

# Chapter

## Popularity and resistance 1933–1945



Source 1

Photograph of German women at a political rally, 1934

Source 2

For an outsider, a non-German who never experienced Nazism, it is perhaps too easy to criticise, to expect standards of behaviour which it was well-nigh impossible to attain in the circumstances.

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

Source 3

One may well assert that the whole nation is convinced that Hitler is a great politician. That is solely attributable to his foreign policy successes, which no one – not even the most confirmed Nazis – would have thought possible before.

A SOPADE report, spring 1939

### Activity

Use source 1 to prove that Hitler was popular amongst the German people if you look closely. You will find conflicting messages. It is, not surprisingly, difficult to find reliable sources of evidence about the extent of opposition to the Nazi Party. We depend for our evidence on various sources which are summarized below. For each one, discuss its values and limitations when investigating opposition to the Nazis.

- Nazi propaganda
- SOPADE (SPD in exile) reports sent to headquarters outside Germany
- Nazi intelligence reports
- Personal records dating from the Third Reich
- Personal accounts recorded after the collapse of the Third Reich.

### Context

The bread masses in the industrial district live for the most part on bread and potatoes. Such price rises must therefore be simply catastrophic for morale.

Gesapo report, 1934

### Introduction

Source 2 provides us with our starting point in this chapter. It is essential that, in examining the ways in which the German people reacted to Nazi rule, we do not make judgements from the comfort and safety of our own position today. This chapter examines the different reactions of the German people to the Nazi state. Before you read on, you need to be familiar with some new terms.

**Resistance** implies some open form of opposition aimed at bringing down the Nazi state. This type of action was extremely dangerous and mainly limited to the war years.

**Dissent** is the term used to describe low level opposition aimed at expressing opposition to the Nazis rather than destroying them.

**Conformity** is used to describe those who, for whatever reason, went along with what the Nazis were doing.

The second part of the chapter considers the impact of the Second World War on the German people and on the popularity of the Nazi Party. It ends with an account of the most serious attempt to assassinate Hitler in 1944.

### Key questions

- To what extent did the German people oppose the Nazi regime and on what grounds?
- What impact did this opposition have?
- Why was opposition to the regime limited?
- How did the German people react to the Nazis' anti-Semitism?
- How popular was Hitler personally?
- How did the war affect the German people and the popularity of Hitler and the Nazis?
- How serious was the opposition Hitler faced during the war?

### Popular opposition to the Nazis

#### What did people dislike about living in the Third Reich?

##### Economic factors

By far the most important factor influencing people's view of the regime was their economic well-being. Although the official unemployment statistics suggested overwhelming success by the Nazis, it wasn't until the Four Year Plan launched a massive rearmament programme that unemployment was fully eradicated. In addition, there were other problems. Food shortages and price increases featured in the early years of the regime. The unemployed were sometimes forced to work at wages less than the unemployment benefit they had been receiving, and many of the work creation schemes meant workers leaving home and performing hard labour. Working conditions often deteriorated and those were continued – and largely unsuccessful – efforts by workers to increase their wages. It wasn't just the working class that had cause to complain, however. Peasants and members of the *Mittelstand* (lower middle class) were amongst the most critical of the Nazi regime. Both were similarly hit by price rises and neither felt rewarded for the support they had given the Nazis before 1933.

#### Intrusion into the private sphere

Not surprisingly, the Nazis' attempt to control the private lives of the German people was often resented. Some people refused to stop listening to banned

music, reading banned books and criticizing the regime, though for the most part, great care was taken to do all this in private. More openly, some people refused to shop in Jewish shops or consulting Jewish doctors. Many people were also unhappy with the attack on the Churches.

**The coming of war**

Every time Hitler acted aggressively in his foreign policy during the 1930s, his popularity dipped. Fortunately for Hitler, each time war was averted up to 1939, the Führer's popularity then increased due to people's enormous relief. But in September 1939, war was not averted and there was little enthusiasm shown by the German people. In June 1939, one observer noted 'The desire for peace is stronger than that for war' and another wrote on the very last day of peace 'Trust in the Führer will now probably be subjected to its hardest acid test. The overwhelming proportion of people's comrades expects from him the prevention of war...'

**Conclusion**

Of course, there were many other reasons to dislike Nazi rule, depending on your position and experience. That those groups outside Hitler's *Volksbewegung* opposed the regime goes without saying. But as a broad rule of thumb, criticism was at its fiercest when people were affected directly. Opposition to sterilization and even euthanasia was most vehement when a family member or friend was affected. Anti-Semitic policies were generally accepted except when it concerned someone you knew and respected – or until you left your own house to find broken glass on the streets. This is why economic conditions were particularly influential: wages, working hours and availability of food all had an immediate impact on everyday life.

**'Everyday' opposition**

- The basic refusal to conform included:
  - Refusal to give the Hitler salute (some people gave the salute but muttered things like 'we should cut the grass when it gets this high' under their breath as they did it)
  - Refusal to cook the *Eintrug* ('One pot meal' which people were supposed to cook on certain Sundays in order to save money which could then be donated to the 'Winter Relief Fund')
  - Reading of banned literature
  - Listening to foreign radio broadcasts
  - Listening to banned music
  - Continuing to buy goods in Jewish shops
  - Telling anti-Nazi jokes

All these expressions of dissent brought risks, however small the gesture. Some people were more aggressive and open in their refusal to conform, such as the alternative youth groups described in Chapter 10. It was very rare for opposition to go beyond this before war broke out.

