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Imagining a World Without Hitler

As Jeremy Noakes notes in his introduction, Hans Mommsen in Alternatives to Hitler has brought together “almost forty years’ research into the history of the German resistance” (p. 3). In this volume, however, Mommsen does not offer a chronological narrative to highlight the key events in the various resistance movements against Hitler and the Nazi regime. Instead, he examines the writings of Hitler’s opponents to ascertain their portrait of a world without Hitler. In this particular study, Mommsen centers on the resisters who worked towards the July 20, 1944 assassination attempt on Hitler. He argues that the middle-class resisters’ “adherence to the legality-principle” (the need to continue the appearance of a Rechtsstaat even when it no longer existed under a National Socialist government) “imposed a lasting handicap” on their success (p. 16). At the same time, Mommsen finds that an “exaggerated fear of a revolution from below” (p. 16) stymied the aristocratic members of the resistance. Therefore, only the “younger members of the 20th July movement, especially Claus Schenk von Stauffenberg, Henning von Tresckow and the Kreisau group” were able to overcome these significant concerns—deeply rooted in German history—in order to act (p. 17). Despite these obstacles, the resisters did actively make concrete plans to create a German society and government after the removal of Hitler. Through his presentation, Mommsen uncovers the complexity and nuances of the resisters’ thinking in order to check historians from categorizing them as a uniform group. In order to grasp these differences, he argues convincingly that “a proper understanding and assessment of the resistance are only possible if the political motives and objectives of the plotters are placed in the dangerously unstable context of Nazism and against an intellectual background of social and historical thinking that reached back to the Weimar era” (p. 24). In essence, Mommsen invites us to assess the participants of the July 20 plot by studying them in the light of the milieu in which they lived.

According to Mommsen, though individuals such as Helmuth James von Moltke were adamant to avoid “any appearance of social exclusivity” (p. 29) among the resisters, they largely came from the upper-middle and upper classes. He points out that a central reason for this can be primarily traced back to recruitment tactics among the aristocratic conservative-nationalist resisters whose social strata in general “resisted wholesale Nazification and provided channels of communication … outside the political sphere” (p. 29). Still, he stresses how difficult it was for them to overcome the deep-seated bond of loyalty between Hitler and the German people, which, from their perspective, was a psychological barrier that they needed to destroy without the risk of being labeled traitors to the nation. An equally serious obstacle to their cause was the fact that many of them were “servants of the state” and held official positions in Hitler’s government. The thought of participating in a treasonous act was unfathomable to many of them. Both these factors caused individual resisters to approach the issue of removing Hitler differently. For example, Carl Goerdeler and those who “belonged predominantly to the older generation” anguished over the legality of their actions (p. 17). This inner conflict led them to recommend that Hitler be arrested. At the same time, the younger re-
sisters, such as Stauffenberg, chose to ignore the legality question and advocated Hitler’s assassination.

In chapter 3, Mommsen presents the social vision and constitutional plans of those who participated directly or indirectly in the July 20 assassination attempt. According to Mommsen, the political thinking of the resisters was “borne along by their desire to find a new solution to the intellectual and political crisis, which they perceived as a pan-European phenomenon. But in their search they often harked back to their experience of history” (pp. 49-50). Nevertheless, all of the resisters believed that they needed to make changes in the structure of government and in its social system despite the fact that the “pace of change was [already] too fast,” which, in turn, had caused the “breakdown of centuries-old social ties and threatened to march relentlessly onward into the nightmare of Bolshevism” (p. 53). The members of the Kreisau Circle attributed this breakdown partially to the “loss of people’s religious and political security”; Moltke and Peter Yorck von Wartenburg, on the other hand, defined it as a "problem of Vermassung (loss of individuality),” which proceeded from “the disintegration of medieval universalism and the progressive expansion of the agenda of the modern state.” This condition, in turn, “had reached its logical conclusion in a totalitarianism that had succeeded in laying claims to the entire man” (p. 54). This progression, they feared, would continue and lead from National Socialism to Bolshevism. To combat this spiraling descent, the resisters turned toward public images of community with respect to individuality. In particular, Moltke’s nearly utopian program of “small communities,” which Mommsen discusses in detail in chapter 4, placed emphasis on public responsibility and the common good, even to the extent of “replacing the European nation-states by a wealth of smaller territorial units” (p. 88), some of which would be multinational in character. In contrast to the Kreisau Circle, Mommsen shows that Goerdeler was unable to separate himself totally from the more traditional concept of state. Still, Mommsen concludes later in chapter 10 that Goerdeler’s plans would ultimately produce “a pale and questionable imitation of the ruling Nazi Party” (p. 125). In all this, he points out that Goerdeler’s outlook was “fundamentally different” from those of Ulrich von Hassell, Johannes Popitz, Ludwig Beck, and Fritz-Dietlof von der Schulenburg, all of whom remained “trapped in a philosophy of the authoritarian state” (p. 90).

