

Chapter

14 Interpretations of Nazism



Source 1

Source 2

In so far as it is unlikely that a political oddity like Hitler will ever again achieve political power, it is a serious mistake to concentrate study of the Nazi tyranny on an analysis of the role which Hitler occupied in it. Dictators are as dependent on the political circumstances which bring them to power as they in turn influence these. The destructive and profoundly inhuman forces which the Nazi system unleashed at all levels may well appear again, though under very different circumstances, with different structures, in a different form and certainly with less forcefulness. This is the context in which the experience of the Third Reich should be analysed thoroughly. The fact that Germany – a civilised and highly developed industrial society – ranged violently out of control has political implications for us today, and it would be wrong to hide these behind a facade that isolates Hitler as the sole and root cause of it. How Hitler could succeed in securing various degrees of support from considerable sections of the German population must be explained in this context.

Mommsen, *From Weimar to Auschwitz*, 1991

Think about

- ▶ What is Mommsen arguing in Source 2?
- ▶ Do you agree?

Further reading

By far the best starting point on interpretations of the Third Reich is Ian Kershaw's *The Nazi Dictatorship, 2000*. Some of the major works of the historians mentioned on this page are listed below. Note: only works translated into English have been listed which is why the publication date may not be the same as in the main text.

- Fischer, *Germany's Aims in the First World War*, 1967
- Wehler, *The German Empire, 1871–1918*, 1985
- Broszat, *The Hitler State*, 1981
- Mommsen, *From Weimar to Auschwitz*, 1991

Introduction: historians and Hitler

In the aftermath of the Second World War there was a desperate attempt by German historians to distance the German people from the appalling crimes of the Nazis. In West Germany this took the form of demonizing Hitler and arguing that it was the unique nature of Hitler's evil which had led the nation astray. This view minimized the responsibility of the German people for Nazism. Meanwhile in America, William Shirer (an American journalist who was in Germany during the Third Reich, was present at the Nuremberg Trials in 1945, and published his massive *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* in 1959) claimed to trace the roots of Nazism back through centuries of German history. The Nazis, he argued, were products of the German people themselves. They did bear responsibility for what had happened.

These two different interpretations of Nazism can be clearly related to the time and place in which they were produced. They each attempted to explain Nazism in a way immediately appealing to their respective audiences. This is not, however, where the interpretations ended. In the 1960s, Fritz Fischer (1961), though not claiming that the roots of Nazism could be traced back for centuries, nevertheless questioned the conclusions of the West German historians after the war who argued that Hitler's evilness only bore fruit in the extraordinary circumstances of Germany in the 1920s. Fischer instead drew a comparison between the leaders of Germany immediately before the First World War and Hitler. They all, Fischer argued, held expansionist ambitions and were prepared to engage in war to achieve them. This view led to an examination of those members of the German elite who held positions of incredible influence and power in Germany around the turn of the century. Historians such as Wehler (1973) began to point to continuities amongst this elite, who clung desperately to their power in the early 1900s and even supported a war in 1914 which might prolong their period of supremacy. The aim of this elite was to keep a form of authoritarian rule in Germany. In Wehler's view, this paved the way for Hitler because the pre-war elite anticipated some of Hitler's mass political tactics and helped to create a political culture based on subservience and a vulnerability to the appeal of authoritarian rule. Not only that, but members of this elite were prepared, in desperation, to aid Hitler's rise to power.

Wehler's approach was 'structural': it focused less on the particular individual in power and more on the society and political system in which the individual ruled. However, Wehler did not focus on the Third Reich. It was historians such as Broszat (1969) and Mommsen (1971) who adopted a 'structuralist' approach to the Third Reich. They were interested in how Hitler ruled and what light this could shed on why he was able to build up such an extraordinary power base. Their conclusions, whilst hardly denying Hitler's importance, nevertheless suggested outside factors which help us to understand the nature of his power. They also encouraged a trend which has continued to gain momentum ever since, and that is the study of 'ordinary' Germans. Studying the Third Reich from the bottom up has revealed the sheer complexities of the German reaction to Nazism.

