

The White Rose and the Definition of 'Resistance'

 [historytoday.com/simon-henderson/white-rose-and-definition-%E2%80%99resistance%E2%80%99](https://www.historytoday.com/simon-henderson/white-rose-and-definition-%E2%80%99resistance%E2%80%99)



Members of the White Rose, Munich 1942. From left: Hans Scholl, his sister Sophie Scholl, and Christoph Probst. On February 18th 1943 Hans and Sophie Scholl threw hundreds of leaflets from the third floor of the main building in the centre of the Munich University campus. The last sentence of them read: 'Our people stand ready to rebel against the National Socialist enslavement of Europe in a fervent breakthrough of freedom and honour'. Brother and sister were executed four days later. Along with other members of the White Rose movement, they dared to struggle against the ideological straitjacket of the Nazi police state. Remarkable and courageous young people, inspirational figures whose example of honour and integrity transcends time and place, the Scholls, alongside Christoph Probst, Willi Graf, Alex Schmorell and their Professor, Kurt Huber, boldly resisted Hitler's regime. The story of the White Rose should be celebrated as the triumph of inquisitive minds and of the indefatigability of the human spirit.

Nevertheless, their motivations and aims remain uncertain, while the precise place of their movement in the orbit of resistance and opposition in Nazi Germany is intriguing. Their story poses important questions and offers great opportunities to historians exploring resistance and conformity among the people of the Third Reich.

The Scholls' Struggle

Hans (born 1918) and Sophie (born 1921) grew up in Ulm, a city on the Danube. Their father, a man of significant local stature, warned from an early point in the Nazi regime that Hitler was like the Pied Piper of Hamelin and that he would lead Germany to destruction. However, both Sophie and Hans joined the Hitler Youth and threw themselves

vigorously into its communal activities. Although it later became targeted by rebellious young people, Nazism began as a movement which could harness the restlessness of youth. Hans and Sophie's sister, Inge, spoke of a feeling of community in the Hitler Youth, a sense of being taken seriously. She described a 'belonging that carried us safely through the difficulties and loneliness of adolescence'.

For Hans, it was this sense of community and fellowship that became increasingly valued above the banner of Nazism. Hans was to be a flag bearer when the Hitler Youth troop he led attended a Party Rally in Nuremberg. He and his boys had sewn a standard with a mystical beast at the centre of its design. One evening during the rally the cadre leader took the flag from him, insisting that all the Hitler Youth troops had to use the banner prescribed for everyone; this regimentation was compounded by the banning of certain songs and books that Hans enjoyed. The Scholls' father had told his children that they should aspire to live in 'uprightness and freedom of spirit', and Hans increasingly felt that his freedom of thought and expression were restricted in the Hitler Youth. As a result, with like-minded friends, he participated in the *Jugendenschaft*, a rival group of young people which existed in several German cities. Enjoying great camaraderie, they produced diaries, magazines and song books, many of which were critical of the regime both implicitly, and at times, explicitly. Around 1937 the Gestapo temporarily imprisoned many young men of the *Jugendenschaft*, Hans included, and his discontent with the Nazi regime became firmly cemented. These events, added to the shock of *Kristallnacht* a year later, did much to sow the seeds of discontent with the regime in Sophie's heart and mind.

University of Munich

Hans' sympathetic commanding officer had arranged for his release in late 1937 and three years later, as a soldier and student, Hans was drafted into a company of medics and took part in the campaign in France. In 1942 he was able to continue his medical studies as part of a student company in Munich. Sophie, having endured labour service for over 18 months, joined him at the University as a biology and philosophy student. Hans read poetry, sang songs and speculated on the future of Germany with three close friends, Christoph Probst, Alex Schmorell and Willi Graf. They were all increasingly critical of the Nazi regime and the terror it perpetrated. Soon he introduced Sophie to the group which for him, it would seem, filled the void left by the *Jugendenschaft*.

However, as he became aware of the horrors carried out by Hitler's regime, Hans increasingly wanted to do more than talk with his friends. Between June 27th and July 12th 1942 he and Alex Schmorell produced and distributed four documents entitled 'Leaflets of the White Rose' that were intended to speak to the German intelligentsia. It was they, Hans believed, who had failed politically since 1918. He also believed that only force could topple the regime, and what he intended therefore was the promotion of opposition to National Socialism.