**Did people's opposition have any impact on Nazi policies?**

The Nazis were not prevented from pursuing their ultimate goals of racial and territorial mastery until war brought defeat. In this respect opposition to the Nazis failed. However, the Nazis never succeeded in establishing the total control over people which was one of their main domestic goals. Memories of the Revolution in 1918 made them particularly sensitive to the demands of the working class. Hitler banned an increase in food prices in 1938 and abandoned

One of the best sources on everyday life and dissent is Peukert, *Inside Nazi Germany*, 1987. See also Kashyur, *Popular Opinion and Political Dissent in the Third Reich*, 1983.

Occasionally, an individual was willing to take an enormous risk, such as Georg Elser, a carpenter. In 1939 he went to the beer hall in Munich, where Hitler was shortly due to deliver his annual speech in memory of the 1923 *Putsch*. During successive evenings Elser would wait until the beer hall closed, hiding in the toilets so that no-one would throw him out. He would then set to work making a hollow in the platform big enough to hold a time bomb. Through sheer bad luck, the night of the speech was foggy and Hitler left earlier than planned, thus narrowly avoiding his own death and changing the face of history. Elser was arrested on his way to Switzerland and was killed in 1945. What sees Elser and those like him apart from the majority was his willingness to risk his life in order to overthrow the regime. Not surprisingly, very few were so brave.

The Führer, Goering and Mussolini are in a plane above Munich. They discuss how they can make themselves popular with the people of Munich. Goering decides to throw down hard ration coupons. The Führer decides to throw down meat ration coupons. Mussolini goes to the cockpit and asks the pilot for his advice. The pilot advises him to throw the other two passengers down.

an attempt to lower wages in 1939 following workers' protests. The Nazis were similarly sensitive to public opinion in 1941, when the euthanasia programme was officially dropped following Galen's speech (see page 202). Overall, however, these responses can hardly be held up as examples of the Nazis being forced to back down over crucial issues.

**Why was opposition limited?**

Despite these various demonstrations of dissent, opposition was, on the whole, limited in both its size and impact. The most obvious reason for this was, of course, fear. 'Keep quiet or you'll end up in Dachau' (the first concentration camp) was one very good reason not to oppose the regime. Even listening to the wrong music could potentially endanger you in a state that monitored the most private as well as public spheres. But while fear may have been the major disincentive for opposing the Nazis, there were other factors:

**Absence of mass organizations to co-ordinate opposition**

Potential centres of opposition were quickly dismantled by the Nazis. The SPD was dissolved in June 1933 and its leaders were either imprisoned or had already escaped, establishing headquarters in Prague and after 1938, in Paris. Its policy after 1933 was to wait for the regime to collapse rather than to force it to do so. The KPD leaders also set up headquarters abroad. Those communists remaining in Germany were a little more active than the SPD in trying to undermine the regime, for example through the distribution of leaflets. But they still faced the problem common to any resistance movement – the inability to meet in large numbers because it was simply too dangerous to do so. Organizing a mass movement of opposition was therefore impossible. Workers also felt the lack of their trade union movement which had provided them with a sense of solidarity. The only mass movement which survived destruction and which was technically outside of the Nazi power structures was the Church. But as we have already seen, the Churches, for various reasons, did not present the Nazis with a united front of opposition.

**The attitude of the army**

The army was the only institution in a position to mount a serious threat to Hitler (and indeed was the only institution to get close to destroying him in 1944) but they chose to support him in 1934. The ambitious remnant plans were divisive; older, more traditional officers were concerned about the effects of mass recruitment, while younger officers welcomed the injection of more money into better and more plentiful equipment. Generally the army supported the Nazis in the early years of the regime. By 1938 when a rift appeared between the officers and the Nazis, it was too late to mount a serious challenge, not least because war seemed imminent.

**The successes of the Nazi regime**

Despite the economic problems already discussed, there was nevertheless a powerful sense that things were gradually getting better, and were certainly better compared to the years of the depression. The grumbles and criticisms of the workers were rarely *politically*. In other words, they might complain about low wages and high prices, but that did not automatically imply an attack on the regime as a whole. The Nazis in fact achieved enough successes to win considerable popular support. The general fall in unemployment was a significant factor in this support, as was the return of strong leadership and the destruction of communism. In addition, the increased power and status of Germany following rearmament, conscription and foreign policy coups such as the remilitarization of the Rhineland, helped to convince people that, in the long run, their country stood to gain from Nazi rule, however unpleasant certain aspects of this rule were.

### Indifference and apathy

Many people became indifferent about politics. The fact that people felt more isolated increased their sense of helplessness. Even people living in democratic countries today, where they can vote and express their views, still complain that nothing will change. Imagine, then, living in a country where none of this was possible. A SOPADE report from 1936 demonstrates the indifference shown by many German people:

Source: 8

Here all life seems to have died out. We have no idea what is going on in the world and most of the time not even what is going on in our town... A large section of the population no longer reads a newspaper. Basically, the population are indifferent to what is in the papers. It is not always the same but, in people's opinion, it is often untrue... Whenever one goes one can see that people accept National Socialism as something inevitable... I know that this is a gloomy picture which I am giving. It is particularly gloomy because it shows that up to now the Nazis have succeeded in achieving one thing: the de-politicisation of the German people... There can be no doubt that the Nazis have succeeded in persuading the masses to leave politics to the men at the top...

### How popular were the Nazis by 1938?

1938 is the year many historians regard as the peak of the Nazi Party's – and especially Hitler's – popularity.

#### Activity

The following activity can be done individually or in small groups. Under each heading list the evidence to support the claims that the Nazis were or were not popular. You may wish to add further headings.