In chapters 5 through 10, Mommsen highlights the significant differences among the July 20 resisters. He creates case studies on individuals as diverse as Schullenberg, Julius Leber, Wilhelm Leuschner, Carlo Mierendorf, and Adolf Reichwein. In his study of Schulenburg, Mommsen reveals how entrenched this individual was in authoritarian thinking. Though Schulenburg had declined Heinrich Himmler’s offer of a senior rank in the SS, he had by that time "given his almost unreserved support to the National Socialist regime” (p. 152), and, earlier, had even given his support to the radical wing of the Nazi Party that desired a “second revolution.” The fear of Bolshevism incited this support. Schulenburg firmly trusted that National Socialism would destroy Bolshevism and implement its concept of Lebensraum in order to allow Germany to rule harmoniously over the peoples of Eastern Europe. For that reason he argued that Germany must not take away the “national character” of the peoples over whom they ruled nor “their freedom to pursue their own cultural and political development” (p. 160). Ultimately, Mommsen finds that although Schulenburg agreed with many aspects of National Socialism, he could not accept the corruption inherent in its governmental system and for that reason chose a more radical course of reform through the resistance movement. In stark contrast, Mommsen shows that Moltke did not simply want a reform of the current system, but reluctantly reached the conclusion that Germany had to be defeated in order for Europe to survive. Still the belief (held even among those who sided with Moltke, such as the Jesuit, Father Alfred Delp) that Germany after the war had to play a central role in European leadership persisted. Mommsen records Delp’s telling remark: “a Europe without Germany, indeed without Germany as one of its leaders was unthinkable” (p. 186).

The final two chapters in Mommsen’s study are the most insightful and important. Chapter 11 addresses resistance among the military and chapter 12 examines antisemitism among the resisters in the context of the Holocaust. Not surprisingly, Mommsen alludes to the fact that many of the conservative-nationalist resisters would have never contemplated resistance had not the war taken a turn for the worse for Germany. He also attributes Operation Barbarossa as an aggravating factor. He notes, for example, that “anti-Bolshevism was particularly strong among the officer corps and was further invigorated by the slogans of the war of racial extermination” (p. 269). Though many resisters looked at the crimes of the regime with disgust, Mommsen argues that military considerations outweighed them. This also allows Mommsen correctly to conclude that “a considerable number of those who played an active part in the July Plot, ... had previously participated in the war of
racial extermination, or had at least approved of it for quite a time and in some cases had actively promoted it” (p. 250). Not surprisingly, then, Mommsen notes that the “Nazi persecution of the Jews was a minor factor in their decision to commit high treason” (p. 254). Convincingly, Mommsen reveals how deeply ingrained anti-semitism was among members of the resistance and even among those who had “dissociated themselves from the regime” (p. 256) such as Generaloberst Baron Werner von Fritsch, who believed that in order for Germany “to become great again, it had to fight three battles: one against the workers, one against Rome’s domination of the Catholic Church and one against the Jews” (p. 256).

Most resisters responded ambiguously to the persecution of Jews. For example, though Carl Goerdeler, as mayor of Leipzig until 1936, attempted to oppose violence against Jews, he did little to limit the effect of the 1933 coordination on Jewish personnel in the civil service. In his 1941 memorandum, “The Goal,” Goerdeler even advocated “the creation of a Jewish state in Canada or South America” and, for that reason, agreed to treat “all Jews living in Germany as registered aliens and to deprive them of citizenship” (p. 259). Mommsen also points out exceptions. For example, as early as November 1938, following Reichskristallnacht, evidence suggests that both Helmut Groscurth, Hans von Dohnanyi, and Hans Oster “opposed the racial policies of the regime in the strongest terms and [were] distinguished by their uncompromising repudiation of Jewish persecution.” After November 9-10, 1938, Groscurth recorded in his diary, “We must be ashamed even to be German” (p. 261). Moltke also actively passed information to the Danish Foreign Minister about the deportation of Danish Jews.

Mommsen does briefly address the question of resistance and antisemitism in the Christian churches. He correctly concludes that in the end, the churches as institutions failed to speak out or aid Jews in any significant way. However, he does find that some notable churchmen, such as Monsignor Bernhard Lichtenberg and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, spoke up for Jews. Even for these individuals, it was a gradual path to move beyond the ingrained antisemitism of their faith traditions. Still, Mommsen concludes that “all these individuals spoke from a standpoint of segregationist anti-Semitism, a fact which robbed their protests of ultimate consistency” (p. 262). While this conclusion is definitely true of most church leaders, Lichtenberg’s statements and actions during the last years of his public ministry, however, offer a challenge to this deduction. In contrast, a very recent finding by Jana Leichsenring from the pen of Dr. Margarete Sommer, director of the Berlin Chancery’s Hilfswerk, which assisted both Christians of Jewish descent and Jews, records that Sommer was fully aware of the Wannsee Conference.[1] This information must have been passed on to church leaders through her regular contact with Bishop Konrad von Preysing and other German prelates. Still nothing was done publicly by the Catholic Church as an institution to protest the plight of European Jews. Clearly, such information will encourage a reexamination of the Catholic Church’s actions during the Holocaust and perhaps an even more critical assessment of the situation.

Overall, Mommsen’s work is best read as a series of essays on the topic of the July 20 resistance plot. At times his arguments and presentation are repetitious as you move from one chapter to the next. Similarly, the author takes almost two chapters to present his central arguments to the reader. Clearly, this work will prove to be a challenging read for anyone without previous knowledge of the resistance movement. Mommsen assumes that the reader is aware of the individuals he discusses. Fortunately, brief biographies of the central figures are included among the notes. Unfortunately, however, in this translated edition, many notes are omitted even though the author quotes directly from his primary sources. Nevertheless, in one volume Mommsen has been amply skillful in sharing his vast research on the resistance movement with the English-speaking reader. This indeed is an accomplishment.

Note


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