Running alongside this 'structuralist' interpretation was a more traditional view of the Third Reich which continued to emphasize the role of Hitler. Many of these interpretations stressed the importance of Hitler's own visions and beliefs as first outlined in *Mein Kampf*. Historians such as Trevor-Roper (1968) and Hildebrandt (1969) argued that Hitler followed a programme, in foreign policy at least. He imposed his wishes on the nation and most of what happened,

happened because he wished it to. This interpretation has become known as the 'intentionalist' school.

Why have historians differed?

East and West Germany

Between 1949 and 1990 Germany was divided in two. East Germany – formally known as the GDR – was run by communists and dominated by Jussia. West Germany – formally known as the FRG – was by contrast run as a modern capitalist democracy with close relations with the rest of Europe and the United States. The differences between the political systems of these two states had a profound effect on the interpretations of Nazism produced by German historians.

In East Germany, Nazism was characterized as the evil consequence of capitalism. The emphasis was not solely on Hitler himself but on the form of fascism which Nazism was characterized as representing. The role of big business in supporting Hitler was highlighted (although this has been questioned by many, especially regarding the years before Hitler was appointed Chancellor). In addition, the role of communist opposition to Nazism itself was emphasized by GDR historians. All of this served to legitimize the GDR as an extreme capitalist system was the problem, then the opposite system, that of communism, was the solution. Nothing could be more different from Nazism. This was useful propaganda to those seeking to build support for the communist regime.

In the West, more attention was paid to explaining Nazism in such a way as to free the German people of collective guilt. This would enable West Germany once again to play an active role in European affairs and ensure that the hostility that lasted beyond the First World War was not repeated. As time went on, however, and West Germany became more established and accepted in the Western World, this need to exonerate the German nation became less crucial. It was clear that Germany had moved on and historians were freer to pose more difficult questions about, for example, the exact nature of people's response to Nazism.

Historical approach

It should be clear from the introduction that historians have varied considerably in the way they have approached the history of the Third Reich. Some more than others have focused on the role of certain individuals, concentrating on the beliefs and power of Hitler in particular. Others have approached it from the other end of the telescope, arguing that it wasn't simply Hitler that determined what was done and how, but also external, structural factors such as the Nazi system of government and German society. This is a key difference and can influence the way different historians interpret the same piece of evidence.

Aims and ideology

As we have already seen, two different ideologies emerged in the two Germanys after 1949. In East Germany where communist ideology dominated, the aim behind much history of the Third Reich was to highlight the evils of capitalism. In the West, by contrast, much of the early history of the Third Reich was anti-fascist. Hitler's Nazism was compared with Stalin's communism. The emphasis was on the promotion of free democracies and on trying to distance West Germany from the evils of Nazism. As time went on, however,

Think about

Why do you think different historians might favour either a 'structuralist' interpretation or an 'intentionalist' one?

See Chapter 15 on the division of Germany in 1949.

The Marxist view of history interprets the past in terms of economic development. All societies are believed to go through various economic stages of which capitalism is the last straw, leading ultimately to the preferred model of communism.

For Marxists, Nazism was seen as a form of fascism, which in itself was seen as an extreme form of capitalism. Fascism, they argued, resulted from capitalism in crisis, when profits began to fall. It involved extreme methods to save the economy and protect the profit-makers: for example, smashing trade unions and expanding abroad to secure cheap raw material and bigger markets.

The move towards more study of 'everyday' life has also shifted the emphasis away from seeing the German people as acting and behaving as one. Instead, regional studies such as Kershaw's in Bavaria reveal the complexity and variety of responses to the Nazi regime.

Think about

Historians in the West were consciously using their accounts of the Third Reich to sound a warning against the dangers of totalitarianism and to try to ensure that it was never repeated.

Is this a valid use of history? What effects might such an aim have on the way in which they interpreted the past?