#### REASONS FOR POPULARITY

- Economic successes (pages 216–221)
- Foreign policy successes (pages 231–235)
- Propaganda (pages 173–177)
- Social policy (pages 183–199)

#### LIMITS TO THIS POPULARITY

- Groups which didn't benefit (Chapter 10, Chapter 11 pages 220–233)
- Apathy and indifference rather than support (page 210 and this page)
- Problems in measuring support (page 213)

### Document exercise: Popular support for the Nazis, 1935–1938

#### Source 9

#### A tense political situation

Since the populace in general is timid and takes great care not to express its opinion publicly, it is becoming more and more difficult to observe and assess the public's attitude. Unmistakable, however, is the fact that the internal political situation has lately been considerably tense, which has adversely affected attitudes... one can point to economic factors as a cause for negative attitudes. In this regard the situation of the working class merits special attention in that wage rates are creating increased bitter resentment... The increase in the cost of foodstuffs required on a daily basis, such as potatoes, vegetables, fat, milk, eggs, and butter, has heightened the dissatisfaction among workers...

Special Report of the State Police in Hannover, August 1935

#### Activity

- 1 Arrange yourselves into small groups or pairs. Using the information you have studied in this chapter and, if possible, Chapter 10, draw up a list of evidence to support each of the following statements:
  - The German people supported the Nazi regime
  - The German people opposed the Nazi regime
  - The German people were resigned to the Nazi regime
- 2 When you have done that, discuss either in your group or as a whole class the following statements:
  - *The German people were terrified into accepting the Nazi regime.*

### Source 10

#### The Germans' reaction to the remilitarisation of the Rhineland in 1936

March 13

Here Hitler made his first 'election' speech tonight... Nothing new in it, though he drummed away nicely about his desire for friendship with France. Certainly these Rhinelanders don't want another war with the Nazi bog. They're as hysterical as the rest of the Germans. Later went out... the taxi-driver turned out to be a communist, waxed bitter about the Nazis, and predicted their early collapse. It was a relief to find one German here against the regime. He said there are a lot of others, but I sometimes wonder.

March 29

A fine early spring day for the 'election' and accordingly to Goebbels's figures ninety-five per cent of the German people have approved the reoccupation of the Rhineland. Some of the correspondents... reported irregularities. But there's no doubt, I think, that a substantial majority of the people applaud the action in the Rhineland, regardless of whether they're Nazis or not.

Extracts from William Shirer's *Berlin Diary*. Shirer was an American correspondent in Germany between 1934 and 1940.

### Source 11

#### Indifference amongst the German people

The general mood in Germany is characterized by a widespread political indifference. The great mass of the people is completely dulled and does not want to hear anything more about politics. Thus, for example, the *Anschlus*s with Austria did not produce anything like the enthusiasm and lasting effect as the reindroduction of conscription three years before. One should not be misled by the general grumbling. Nowadays people grumble everywhere about everything but nobody intends this grumbling to represent a hostile attitude to the regime.

SOPADE (SPD) in exile report, 1938

#### Source 12

#### Attitude towards war

There is full employment right down the line and, what is more, rising wages which are welcome on social grounds but economically dubious. The theatres are fully booked, the cinemas full, and the cafes are overflowing into the early hours with music and dancing; there are record numbers of outings on Sundays. And yet despite all these signs of a favourable economic situation the mood among large numbers of people is not one appropriate to a boom. It is in many cases depressed about the future... There is serious concern among the broadest sections of the nation that a war will sooner or later put an end to the economic revival and have terrible consequences for Germany.

From a monthly report of the Military Economic Inspectorate, Munich, September 1938

#### Activity

When you have completed the activity above, discuss whether or not you agree with the following statement:

*By 1938, most Germans had reason to be grateful to the Nazis.*

**Exam preparation-style questions**

- 1 **Comprehension in context**  
Study Source D. Using the source and your own knowledge explain why there was a 'depressed' mood in Germany in September 1938.
- 2 **Comparing the sources**  
Study Sources B and C. How and why do they differ in their assessment of the mood of the German people?
- 3 **Assessing the sources**  
Using Sources A and B, explain why it is difficult to assess popular opinion in Germany during the 1930s.
- 4 **Making judgements**  
Using all the sources and your own knowledge, examine the view that between 1935 and 1938, popular support for the Nazis was largely superficial.

**The Jewish Question**

Anyone studying the Third Reich will at some point want the answer to a deceptively simple sounding question. How were the Nazis able to murder 6 million Jews? Behind that question lies another, implicit one. Why were they not stopped? To answer this question we must start by asking 'Who could have stopped them?' Given that the acts of genocide were carried out during the Second World War, the most obvious response is the Allied powers, and indeed, it was only the defeat of Germany in 1945 that halted the extermination programme. However, historians have also examined the degree to which the German people accepted Hitler's anti-Semitism long before war actually broke out. We have already seen that during the 1930s, Hitler was not oblivious to public opinion. If the German people had expressed *strong* opposition to anti-Semitic policies, how far would Hitler have pursued them?

We know that Hitler played down anti-Semitism in election campaigns after 1928 because it was not always well received. Similarly, the architects of the 'Final Solution' went to great lengths to keep their plan secret from the public. It certainly seems that Hitler cared about the popular reaction to his anti-Semitic policies. However, it is virtually unthinkable that he would have ever abandoned them, given their central place in his overall vision. The question is not so much, therefore, whether the German people could have *prevented* the full implementation of Hitler's racial policies but rather, to what extent and why they *accepted* them at all, and by doing so, possibly smoothed the path towards genocide. As ever, there is a fine line to be drawn between *acceptance* and *collaboration*. Not surprisingly, this is still a very sensitive issue in Germany today.

