

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Martyn Housden. *Resistance and Conformity in the Third Reich*. London and New York: Routledge, 1997. xi + 199 pp. \$18.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-415-12134-7.

Reviewed by Richard Steigmann-Gall (University of Toronto)

Published on H-German (February, 1998)

At the moment, perhaps the most active field of inquiry into the Nazi past is resistance. In the last few years a spate of books has appeared dealing with the complicated issues of resistance, opposition, acquiescence, and support for Nazism among the German population. Especially noteworthy is the renewed interest in the July 1944 plot against Hitler. Hence Martyn Housden's *Resistance and Conformity in the Third Reich*, styled as a work of stock-taking, comes at an opportune moment. It takes us through the many conceptual questions that have surfaced in the last years, while simultaneously serving as an introduction to the topic and its historiography for undergraduate students.

After an introduction which defines Nazism and its audience, Housden surveys the main loci of German society which could have served as potential sources of resistance: the working classes, the churches, youth, conservative elites, and German Jews. In addition, he explores the specific question of racialism and its reception among ordinary Germans. The concluding chapter is more explicitly analytical, and attempts a nuanced, subtle definition of opposition in Nazi Germany, placing it on a continuum between violent resistance and passive disobedience. While the rest of the book concerns itself with evaluating the literature, it is in the last chapter where Housden develops his own interpretation.

Housden suggests that previous efforts by Detlev Peukert and Ian Kershaw to define the variety of domestic reactions to Nazism have been insufficient. He rightly points out that Peukert's attempt at defining resistance was overly schematic, since it implied that "would-be resisters had careers somehow progressing up a hierarchy of increasingly serious action" (p. 165). Housden argues that Kershaw's more phenomenological approach, while attempting to do justice to the nuance and subtlety of the "shades of gray" of resistant or oppositional behavior, nonetheless ends up overlooking the different contexts in which similar forms of opposition could take place. Housden convincingly shows us how context can deter-

mine the political valence of, for instance, the famous joke: "The ideal German should be as blonde as Hitler, as tall as Goebbels, as slim as Goering and as chaste as Roehm" (p. 168). Based on existing categorizations of behavior, which tend to overlook context, we do not know whether those telling the joke were "enjoying a 'harmless laugh' at the expense of their political leaders (something which even the most loyal of Nazis could do)", or whether they were "using jokes as a subversive means to express and bolster up mental protection to National Socialist propaganda" (p. 168).

For Housden, the only way to rectify this deficiency is to place motive and intention at the center. Returning to the example of joke-telling, "A joke remains a joke unless the person telling it *intends* deliberately to use it as a subversive tool" (p. 172). Citing the highly ambivalent figure of Wilhelm Canaris, Housden similarly contends that a "Nazi who contravened the party's ideologically-based expectations remains a Nazi unless it can be shown that *he or she honestly held alternative beliefs*" (p. 172). Instead of a model, Housden offers a "table of perspectives" (p. 167) which includes "political aims", "personal motives", "means used" and "social context." Sounding an intentionalist note, the author argues that "Broszat's argument [...] that the social impact of actions matters more than the intentions which lay behind them simply cannot be accepted" (p. 172). Through the judicious use of many case studies, both at the elite and social levels, Housden is able to make a strong case here.

Unfortunately, the insightful quality of the concluding chapter is offset by numerous problems, the most serious of which arise in the chapter on the churches. Housden refers to the "German Christians" as a movement "against Protestantism" (p. 47), then claims five pages later that "the ranks of the Protestants actually gave rise to the very German Christianity [sic] movement which later tried to absorb their churches" (p. 52). Similarly, Housden describes the "Confessing Church" as "an outspokenly anti-Nazi organisation" (p. 47), then quotes

Niemoeller to the effect that the Confessing Church was *not* a resistance movement, pointing out as well how Niemoeller had actually supported Nazism before 1933 (p. 53). Neither Doris Bergen's work on the German Christians nor Victoria Barnett's work on the Confessing Church are consulted. These problems are minor, however, compared with the glaring omission of Christian antisemitism from a chapter asking if churches exercised an "opposition born of belief." None of the authors who have directly addressed the problem of Christian antisemitism leading up to and including the Third Reich—Wolfgang Gerlach, Hermann Grieve, Richard Gutteridge, Markje Smid—are mentioned. Housden is certainly right to point to the churches' acts of omission in explaining their failure to resist Nazism. But by overlooking admittedly more disturbing acts of ideological commission, he leaves the reader with a flawed analysis.

The subsequent chapters on youth, elite resistance, German Jews and popular reactions to racialism are generally more satisfying, even if they do not add much to our existing knowledge. Stauffenberg and Beck are certainly given their due as resisters of Nazism, but not without a probing critique of their own ideologies. Housden pulls no punches when he points to Stauffenberg's view of Poles as "an unbelievable rabble", their country occupied by "a lot of Jews and a lot of cross-breeds" (p. 100). Similarly, Housden shows how General Beck's opposition to Hitler resulted from a disagreement over Hitler's *tactics* in annexing the Sudetenland, not Hitler's *goals*. Moltke is really the only one among the July 1944 conspirators to appear unambiguously opposed to Nazism on ideological grounds. However, as with the chapter on the churches, Housden contradicts himself. He de-

scribes the rightist conspirators as "fundamental opponents of the Third Reich" (p. 116)—a rather curious appellation in light of the considerable space given to the overlap between, among other things, the conspirators' and the Nazis' expansionism. Contradictory argumentation is to be found elsewhere. For instance, the attempts of a Protestant congregation to alleviate the suffering of a converted Jewish family on their way to the camps is proof for Housden that such behavior "actually helped to have Jews deported—albeit for the 'best' of motives" (p. 64). However, when the author points to similar behavior on behalf of a Jewish organization, he imputes an entirely different motive: "to make the whole process at least minimally tolerable" (p. 127).

We might point to Housden's intended audience when considering these problems. Certainly the book is written for the uninitiated, as the lack of jargon throughout the work illustrates. The problems mentioned above may not seriously detract from the value of the work when the reader has no prior knowledge, which is the author's underlying assumption. Housden achieves his primary goal of explaining why German resistance was so lacking, while simultaneously drawing our attention to the ambiguities faced by the historical subjects under review. Housden is to be commended for pointing both to the agency of these historical actors and to the outside restrictions they faced. For specialists in the field, however, problems in argument and analysis will mar what is otherwise an admirable effort.

Copyright 1998 by H-net. All rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

Citation: Richard Steigmann-Gall. Review of Housden, Martyn, *Resistance and Conformity in the Third Reich*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. February, 1998.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1721>

Copyright © 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.