Before reading this section, you are advised to re-read Chapter 9, especially pages 165–171.

The historian Hildebrand has gone as far as to say that Nazism was in fact Hitlerism, such was the pivotal role of Hitler in the Party.

West Germany's need to protect herself from any bad press preceded and historians were able to study the Third Reich in its own right, rather than as a means of legitimizing the present.

This has subsequently led to many different interpretations of the Third Reich amongst West German historians – and indeed amongst historians of the western world.

Evidence

Although it might appear to students of Nazism that one thing it does not lack is evidence, there are some significant gaps. Some of these are the product of deliberate action by the Nazis themselves, especially towards the end of the war when material was destroyed. Other gaps, however, are the result of circumstance. Bombing raids by the allies accidentally destroyed evidence, for example. And Hitler's very method of governing, with a minimum of paperwork and few formal meetings, means that the evidence stops short of the key decisions where Hitler – we presume – was involved. One gap, for example, is the order to carry out the Final Solution. There is no actual record of who gave the order to go ahead so it is difficult to be certain how big a role Hitler played in it. This lack of evidence causes problems for those trying to prove that Hitler controlled everything in the Nazi government.

Conclusion

As you can see, there are many factors influencing the way historians have interpreted Nazism. Although we have primarily concentrated on German historians here, these differences extend to historians outside Germany. In conclusion, when assessing an interpretation of Nazism, it is necessary to consider the following:

- When was it written? How soon after the war?
- Where was it written? East Germany? West Germany? Outside of Germany?
- Why was it written? Was there a clear purpose?
- Which approach was used? A structural approach or an 'intentionalist' approach?

A weak dictator or master in the Third Reich?

As you know from Chapter 9, the Nazi government was far from the well-organized machine suggested by its propaganda. In reality, Nazi officials worked in isolation, ignorant of what others were doing and often duplicating their work. Hitler was somewhat aloof from the day-to-day business of government and had a dislike for paperwork. He preferred others to present him with ideas to which he could respond. Decisions were not always taken quickly and Nazi policy often lacked the coherence which a more organized government would produce.

Historians have disagreed, however, on whether this was a deliberate policy by Hitler. Did he deliberately allow the Nazi state to be governed in such a chaotic fashion because it enhanced his own power? By remaining aloof and appointing several people to the same job, was he deliberately encouraging infighting and a complex dependence on him alone? Those historians who advance this argument are part of the 'intentionalist' school. They are also known as 'pragmatists'. They believe that Hitler did intend this chaos and that it is further evidence that Hitler was master in the Third Reich. They argue that Hitler followed a programme as laid out in *Mein Kampf* and that everything which followed was shaped by this. This particular argument has

been most successfully applied to foreign policy (see Chapter 12, page 237).

Other historians, part of the 'structuralist' school and also known as functionalists, argue that Hitler did not set out to create this chaos. It was in fact a consequence of his own business, rather than being in full control of events. Hitler was in fact constrained by various outside 'structural' factors. These included his dependence on State institutions dominated by traditional elites (such as the civil service), an economy allegedly spiralling out of control by 1939 and the actions of other states. They also included Hitler's own personality which was ill-suited to the governing of a large state. According to this interpretation, Hitler was forced to respond to events more than he was able to shape them. There was an absence of clear planning and Hitler's ideological aims were little more than propaganda devices to unite the people.

In the twelve years of his rule in Germany Hitler produced the biggest confusion in government that has ever existed in a civilised state. During his period of government, he removed from the organisation of the State all clarity of leadership and produced a completely opaque network of competencies. It was not laziness or an excessive degree of tolerance which led the otherwise so energetic and forceful Hitler to tolerate this real witch's cauldron of struggles for position and conflicts over competence. It was intentional. With this technique he systematically disorganised the upper echelons of the Reich leadership in order to develop and further the authority of his own will until it became a despotic tyranny.