The conclusion of the fourth leaflet proclaimed, 'We will not be silent. We are your bad conscience. The White Rose will not leave you in peace!' The ideas expressed had been influenced by Sophie's Philosophy teacher, Professor Kurt Huber, and the quoting of authorities like Schiller, Goethe, the Bible and Aristotle was designed to add credibility in appealing to the educated classes. Writers, professors, doctors and café, restaurant and grocery store owners – selected because of their influential position in the local community – were among some one hundred recipients of the leaflets. No fewer than 35 of these individuals, however, passed the leaflets on to the Gestapo. Hans was aware of this and it remains unclear as to whether he and Schmorell would have continued distributing them had they not been sent to work at the Eastern Front.

Hans now witnessed the mistreatment of Russians and Jews at first hand, and these experiences in Russia made Hans and his friends more determined to continue their campaign. Composed by Scholl, and edited by Professor Huber, the fifth leaflet was entitled 'Leaflets of the Resistance Movement in Germany' and was distributed at the end of January 1943. The active core of the group had expanded to include Sophie, Christoph Probst, Willi Graf and Hans Hirzel, a family friend living in Ulm. The leaflet called on citizens to disassociate themselves from Nazism and prepare for the end of the war. Between six and nine thousand copies were distributed across Augsburg, Stuttgart and Frankfurt in Germany and Salzburg, Linz and Vienna in Austria. Members of the group took trains to the different cities in order to post the letters, not as the Gestapo assumed to distract from Munich as the centre of the operation

but because the postage costs were significantly reduced this way. In fact on January 28th 1943, having run out of envelopes, they scattered between two and five thousand leaflets in the centre of Munich.

The sixth and final document was written by Professor Huber and was addressed to German students. The leaflet was triggered by the news of the German defeat at Stalingrad on February 3rd 1943. The message was 'Fight against the Party!' and cited Stalingrad as another example of Hitler's disastrous and criminal policies. Prior to the distribution of the sixth leaflet, and with Sophie back in Ulm looking after her mother, Hans and Schmorell embarked on an extraordinarily risky graffiti campaign. They used paint and tar to write the words 'Down with Hitler!' on the walls of twenty-nine different public buildings in Munich and the word 'Freedom' on both sides of the University entrance.

The Executions

By this stage the University was under Gestapo surveillance. An initial investigation into the leaflets distributed in the summer of 1942 had come to nothing. The Gestapo had been following events closely since recovering some of the leaflets scattered in Munich, yet there was still no clear link to the White Rose group. This changed in February 1943. In January Hans Hirzel had confided in two friends who were in the Hitler Youth that the White Rose would distribute more leaflets in the future. One of these young men informed the Gestapo who interrogated Hirzel on February 17th and confronted him with the name of Sophie Scholl. He warned the family in Ulm, but the warning did not reach Sophie and Hans in time. They went to the University on the morning of the 18th of February with a suitcase full of leaflets. Brother and sister scattered the leaflets from the third floor. The University Superintendent saw them, the Gestapo were called, the building was sealed, and the Scholls arrested.

The question of why the Scholls threw the leaflets is not easily answered. Some have argued that their actions were self-sacrificial. However, a vast amount of material which incriminated the Scholls' friends was not destroyed beforehand. It would seem more likely that a growing sense of destiny and even fatalism was at work here. Sophie had experienced a dream the night before in which she and Hans were arrested by the Gestapo. Her brother's graffiti activities in the previous days were spontaneous and indeed somewhat reckless. The White Rose group had developed a system of mailing leaflets to themselves to ensure their delivery methods were effective, but Hans did not receive the sixth leaflet and the Gestapo later claimed they had intercepted it. Perhaps he knew the net was closing in and chose to perform one last dramatic act of resistance.