The historian Daniel Goldhagen, whose book *Hitler's Willing Executioners* (1996) prompted great controversy and media interest, argues that the German people were virulently and *uniquely* anti-Semitic and had been since medieval times. Not only did the Germans stand by whilst German Jews were persecuted, they were also, according to Goldhagen, the willing executioners of even the most extreme racial policies conceived by the Nazis. Indeed, according to Goldhagen, some of those responsible for the very worst atrocities of the war positively gained pleasure from their actions. It is true that other historians have tried to fathom why ordinary German men were prepared to execute large numbers of Jews and Poles during the war even when offered the chance to back out. However, Goldhagen's claims that they did it because *they wanted to and because they hated Jews* have on the whole been rejected by historians, not least because they have challenged Goldhagen's selective use

**Think aloud**  
The Nazis' attempt to eliminate all European Jews between 1941 and 1945.

**Think aloud**  
A university student from Cologne discovered in 1994 that one of her grandmothers who died after the war had been Jewish. The discovery brought relief because the student felt she could now express her opinions about the Nazis freely, without fear of saying the wrong thing.  
Why do you think she felt like this?

**Think aloud**  
Interestingly, the media's response to Goldhagen's book was more positive. After a series of excellent reviews, Goldhagen's book has sold more copies than most other books on the Third Reich. Most historians, however, dismiss the book.  
Why might different audiences have reacted differently to the book?

of evidence. The following section provides an extract from his book, together with some contrasting views of other historians about the degree to which the Germans were anti-Semitic before 1933. You will then have the opportunity to study some primary evidence and reach your own conclusions about the popular reaction to Hitler's anti-Semitic policies.

**How anti-Semitic were the German people before 1933?**

**Historical database**

**Anti-Semitism in Europe**

Anti-Semitism was well established even before the depression in countries where there was a big Jewish minority. In Poland, for example, Jews were barred from entering the legal and medical professions and were encouraged to emigrate. By 1939, one-third of Polish Jews were dependent on welfare payments and charity.

**Source A**

**Daniel Jonah Goldhagen**

...model of Nazi anti-Semitism had taken shape well before the Nazis came to power, and... this model, throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was... extremely widespread in all social classes and sectors of German society, for it was deeply embedded in German cultural and political life and conversation, as well as integrated into the moral structure of society.

Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, 1986

**Source B**

**Sarah Gordon**

It is clear that Germany was in many ways a good place for Jews to live during these [pre-1933] years. Had the German population been uniquely rabid [extreme] in its hatred of Jews, it is inconceivable that Jews could have fared so well, especially compared to Jews in other nations.

Gordon, *Hitler, Germans and the Jewish Question*, 1984

**Source C**

**Richard J Evans**

If German nationalism defined Germanness by opposing itself to the negative image of Jews, how was it then that the civil equality and legal emancipation [freedom] of the Jews was one of its demands from the outset, finally implemented in full in the unification of 1871? If the German population and German elites were so deeply anti-Semitic, why did Jews actually gain civil equality by legislative enactment [i.e. laws] all over Germany in the course of the nineteenth century?

Evans, *Rereading German History 1800-1906*, 1997

**Further reading**

For more information about anti-Semitism, see Grant *Anti-Semitism in the Third Reich*, 1992.

**Think aloud**

→ To what extent do these extracts offer different interpretations of anti-Semitism in Germany before 1933?

Why might it be possible for historians to hold such different views?

What was the popular reaction to Hitler's anti-Semitism?

These extracts are intended to demonstrate the variety of responses to Hitler's anti-Semitism as well as to suggest what might have been the most typical response. As you study them, keep the debate on the previous page in your mind. To what extent do these extracts support the historians' views?

Source 5

One always thinks that surely somewhere in Germany voices of shame and fear must be raised, protests must come from abroad, where everywhere there are Jews in the highest positions - nothing!

Zanuck, grammar school teacher...man around fifty, recently came up to the car as we were parked at Bismarckplatz, Party badge. Could easily walk past without acknowledging us... But comes up with evident heartfelt pleasure. How am I, whether I have stayed in Dresden, how sorry he is...

In the *Sturm* I recently saw a picture: two girls in swimming costumes at a seaside resort. Above it: 'Prohibited for Jews', underneath it: 'How nice that it's just us now!' Then I remembered a long-forgotten incident: September 1900 or 1901... In the lower sixth we were 4 among 16... There was little trace of anti-Semitism among either the teachers or the pupils.

More precisely none at all... on the Day of Atonement - Yom Kippur - the Jews did not attend classes. The next day our comrades told us, laughing and without the slightest malice, Kufahl, the mathematician, had said to the class: 'Today it's just us... to me these words confirm the claim of the NSDAP to express the true opinion of the German people. And I believe ever more strongly that Hitler really does embody the soul of the German people...'

There is no German Jewish question. Whoever recognises one, only adopts or confirms the false thesis of the NSDAP and serves its cause. Until 1933 and for at least a good century before that, the German Jews were entirely German and nothing else... Jews and Germans lived and worked together without friction in all spheres of life. The anti-Semitism which was always present is not at all evidence to the contrary. Because fiction between Jews and Aryans was not half as great as that between Protestants and Catholics...

Yesterday I met Moses, the greenpooter...hand was given an unrozan cabbage, a swede and carrots - all rare delicacies. In addition a present of a bread coupon. Moses has already repeatedly given Eva potatoes. It is well known that we are allocated fewer coupons than comrades of the people.