Otto Dietrich, Hitler's press chief

One thing, especially, Hitler never did - he never ran counter to the opinion of his *Gauleiters*, his district commissioners. Each of these men was in his power, but together they held him in theirs... The secret of his leadership lay in knowing in advance what course the majority of his *Gauleiters* would decide on, and in being the first to declare for that course... Hitler was at all times dependent on them - and not on them alone... the result was that his policy continually developed along wholly different lines to those he had envisaged. He maintained his position of supremacy, but he lost his freedom of decision.

From the memoirs of Raushning, at one time a friend of Hitler's

Look at Sources 3 and 4. Source 3 comes from the memoirs of Otto Dietrich, who was Hitler's press chief. Source 4 is from the memoirs of Raushning, originally a friend and supporter of Hitler but forced to flee Germany in 1936 and subsequently a critic of Nazism. How could these sources be used by both 'functionalist' and 'structuralist' historians to support their case?

Think-aloud activity

The 'structuralist' interpretation shifts some of the emphasis away from Hitler and in doing so highlights the role of the German elites in supporting Nazism. Think back to the issues raised earlier in this chapter. Why do you think the 'structuralist' interpretation emerged in West Germany in the late 1960s and not before?

Raushning is probably here referring to Hitler in 1934. See page 172 for a definition of *Gauleiter*.

Interpretations exercise: Was Hitler the master of the Third Reich?

The confusion and conflict of leadership and administrative hierarchy was further complicated by the wide proliferation of leadership positions. The machinery of both Party and State had to be expanded if the all-encompassing supervisory functions of the totalitarian system were to be carried out. The alleged inefficiency and corruption of the Weimar democracy were as nothing compared to the costly expansion of the one-party state and the antagonistic coexistence of overlapping top-level bodies. So long as the Führer did not interfere - and he gave free rein to the policy of divide and conquer - nothing could stop this. On the contrary. Over the years, Hitler, in the consolidation of his leadership dictatorship, created a vast special bureaucracy which in turn had to collide with the 'normal' agencies.

Bracher, *The German Dictatorship*, 1970

Activity
Would you describe each of these Interpretations (Sources A-D) as 'functionalist', 'structuralist' or a combination of the two? Summarize your conclusions in the form of a chart

View of historian	Evidence/reasons provided to support view

Hitler was never as sure of himself and his position as both his enemies and friends thought. He was a man playing in a game of chance, a German roulette... Particularly in his early days in power, until the Rohm murder and the death of Hindenburg, there is evidence of real fears of opposition and then real surprise that the opposition had melted away... Like most common men, he overestimated the ability of his 'superiors'. When he himself was the 'superior', he avoided meetings with subordinates who might question a decision, or he flooded them with monologue to prevent their raising any objection. This is a sign of weakness, not strength... The suspicion is strong that Hitler avoided the really difficult decisions and acted only when forced to and then not from a long-considered specific plan, but from simple prejudices and the inspiration of the moment. Possibly he was overtaken by circumstance. Precise plans, as against romantic dreams, may have been the concern of his more methodical subordinates, and possibly of more inventive historians who 'discovered' them.

Peterson, *The Limits of Hitler's Power*, 1969

The notorious insecurity which pervaded the power structures of the Reich was encouraged by Hitler more out of habit than purposefully and to a large extent was simply a logical consequence of the Nazis' inability to settle into a stable institutional framework once they had achieved power. This insecurity was the source of constant competition for the Führer's favour among the regime's potentates [unless]. It led to the top officials of the regime constantly seeking to excel each other in advocating ever more radical policies, though they were always careful to ensure that these were in line with Hitler's ideological attitudes and - very importantly - not a threat to the position of other dominant interests in the system.