Hans and Sophie, along with Christoph Probst, were swiftly interrogated, tried and executed for 'high treason' on February 22nd 1943. Professor Huber and Alex Schmorell were executed on July 13th and Willi Graf on October 12th 1943. Several contacts of the White Rose group were tried and punished in the following months. When the guard came to his cell to take him to the court for sentencing, Hans looked at the prison wall and smiled. He had written the words by Goethe that his father had often repeated: 'Hold out in defiance of all despotism'.

Opposition and Dissent – the Problems of Interpretation

The White Rose story appears to offer the opportunity for an unequivocal analysis of resistance and conformity in Nazi Germany. Hans and Sophie are clear examples of resisters and the University Superintendent the archetypal conformer. However, a closer reading of events opens the door to an exploration of the great subtleties in the response of people to the regime, and to the significant difficulty of interpreting these responses.

The 'resistance debate' revolves around the issue of what should be classed as 'resistance' against the Nazi regime. The German word for resistance is *Widerstand* and traditional interpretations of this phenomenon focused on organised political groups which sought to overthrow the Nazi regime, most notably those in the elite responsible for the bomb plot of July 20th 1944. Obviously it is questionable whether the White Rose group reached this level of *Widerstand*. After all, their story shows more spontaneity than disciplined organisation, and they recognised their inability to physically challenge the regime. The fourth leaflet argued that the aim was 'to achieve a renewal from within of the severely wounded German spirit'. Professor Huber's message in the final leaflet is more radical in its

lexical choice, calling for German youth to 'take revenge ... [and] smash its tormentors', but there is still a focus on the power of 'spirit'. The White Rose group did not have the ways and means to overthrow the regime.

However, the 'Bavaria Project' directed by Martin Broszat introduced a new concept to the 'resistance debate'; that concept was termed *Resistenz*. There is no precise English translation of this word, but what Broszat was bringing attention to was all acts which actually helped to limit the infiltration of Nazism into everyday life. The Nazi regime was intent on controlling and manipulating public opinion and Broszat's conceptualisation deals with how far they were able to achieve this, so he focuses on the subversion of the regime's ability to penetrate the world-view of the German populace rather than efforts at fundamental opposition. From this perspective, the White Rose activities were certainly examples of actions which fall within the category of *Resistenz*.

Nevertheless, critics of Broszat have argued that this concept is too broad in scope. Indeed how do we separate the actions of Hans and Sophie Scholl from those of their father? He regularly warned his children of the evils of Nazism, and of the folly of following Hitler, and indeed his voicing of such opinions to an indiscreet employee saw him serve time in prison. Yet he did not seek to speak out to the extent of the White Rose group. Similarly, despite the fact that in the Hitler Youth the sexes were supposed to be kept separate, this was not always the case. Indeed the League of German Maidens was nicknamed the 'League of German Mattresses'. If we understand *Resistenz* in its broadest sense, do we then interpret this suggestion of teenage sexual promiscuity as an example of subversion of a totalitarian regime?

Arguably Ian Kershaw offers the best route to traversing these problems of interpretation, providing three categories of conflict with Nazism. Firstly, he points to 'resistance' as 'active participation in organised attempts to work against the regime' with the intention of bringing it down or planning for its end as the most extreme form of conflict with Nazism. Secondly, he outlines a far less specific categorisation of activity as 'opposition', which can involve 'resistance' but also encompasses actions of 'limited aims' which were not necessarily pointed attacks on the regime and may have come from people who sympathised with some elements of Nazism. Kershaw's final categorisation is that of 'dissent' which can best be described as general attitudes and grumbling that can in some way be interpreted as critical of the regime.

The existence of 'dissent' is largely a consequence of the Nazi regime itself and follows from the axiomatic point that the more totalitarian a regime, the more dissent there will be, in the sense that the government ascribes a subversive element to that which would be seen as legitimate discourse in a democracy. It was the Nazis' obsession with public opinion and the domination of a monolithic official propaganda message which in effect created a popular 'dissent'. An SPD report of spring 1937 concluded that most people had two faces: 'The private face shows the sharpest criticism of everything that is going on now; the official one beams with optimism and contentment.' Certainly as the war progressed reports of a mood critical of the regime increased. The students who attended a meeting at Munich University to express support for the execution of Hans and Sophie Scholl were medics on leave from the Russian front; they had good reason to ingratiate themselves with Nazi officials, but surely their experiences on the front inspired some 'dissent', however private its expression.