Favourable experiences with the star of David - all Jews were forced to wear it after 1941 to mark them out publicly! Only a child of former acquaintances had run out full of fear: 'Ugh, a Jew!' Identified the mother apologetically, he had not heard it at home - presumably at kindergarten... I myself experienced this whilst shopping. Elderly woman, smiling from a handcart... I glance longingly at the tomatoes, forbidden goods in short supply. 'They're not to be had without a card, are they?' 'I'll give you some, I know how things stand! Makes up a pound. Then reaches under her cart, pulls out a handful of onions, which are very rare... There is no doubt that the people feel the persecution of the Jews to be a sin...'

Extracts from the Diaries of Viktor Klemperer, a German Jew living in Dresden during the Third Reich (see page 158)

Source 6

I met my former secretary today. She fixed me sharply with her short-sighted eyes, and then turned away. I was so nauseated I spat into my handkerchief. She was once a patient of mine. Later I met her in the street... I look her on, rained her for years... Now that she can no longer greet me, me who rescued her from the gutter!

Extract from the diary of a German Jewish Doctor, Hertha Nathorff, October 1935

Source 7

Between 10,000 and 12,000 German Jews went into hiding during the war. They were largely dependent on the help of people like Frau Eran Dinnick who hid her Jewish friend, Hilde Neumann, in her Berlin apartment between 1943 and 1945. When asked about the danger to herself, she replied:

'Ah, Gott, well I, I... you know, one *weibchen* I don't know. I didn't concern myself with it at all...'

But she must have known that she was risking her life. Owing, Frauen, 1995



Source 8

Anti-Semitism cannot, it seems, be allocated a significant role in bringing Hitler to power, though, given the widespread acceptability of the Jewish Question as a political issue - exploited not only by the Nazis - nor did it do anything to hinder his rapidly growing popularity. However, the relative indifference of most Germans towards the Jewish Question before 1933 meant that the Nazis did have a job on their hands after the take over of power to persuade them of the need for active discrimination... The permanent radicalisation of anti-Jewish policies after 1933 can hardly be said to have been the product of... the strong demands of popular opinion... Popular opinion, largely indifferent and... bolstered by propaganda, provided the climate within which spiralling Nazi aggression towards Jews could take place unchallenged. But it did not provoke the radicalisation in the first place. The road to Auschwitz was built by hate, but paved with indifference.

Kaschnaw, *Popular Opinion and Political Dissent in the Third Reich*, 1993

Source 10

Social discrimination against Jews was practically non-existent in the town. Jews were integrated along class lines: the two wealthiest Jewish families belonged to upper class circles and clubs. Jews of middling income belonged to the middle class social organisations, and working-class Jews were in the socialist community. Yet abstract anti-Semitism in the form of jokes or expressions of generalised distaste was common... If Nazi anti-Semitism held any appeal for the townspeople, it was in a highly abstract form... unconnected with daily encounters with real Jews in Thulburg... Thulburgers were drawn to anti-Semitism because they were drawn to Nazism, not the other way round. Many who voted Nazi simply ignored other unpleasant aspects of the Nazi movement. Allen, *The Nazi Seizure of Power: the Experience of a Single German Town 1922-1945*, 1966

Source 11

I learned from the example of my parents... that one could have anti-Semitic opinions without this interfering in one's personal relations with individual Jews... When I heard that the Jews were being driven from their professions and homes and imprisoned in ghettos, the points switched automatically in my mind to steer me round the thought that such a fate could also overtake you or old Leyl. It was only the Jew who was being persecuted and 'made harmless'.

Extract from the memoirs of Melitta Maschmann

Fig. 1 Activity 1

- Study all the sources carefully. Then note down any evidence which proves or disproves the following statements:
  - The German people were extremely anti-Semitic before 1933
  - The German people actively supported the Nazis' anti-Semitic policies
  - The German people were largely indifferent to the Nazis' anti-Semitic policies

Fig. 2 Activity 2

- Can you add any further evidence using your own knowledge? (You may wish to look back at the document exercise on pages 205-207)
- Clearly, there was a degree of acceptance amongst the German people with regard to anti-Semitic policies in the Third Reich. Do any of the sources suggest a reason for this? Can you suggest any other reasons, from your own knowledge?
- What are the difficulties facing the historian who wishes to reach a conclusion about the popular reaction to the Nazis' anti-Semitic policies?

## The Impact of the Second World War

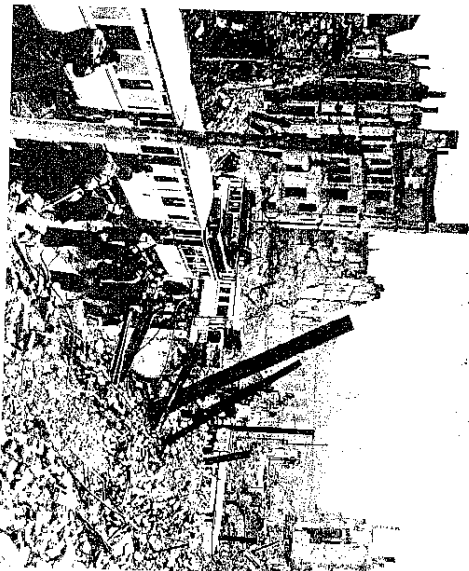
### Rationing

As you would expect, war brought hardships to the German people, both emotionally, as their loved ones left to fight, and physically, with shortages of goods and an increased work burden. Food was rationed immediately, although the Germans were not faced with chronic shortages of food until 1944. However, certain products such as meat and fats were soon in short supply and food consumption per person fell by 25 per cent between 1939-1941. People were encouraged to use unfamiliar, more exotic products brought in from the conquered territories, such as aubergines, fennel and Jerusalem artichokes, but it proved difficult to change people's tastes. Ingenious recipes were devised by special groups to make use of available products and parks and gardens in the cities were dug up and used as vegetable patches.