Mommsen, *From Weimar to Auschwitz*, 1991

Context D

...in the case of Hitler there was never any question of a *primat* (primacy) against the leader, and one of the significant features of both National Socialism and the Third Reich is the fact that from the beginning, so the very end it stood and fell with this man, with his decisions, his ideological fixations. His purely political way of life, and his need for the grandiose alternative of victory or catastrophe. It influenced not only the ideological goals of the movement but even more the organization of mass meetings displaying overwhelming power and leader-worship. For these reasons, National Socialism can indeed be called Hitlerism. This man and his intentions and actions will always be in the very centre of Nazi history. But at the same time, Hitler himself is to be understood in terms of German and European traditions which formed the framework and feeding ground of a Nationalist Socialist movement that existed well before Hitler.

Brechtel, *The Role of Hitler: Perspectives of Interpretation*, in Jacques Faeser, *A Reader's Guide*, 1976

Synthesis

How are we supposed to reach a conclusion on this issue? As we have already seen, the evidence itself is never going to provide a conclusive answer.

Source 5

The hypothesis that Hitler was the sole author of all the crimes of the Third Reich cannot be proved in the most mundane sense – the source materials are both inadequate both in quantity and quality to prove it. At this elementary level we know less about Hitler's control over German policy, much less about his motives and calculations, than we know about the conduct of most other nineteenth- or twentieth-century political leaders. For this reason alone, an analysis of his choices and of his influence is exceptionally difficult to execute.

Tim Mason, *Intention and Explanation: A Current Controversy about the Interpretation of National Socialism*, in Hirschfeld and Kershaw, *The 'Führer State': Myth and Reality*, 1981

Historians have now begun to see a way through these debates (which were never as polarized as some historians claimed) to reach an interpretation which acknowledges the structural constraints on Hitler whilst maintaining that he was powerful enough to pursue his major aims. In other words, whilst Nazism cannot be seen simply as Hitlerism and Hitler was not quite the 'master' that historians once thought, he was nevertheless far from being a 'weak dictator'.

How popular was Nazi rule in Germany 1933–1939?

As we have seen, in the aftermath of the war, German historians were busy creating an image of the German people being somehow tricked and cunningly manipulated by Hitler. Outside Germany, there were contrasting attempts to share out the blame for the Third Reich among the German people and to blame their particular human nature. Both interpretations were far too simplistic. What has emerged in their place since the 1960s is a much more complex and sensible emphasis on the variety of responses to Nazism. That is not to say, however, that historians have not differed in their overall interpretations.

Examination-style questions

- 1 Comprehension in context**
Using Source A and your own knowledge, explain what the author means by 'The confusion and conflict of leadership'.
- 2 Comparing the sources**
To what extent do Sources A and C differ in their interpretation of the Nazi state?
- 3 Assessing the sources**
To what extent should we treat all these interpretations with some caution?
- 4 Making judgements**
Using all the sources and your own knowledge, do you agree that Hitler was indeed 'master in the Third Reich' with no real limitations to his power?

Activity

Men do make their own history, but they do not make it as they please, not under conditions of their own choosing, but rather under circumstances which they find before them, under given and imposed circumstances.

Marx, 18th Brumaire

▶ Could this quotation be applied to Hitler?

Think about

▶ How satisfactory is this synthesis in your opinion?



You are advised to read Chapter 13 again before reading this section.

Activity

The concept of resistance must comprise all that was done despite the terror of the Third Reich, despite the suffering and martyrdom, for the sake of humanity, for the aid of the persecuted. And the word 'resistance' in some cases applies, too, to certain forms of standing aside in silence.

Jacobson, *Germans Against Hitler*, July 20 1944, 1969

Activity

Firstly, read Kershaw's categories of different kinds of opposition below:

Resistance – active participation in organized attempts to work against the regime with the conscious aim of undermining it or planning for the moment of its demise.

Opposition – a wider concept comprising many forms of actions with partial and limited aims, not directed against Nazism as a system and in fact sometimes stemming from individuals or groups broadly sympathetic towards the regime and its ideology.

Dissent – the voicing of attitudes frequently spontaneous and often unrelated to any intended action, which in any way whatsoever ran counter to or were critical of Nazism.