Long before Hans spent time on the Eastern Front his actions moved beyond the concept of 'dissent'. When the cadre leader demanded he surrender the banner of his Hitler Youth troop at the Nuremberg Party Rally, Hans actually slapped the man; and when he enjoyed weekends away with his friends in the *Jugendenschaft* he was engaging in 'opposition'. His actions were not an organised attempt to confront the regime and they had partial and limited aims, but he was showing more than simple 'dissent'. In fact it would be reasonable to assert that the teenage Hans was rebelling against authority in general. He had joined the Hitler Youth despite his father's objections and, when that constricted his freedom of expression, he embraced the *Jugendenschaft*.

Indeed when analysing youth protest in the Third Reich we see not only a counter-culture which was motivated less by a conscious political or ideological rejection of Nazism and more by a rage against the restrictions of everyday life, but also shades of grey between rejection of and conformity with the Nazis. The Edelweiss Pirates embarked on hiking weekends and adopted alternative dress and greetings to the Hitler Youth. The 'Swings' listened to American

Jazz and rejected traditional Germanic ideals. Yet confidential reports revealed that members of the Hitler Youth were among those arrested at Swing festivals, as were SA and SS members. Indeed some young people moved between the different organisations as they shaped their own identity in the turbulent years of adolescence. The Edelweiss Pirates were involved in acts of sabotage during the war, but they then evolved after the fall of the Third Reich and changed their rituals in an attempt to shock Allied occupiers. This general inconsistency of purpose and organisation points to 'opposition' and not 'resistance'.

When then did the White Rose group begin to 'resist'? Throughout the spring of 1942 Hans spoke passionately among his circle of friends against the horrors of the regime. Nevertheless, he stopped short of taking practical action because of the oath of loyalty he had taken as a soldier. However, as the dominance of the Allies came into focus, he and Schmorell distributed the first four leaflets, at which point they produced an organised attempt to undermine the regime – 'resistance'. At this phase it is questionable as to whether Sophie was actively involved and the two men discussed the leaflets with friends without acknowledging their authorship openly.

It has often been argued that the principal motives of the White Rose were moral; but it would appear that day-to-day military and political considerations had the major influence on when acts of 'resistance' were undertaken. After their time spent in Russia, Hans and his friends increased the scope of the leaflet distribution, including their scattering by hand in Munich, and the defeat at Stalingrad prompted Huber's leaflet. The graffiti activities and the final throwing of leaflets at the University emanated from a feeling that a military catastrophe was coming and the nation needed to be saved. There is evidence that Hans was keen for the Allies to take note of the group's actions as evidence of the existence of another Germany separate from Nazism. The White Rose group's motivations and aims represented an undoubtedly political attack on the regime; however, as their message was expressed more loudly, their actions became less well organised and more incoherent. The more spontaneous and reckless Hans and Sophie became in early 1943, the more they moved away from 'opposition' and deeper and deeper into 'resistance' – so deep that the power structure closed in and the Gestapo took them.

Issues to Debate

- What factors led the Scholls to move from the Hitler Youth to the White Rose circle?
- What did they hope to achieve with this group?
- Should the White Rose be classified as embodying 'resistance', 'opposition' or 'dissent' in the Third Reich?

Further Reading

- A. Gill, *An Honourable Defeat – A History of German Resistance to Hitler* (New York, 1994)
- P. Hoffman, *German Resistance to Hitler* (Harvard University Press, 1988)
- M. Housden, *Resistance and Conformity in the Third Reich* (Routledge, 1997)
- I. Kershaw, *The Nazi Dictatorship* (Arnold, 4th edn, 2000)
- C. Moll, 'Acts of Resistance: The White Rose in the light of new archival evidence' in M. Geyer and J. Boyer (eds.) *Resistance Against the Third Reich 1933-90* (University of Chicago Press, 1994)
- Inge Scholl, *The White Rose* (Wesleyan University Press, 1970)

Simon Henderson teaches history at Teesdale Comprehensive School in Barnard Castle, Co. Durham.