It was not only food that was rationed; items such as cigarettes, soap, clothing and shoes were also restricted. By 1941, women were allowed only one and a half cigarettes a day and old shoes had to be given up when new ones were bought. Indeed, any household suspected of harbouring unnecessary footwear was inspected by Nazi officials and the offending items removed.

### Bombing

Source 12



The centre of Dresden in 1945.

**The workforce**

Germany faced a serious shortage of labour during the war. By the autumn of 1944 a total of 13 million men had been drafted into the army, leaving a dwindling number of workers to produce the crucial armaments needed at the front. Despite attempts to redistribute workers, the shortage remained acute.

#### Wife/Katze Escapes

Baked under with herbs  
Scuffed calf's heart  
Escalope of kohlrabi  
Sorel cutlets  
Nettle soufflé  
Daisy salad  
Rose-hip soup  
Acorn nougat  
Acorn coffee

Allied aircraft carried out a total of 1,442,260 missions over Germany, especially from 1943 onwards. 2,700,000 tons of bombs were dropped and an estimated 650,000 civilians were killed.

The Nazis were concerned not to alienate the German workers too much and measures to ban holidays, make overtime compulsory and extend hours of work were delayed until the summer of 1944. Nevertheless, working hours were generally longer and a higher rate of sick leave was evidence enough that the work was hard going.

(October 1941) Frau Voss receives a bill from her health insurance, addressed to 'Frau Käthe Lore Voss'. She signs the compulsory 'Sara in Lore'. Similarly, turning back the coat over the Jew's star or walking with her umbrella up, even when it has stopped raining - because her arm then covers her star. Or a package or a bag pressed against it.

Kempner, *I Shall Bear Witness*, 1998

The telling of vulgar jokes detrimental to the State, even about the Führer himself, has increased considerably since Stallday. In conversations in cafes, factories and other meeting places people tell each other the latest political jokes and in many cases make no distinction between those with a harmless content and those which are clearly in opposition to the State...

SD (security service of the SS) report, July 1943

The solution was to bring in thousands of foreign workers and prisoners of war (POWs) and by the end of 1944, more than 8 million foreigners were working in Germany. The foreign workers were paid very little and were hardly predisposed to hard labour, whilst the POWs were treated so appallingly that many of them never made it into a German factory at all. In January 1943 a register was compiled of all able-bodied men between 16 and 65 and women between 17 and 50 who could contribute to the war effort. Again, this wasn't enough, partly because Hitler's reluctance to mobilize women meant that many exceptions were made, and those who were brought in to work often did so on a part-time basis only.

### The persecution of the Jews

During the war, persecution of the Jews intensified. In 1941, all Jews were forced to wear the yellow Star of David on their sleeve, a measure which kept Viktor Kempner indoors for days, unable to face the world outside with this distinguishing mark on him. Jewish emigration was banned in 1941, leaving a third of the Jewish population of 1933 trapped inside a country where their fate appeared to be increasingly sealed. As the war went on, Jews were either rounded up and sent to camps or went into hiding. Those with Aryan partners or parents were safer until 1945, at which point even their lives were at risk. However, the majority of Germany's Jews survived the Third Reich through emigration before 1941 or through hiding. The same cannot, of course, be said of Jews elsewhere in Europe, for example in Poland.

### The response of the Churches

Initially at least, the Churches offered no resistance to the war itself. Martin Niemöller, leader of the Confessional Church, even sent a request from Sachsenhausen concentration camp asking for permission to join the German navy. However, harassment of both Churches increased during the early years of the war until Hitler ordered the attacks to stop in the summer of 1941. The Churches responded vigorously to attacks on their own freedoms although they still refrained from open criticism of the Nazis' policies on the 'Jewish Question'. It was left for individual priests and pastors to voice their opposition to the growing barbarity of Nazi policies. Nazi reports during 1943 claimed that Catholic priests were publicly expressing their outrage over policies of genocide. From the Nazi point of view, this was all the more serious in the light of increased attendance at church services. Hitler made it clear however that the destruction of the Churches would have to wait until the end of the war.

### How unpopular was the Nazi Party during the war?

Although the German people did not greet the outbreak of war with enthusiasm, the early victories helped to sustain public confidence in the Party and especially in the Führer himself. The sudden collapse of powerful countries such as France seemed to confirm the belief that Hitler was a military genius. However, by December 1940, when the initial run of victories was over and people were faced with the onset of another winter as well as the first spate of Allied bombing raids, Goebbels described the popular mood as one of 'light depression'. This mood became a permanent one after war was declared on Russia in June 1941 and the hopes of a short war soon disappeared.

People responded to an endless stream of propaganda with increased scepticism for which they had good reason. Letters from soldiers fighting at the front painted a very different picture from official reports. Overall, the Nazi

Party certainly lost support during the war. More and more people were reluctant to participate in Party activities and even loyal members were less inclined to attend Party meetings. Membership of the Party fell and the ban imposed on further membership had to be temporarily lifted. The Battle of Stalingrad in 1942-1943 proved a turning point in the people's tolerance of war. All they now wanted was an end to the war. The regime was obliged to make 'defeatism' a criminal offence and punishable by death. Despite this, by 1945, half a million Germans were held in concentration camps compared with 100,000 in 1942.

However, the vast majority of people remained loyal to their Führer. Despite Hitler's preoccupation with the war (he only made three public speeches in 1943) he remained much more popular than the Party itself. Attempts on his life – especially in 1944 – were condemned by many people, partly because they felt that Hitler was the only one who could get Germany out of the mess she was facing abroad. The Churches also spoke out against assassination attempts.