Kershaw, *Popular Opinion and Political Dissent in the Third Reich*, 1983

In pairs, list all the possible kinds of resistance to the Nazis, defined in its broadest sense. Then categorize these according to Peckert's graph and Kershaw's definitions above. Which method of categorizing works best in your opinion?

Broadly speaking, historians have differed in their responses to the following questions:

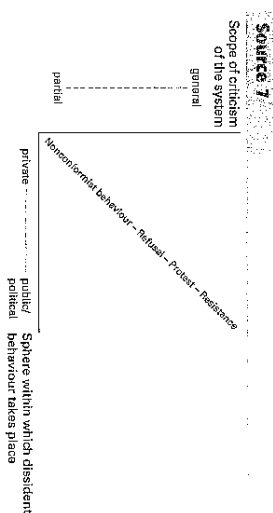
- What do we mean by 'resistance'? What kinds of behaviour did it include?
- Who resisted Nazism and why?
- Did resistance – defined in its broadest sense – have any impact on the Nazis?

What do we mean by resistance?

Resistance to the Nazis, as interpreted in its most narrow sense, means any action intended to destroy the Nazi regime. This would include assassination attempts on Hitler, for example, and is mainly restricted to the war years and to elite groups, such as the army. There have been alternative interpretations of resistance, however. One of the broader definitions was offered by H.A. Jacobson in 1969 (see Source 6).

In Jacobson's definition, resistance encompasses every kind of rejection of Nazism, from a refusal to give the Nazi salute, to the reading of banned literature, to more dangerous acts of public opposition such as criticizing the regime or continuing to shop in Jewish stores. Jacobson's definition therefore brackets assassination attempts on Hitler with much more low-key, less dangerous refusals to conform. Martin Broszat proposed a similar interpretation by also arguing that resistance should be examined on a much broader scale than outright attempts to bring down Nazism. He uses the term 'Resistenz' which roughly translates as the kind of resistance you build up against germs. It does not therefore imply wholly active behaviour but could mean a kind of immunity to Nazism. Again, this would include a range of different kinds of behaviour including relatively minor actions about which the Nazis themselves were probably unaware.

Some historians are not happy with such an all-encompassing definition, however. By using the same term to describe a large spectrum of behaviour, you run the risk of blurring the distinction between different responses to Nazism. In other words, you are over-simplifying the issue. The historian Peckert has tried to overcome this by constructing a graph on which an enormous range of different kinds of behaviour can be plotted:



Who resisted, why and how?

Interpretations have differed according to where the historians came from. The chart on the next page summarizes the changing interpretations to come out of West Germany. It is based on chapter eight of Kershaw's book *The Nazi Dictatorship*, 1993.

Date	Interpretation	Context (in West Germany)
1940s	That there were many in Germany – especially amongst the elites – who challenged and resisted Nazism.	Need to respond to interpretations outside Germany accusing the German people of collective guilt.
1950s	That the communists played no real role in fighting Nazism. The fight against Nazism was a fight against totalitarianism.	The onset of the Cold War with the division of Germany into a communist East and a capitalist, democratic West.
1960s	That the conservative opposition to Hitler was not a fight against totalitarianism. Many of the members of the elites involved in opposition wanted to keep authoritarian rule after Hitler had gone.	More sources of evidence available. West Germany more established, so less need to exonerate the German people. A younger generation of historians.
1970s	That opposition to Nazism was much more widespread than a focus on assassination attempts suggests. There were many different ways of registering opposition to the Nazi regime. The Nazis were far from successful in imposing totalitarian rule. However, there was also a degree of acceptance of Nazism amongst the people for various reasons.	Local studies which focused on everyday life and everyday types of opposition.

In East Germany, however, it was a different story. Communist opposition was highlighted as a way of giving greater legitimacy to the GDR. If it could be proved that the communists played the biggest role in opposing the Nazis, then the communists could perhaps be seen as the natural replacement of the Nazis in Germany. It was certainly true that the communists were amongst the very first clear opponents of Nazism and continued to oppose it, as an underground movement, until the fall of the regime. However, as we have seen in the previous chapter, there were other important examples of organized opposition.

