested'. Without exception the participants accompanied the dances and songs by singing English lyrics . . . The dancers made an appalling sight. None of the couples danced normally; there was only swing of the worst sort. Sometimes two boys danced with one girl; sometimes several couples formed a circle, linking arms and jumping, slapping hands, even rubbing the backs of their heads together; and then, bent double, with the top half of the body hanging loosely down, long hair flapping into the face, they dragged themselves around practically on their knees. When the band played a rumba, the dancers went into wild ecstasy . . . The band

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played wilder and wilder numbers; none of the players were sitting any longer, they all 'jitterbugged' on the stage like wild animals.

Source: Bessel (ed.), *Life in the Third Reich*, p. 37

2.4 Swing Youth – a report by the Reich Ministry of Justice, 1944

(b) Liberal–individualistic gangs

They originated in north Germany, namely in Hamburg. The most striking example among these groups is the so-called Swing Youth, on whom there have been reports from various parts of the Reich . . . These groups are motivated by the desire to have a good time and have increasingly assumed a character bordering on criminal anti-social. Even before the war boys and girls from the socially privileged classes joined groups wearing strikingly casual clothes and became fans of English [American] music and dance. At the turn of 1939/40, the Flottbeck group organized dances which were attended by 5–6,000 people and were marked by an uninhibited indulgence in swing . . . The whole life style of these members costs a considerable amount of money . . . The greed to participate in what appeared to them to be a stylish life style in clubs, bars, cafes and house balls suppressed any positive attitude in responding to the needs of the time. They were unimpressed by the performance of our Wehrmacht [the German army]; those killed in action were held up to ridicule. An hostility to the war is clearly apparent . . . They regard Englishmen as the highest form of human development. A false conception of freedom leads them into opposition to the HJ.

Source: Noakes (ed.), *Nazism 1919–1945*, vol. 4, pp. 452–53

Document case-study questions

- 1 Explain briefly what is described in 2.1.
- 2 What does 2.2 tell us about how the Nazi authorities reacted to the Edelweiss Pirates?
- 3 What does 2.3 tell us about the attitude of the Nazis towards Swing Youth?
- 4 How does the Reich Ministry of Justice in 2.4 interpret the behaviour of Swing Youth?

Notes and references

- 1 For a detailed examination of the activities of Jazz and Swing Youth in Nazi Germany, see D. Peukert, *Inside Nazi Germany: conformity, opposition and racism in everyday life*, London, 1987.
- 2 D. Peukert, 'Youth in the Third Reich', in R. Bessel (ed.), *Life in the Third Reich*, Oxford, 1987, pp. 30–37.
- 3 A. Gill, *An honourable defeat: a history of German resistance to Hitler*, London, 1994, p. 195.
- 4 J. Noakes (ed.), *Nazism 1919–1945*, vol. 4: *The German home front in World War II*, Exeter, 1998, p. 452.
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 Peukert, 'Youth in the Third Reich', pp. 37–40.