However, even Hitler was the target of some popular criticism after 1943. One Nazi report in 1943 drew attention to the fact that some people were 'openly risking criticism of the Führer himself by spreading malicious rumours or telling jokes.

### How serious was wartime opposition?

Although many people remained basically loyal to the regime during the war, the number of individuals who began seriously to consider ways of overthrowing the regime increased. In most cases, these were people who had supported the Nazis during their early years in power but had become disillusioned during the war.

#### The White Rose

The White Rose was a student resistance movement organized in Munich University and led by Hans and Sophie Scholl. Most of the members had been initially attracted to the Nazi regime but became increasingly hostile as they witnessed its brutality. Hans Scholl served as a medical orderly on the Eastern Front in 1942 and returned even more convinced of the need to oppose the Nazis. His sister Sophie, meanwhile, had been collecting information about the gassing of disabled children. Together with friends, the students conducted a leaflet campaign condemning the barbarity of the Nazis and stressing the need for action. In February 1943, the White Rose decided to drop leaflets denouncing Nazis as sub-humans into the university lecture rooms. They were spotted by a porter who immediately called the Gestapo. They were arrested and later that month, Hans and Sophie were sentenced to death and beheaded in the courtyard of Stadelheim prison. At her trial Sophie Scholl said 'What we have written and said is in the mind of all of you, but you lack the courage to say it aloud.'

#### The communists

During the period of the Nazi-Soviet Pact (1939-1941), underground communist groups were unsure what action to take against the Nazis. The official line from Russia was to support Stalin's foreign policy, but to oppose Hitler within Germany. The German attack on Russia in June 1941 clarified the communist position. The German communists increased their attempts to undermine the regime, not least by participating in Soviet spy networks. The

The SD summary reports of public mood were stopped in 1944 because their contents had become too demoralizing for the government.

#### A wartime joke

'What is the difference between India and Germany? In India one man [Gandhi] saves for all, in Germany all save for one man!'

Why do the German people behave so apathetically in face of all these dreadful and inhuman crimes? It is not only pity that we ought to feel but guilt... Each will declare himself guilty, each does so and then goes to sleep with an easy conscience. But he cannot declare himself guiltless, he is guilty, guilty, guilty.

Extract from a White Rose leaflet

#### Biography

##### Claus von Stauffenberg



Born in 1907 to an aristocratic family, Stauffenberg distinguished himself in the early part of the Second World War, serving as an officer in Poland, France and North Africa. In 1943 he suffered extensive wounds, losing an eye, his right hand and part of his left. Soon afterwards he became more openly opposed to Hitler and the Nazis. He deplored the barbaric practices carried out in Europe and joined fellow conspirators in planning Hitler's death. He was the leader of the 1944 conspiracy.

I know that he who will act will go down in German history as a traitor, but he who can and does not, will be a traitor to his conscience. If I did not act to stop this senseless killing, I should never be able to face the widows and orphans of the war.

Claus von Stauffenberg

most famous of these, the Red Orchestra, was uncovered by the Gestapo in 1942 and its leaders hanged in Berlin. Sabotage action continued but in the aftermath of the Bomb Plot in July 1944, thousands of communist activists were arrested.

### Conservative opposition

The main conservative opposition group during the war was the Kreisau Circle. This was a diverse group including aristocrats, socialists, clergymen and foreign office officials. It was named after the Silesian estate of Count Helmuth von Molke where meetings of the circle took place from 1940. The aim of the group was to draw up plans for the period after Hitler's downfall rather than to orchestrate that event themselves. Von Molke was arrested in January 1944 for speaking against the regime. After his arrest, some members of the circle continued their work and developed links with Colonel von Stauffenberg, in the German army. Von Molke was executed early in 1945.

### The Bomb Plot, 20 July 1944

In 1943, as hopes of victory seemed lost, plans to assassinate Hitler began to take shape within the army itself. After hearing of mass murders of Jews in May 1942, Colonel Claus von Stauffenberg emerged as a key figure in the co-ordination of 'Operation Valkyrie'. Up until that point, Stauffenberg had supported the Nazis in their war aims, even during the Russian setbacks, but the news of atrocities convinced him that it was the duty of army commanders to overthrow the regime.

In May 1944, Stauffenberg was appointed Chief-of-Staff to the Home Army Commander. This position enabled him to make preparations to lead the Home Army in support of the coup once Hitler was assassinated. It also – and this was crucial – gave Stauffenberg access to Hitler himself. It was for this reason that Stauffenberg, physically unsuited to the task, was given the job of planting the bomb intended to kill Hitler. After the assassination, the conspirators intended to declare martial law, set up a provisional government and negotiate for immediate peace with the allies. They were motivated by a desire to save Germany from total destruction, and the killing which had become pointless – and to prove that there were some Germans prepared to take a stand.

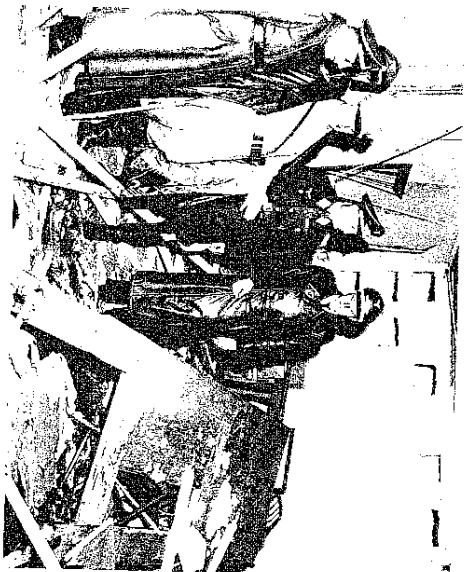
### Why did the Bomb Plot fail?