Source 8

The East German literature concedes that the communists cannot claim sole credit for whatever was done in resisting the Nazis, but it insists that among the varied resistance groups the communists played the most important role in this struggle. This accounts for the minimal attention paid to other resistance groups, such as, for example, the (Protestant) Confessional Church. As for the oppositional forces gathered around the former Mayor of Leipzig, Carl Goerdeler, which had access to such layers of power as the military and high bureaucrats, their efforts are dismissed as constituting mere tactical disagreements within the ruling class.

Dornalen, *German History in Marxist Perspective: The East German Approach*, 1985

When the German opposition to Hitler first became an object of historical interest, it was in the context of attempts to disprove Allied theories of collective guilt and to construct a bridge of historical continuity to span the twelve years of Nazi rule, which were regarded at the time as a catastrophic and unnatural interruption of the historical process by demonically destructive forces.

Mommisen, *From Weimar to Auschwitz*, 1991

Think about

- ▶ Why, according to Source 9, were people grumbling about the Nazis?
- ▶ Why would this weaken opposition to the Nazis?

How much impact did opposition to the Nazis have?

On one level, it is possible to argue that the opposition to Nazism had virtually no effect. The Nazis were not prevented from achieving their major aims and it took the combined force of the wartime Allies to overthrow them. In this sense, the opposition was a failure. However, historians looking at it from a different perspective, in terms of whether the Nazis were successful in controlling the German people and imposing their will on them, reach a rather different conclusion. They argue that in fact the Nazis were prevented from carrying out some of their aims as they wished and also that the Nazis never had total control over the people. Martin Broszat goes as far as to say that the more low-key forms of opposition – ‘resistant’ as he terms it – probably presented a bigger irritant to the Nazis than more organized forms of resistance. One consequence of examining the response to the Nazis amongst ordinary Germans is that the degree of consensus or agreement with Nazism is revealed. Or at the very least, indifference. Reports to SOPADE (SPD in exile) headquarters reveal the Left’s frustration at the way in which many people appeared to accept Nazism and go along with it.

Source 9

The weakness of its opponents is a strength of the regime. Its opponents are ideologically and organizationally weak. They are ideologically weak because the masses consist only of dissatisfied people, only grumblers; their dissatisfaction is based solely upon economic reasons... their criticism stems from only narrow personal interests.

From a SOPADE report, 1934

Recent historians who have examined the complexity of the German response to Nazism and have acknowledged the complexity of many with the regime, are nevertheless at pains to acknowledge the sacrifice made by many in the fight against Nazism. It would be quite wrong to disregard the German resistance to Nazism. However, there is no longer any need to shield Germany from the reality that alongside the opponents of Nazism were also its supporters. Hitler’s foreign policy in the 1930s, for example, was the cause of particular support. Even more important was the economic recovery and general rise in living standards during the 1930s, which provided more stability and prosperity.

Interpretations exercise: opposition to the Nazis

Source 10

No serious opposition

The number of those who consciously criticize the political objectives of the regime is very small, quite apart from the fact that they cannot give expression to this criticism. And the fact that discontent labour other material makes itself hardly felt on numerous occasions also confirms the ‘good conscience’ of these people in terms of the National Socialist regime. They do not want to return to the past and if anyone told them that their complaints about this or that aspect threaten the foundations of the Third Reich they would probably be very astonished and horrified.

From a SOPADE report, 1937

The opposition of the workers

In September 1939 the government ordered further wage cuts and more civil conscription; hours of work were lengthened and overtime bonuses abolished; paid holidays were suspended. Wage earners lost virtually all their remaining rights. The consequence was a massive wave of resentment. Absenteeism and refusals to do overtime and week-end shifts increased to such an extent that production was seriously disrupted in October... The government was forced to give way and to withdraw most of its war measures, lest the home front collapse.

Now it cannot be demonstrated that what occurred in German industry in the first weeks of the war amounted to a general rejection of the war by a large section of the working class. While it is true that the war was unpopular throughout Germany at this time, this interpretation cannot actually be proved from the sources. That is to say, we probably cannot speak of *resistance* in the precise sense of the term. But what happened clearly did have a quite different quality from 'bad work discipline': it had the quality of a broad denial of co-operation by the working-class, a denial marked by economic class consciousness in the widest sense, and in which the solidarities of the old working-class movement were still a driving force. This refusal to co-operate was the exactly appropriate method of asserting immediate class interests *within* the dictatorship. More aggressive or decisive actions, the 'riot' or 'rising' which Hitler feared, could hardly be brought about in the absence of organisations, and would, as everyone knew, have been repressed with ruthless brutality. And the denial of co-operation was adequate to the situation, in that its scale was sufficient to force the government to change its social and economic policies within 5-12 weeks... Neither resistance nor opposition were able to overthrow the Nazi regime. In the event, the opposition probably caused it more trouble than the resistance.

Mason 'The Workers' Opposition in Nazi Germany'
In *History Workshop Journal* no. 11, 1981

The limited impact of resistance

The ineffectiveness and failure of German resistance to Nazism had its roots in the strife-torn political climate of the Weimar Republic. The intractable conflict on the left, the enthusiasm of the conservative Right to act as gravediggers to the Republic, and the massive popular readiness to embrace authoritarianism and reject the only form of democracy then known to Germany explain divisions within, slowness to act of, and lack of popular support for, resistance during the dictatorship. The moral courage of those who stood up to Nazi tyranny remains, and will remain, an example to all subsequent ages. But a historical understanding of the weaknesses and failure of resistance is crucial. Apart from illustrating the self-evident truth that it is easier to prevent a would-be dictator from taking power than to remove such a dictator once he has the might of the State at his disposal, the historiographical and conceptual debates about resistance... have increasingly demonstrated the very complexity of the problem of resistance under Nazism. Perhaps more than all else, it has been their merit to emphasise more and more as time has passed one cardinal aspect of the problem: that the story of dissent, opposition, and resistance in the Third Reich is indistinguishable from the story of consent, approval, and collaboration.

Kershaw, *The Nazi Dictatorship*, 1993

The resistance of the elite

The majority of those involved in the national conservative resistance, several of whom held unequivocally Nazi views and most of whom either held senior positions of authority or were members of the officer corps, believed, at least up to the beginning of the war, that they would be able to contain the radicalising tendencies in the regime. These tendencies were regarded primarily as a threat to the Reich's external security and it was felt that they could be contained without having to undertake any major changes in the internal structures of the system... the national conservative resistance only gradually and hesitantly developed from seeking merely to correct abuses in the system and impose alternative strategies on to it to the idea of staging a *coup d'état* and establishing a new social order.

Mormann, *From Weimar to Auschwitz*, 1991

Statistics of resistance

- By 1939:
- Around 150,000 communists and Social Democrats had been imprisoned in concentration camps
 - 40,000 Germans had left the country for political reasons
 - 12,000 Germans had been convicted of high treason
 - 40,000 Germans had been imprisoned for lesser political offences.

Figures taken from Kershaw, *The Nazi Dictatorship*, 1993

Examining the sources

- 1 **Comprehension in context**
Using Source D and your own knowledge, explain how effectively the elite groups in Germany resisted Nazism.
- 2 **Comparing the sources**
To what extent do Sources B and C differ in their interpretation of the success of opposition to Nazism? Can you offer any reasons for their differences?
- 3 **Assessing the sources**
Of what use is Source E when assessing the effectiveness of resistance to Nazism?
- 4 **Making judgements**
The popularity of the Nazis outweighed the opposition. Using the sources and your own knowledge, how far do you agree with this statement?