On 20 July, Stauffenberg took two kilos of plastic explosives to a conference at Obersalzberg. He was disturbed whilst setting the fuses and only carried one kilo of explosives into the meeting which, to his surprise, was taking place in the tea-house, rather than the concrete bunker as usual. Stauffenberg placed the briefcase containing the bomb under the large oak table. A table leg lay between the briefcase and his intended victim, Stauffenberg, making the excuse of a presumed telephone call, left the room and dove off immediately to an airstrip where a plane was waiting to carry him back to Berlin to take charge of events once Hitler was dead. Hitler was leaning across the table studying a map when the bomb exploded. The flimsy walls of the tea-house were not enough to contain the force of the bomb which would have caused more damage had the meeting been carried out in the bunker. One person died immediately and a further three died later, but Hitler, shielded by the solid oak table leg, suffered only bruises and a perforated eardrum.

Although the assassination attempt had failed, the coup might still have succeeded had the response been swift and decisive. However, the time taken

by Stauffenberg to return to Berlin caused a fatal delay during which time the news of Hitler's survival began to reach the other conspirators. Indecision followed and the failure to cut all communications from Obersiebenbrunn robbed the operation of time in which to gather forces. Stauffenberg was arrested when he reached Berlin and shot. A wave of terror followed in which over 7,000 were arrested and around 5,000 executed by April 1945.

Source 13



Georing surveys the remains of the oak table which saved Hitler's life in July 1944.

For further reading  
For more information on resistance in the Nazis, see Clay Lorge, *Contending with Hitler*, 1991

### Document exercise: Resistance during the war

Source A

#### The views of a conservative anti-Nazi

Berlin, 21 October 1941

The day is so full of gruesome news that I cannot write in peace, although I retired at 5 and have just had some tea... What affects me most is the inadequacy of the reactions of the military... dreadful new orders are being issued, and nobody seems to see anything wrong in it all. How is one to bear the burden of complicity (going along with everything)? In one area in Serbia two villages have been reduced to ashes, 1,700 men and 240 women from among the inhabitants have been executed... May I know this and yet still sit at my table in my heated flat and have tea? Don't I thereby become guilty too? What shall I say when I am asked: And what did you do during that time?... Since Saturday the Berlin Jews are being rounded up... A woman Klep knows saw a Jew collapse on the street, when she wanted to help him, a policeman stepped in, stopped her, and kicked the body on the ground so that it rolled into the gutter, then he turned to the lady with some shame and said: 'Those are our orders.'

Excerpts from *Letters to Freya* by Helmuth James von Moltke (leader of the Kreisau Circle, who was executed early in 1945), 1991

Source B

#### The Catholic reaction to war and genocide

[From Upper Silesia] In closing, I point to the fact that the Church knowingly ignores the difference between the races. Priests speak for and pray for Catholics of different languages... In two districts of the old Reich, the clergy attempted to have their German congregation sing old Polish hymns with a German text. A mass was said by a German congregation for Poles who died in a concentration camp...

From reports of 6-12 June 1943, written by regional Nazi Party leaders

Source C

#### The resistance of university students

The war is approaching its inevitable end. With mathematical certainty Hitler is leading the German nation to disaster. Now it is time for those Germans to act who want to avoid being lumped with the Nazi barbarians by the outside world... Only in broad-minded co-operation between the peoples of Europe can the basis be established for a new society... Freedom of speech, freedom of belief, protection of the individual citizen against... criminal power - these are the foundations of a new Europe.

From a leaflet written in January 1943 by Hans Scholl, leader of the White Rose

Source D

#### 'What about father? He was executed'

My father was a member of the SPD, and because he felt his duties were in Germany, he refused an offer to emigrate to the United States... In 1938 came a turning point that had a very strange effect on my father's career... During this time, Colonel Gert Stauffenberg came to our house on two occasions... One evening in June 1944, my father let me in on the secret with the words, 'I have to put a burden on your shoulders, since now you are a soldier.' He then told me in great detail about his activities in the civilian resistance movement. He was an absolute supporter of the concept of surrender to the Allies after a successful assassination. That way at least all of the troops, especially those in the east, could be brought back... inwardly he was a sceptic, an opponent of the assassination. But he saw that in all likelihood we would have no other chance to make clear that there were not only Nazis in Germany.

The memories of Michael Maass, whose father was executed by the Nazis after the Bomb Plot in July 1944

### Examination-style questions

- 1 Comprehension in context**  
Using Source B and your own knowledge, explain why the Nazis were concerned about the behaviour of certain Catholic priests.
- 2 Comparing the sources**  
Study all the sources. To what extent do they agree about the reasons for opposing the Nazis during the war?
- 3 Assessing the sources**  
Assess the usefulness of Source B to a historian studying the response of the Catholic Church to the Nazi regime during the war.
- 4 Making judgements**  
Using all the sources and your own knowledge, explain why resistance to the Nazis during the war was unsuccessful.

### Conclusions

Before the war there were few attempts to overthrow the Third Reich. This was not because all Germans were happy with the Nazi regime. What stopped people from acting more aggressively was fear and the lack of an organized opposition. It is true, however, that the Nazis did enjoy some popular support during the 1930s and this contributed to the regime's survival. Only the army had the power and resources to destroy the Nazi regime and it was not until defeat in the Second World War seemed imminent that army generals took action. Their failure in 1944 was a humanitarian disaster. During the final year of the war, thousands of lives were lost, not just of those fighting and living in the battle zones but also of Europe's Jews.