

Resistance or Collaboration?:
The Turmoil of Universities in Nazi Germany

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1 Introduction

It is without question that the Nazi regime under Hitler in Germany committed among the most horrid atrocities the world has ever seen. In accounting for these actions it is an automatic assumption that the leaders of National Socialism were at the root of the problem. In the face of such catastrophes as the Holocaust, some chose to ally themselves with the Nazis usually for personal gains, most remained passive, and still others chose to actively resist. A detailed analysis reveals that collaboration (and resistance as well) existed at all social levels; not just at the higher echelons.

The intelligentsia is one of the most revealing groups of the acceptance of National Socialism within Germany because by its very nature it was forced to rationalize the doctrines of the Nazi movement. The German university had long played a prominent role in the ideologic course of the nation, and university intellectuals were highly respected by most segments of society. Therefore, by examining the effect of National Socialism on German Universities and the reaction to these policies among students and faculty, we can hope to shed light on the acceptance of National Socialism in the country as a whole.

It is the aim of this paper to characterize Nazi policy towards the universities, and, more importantly, the reaction of students and faculty members to those policies.

2 Faculty and Administration

2.1 The Reorganization of the Universities

The modern German university began in the early nineteenth century with a school of philosophers establishing the idea for a Humboldtian University (*Humboldtsche Universität*). At its core, the Humboldtian University was led by a hierarchy of deans of each department assisted by the “inner faculty” or *Ordinarien*, a Senate, and a Rector who served as the supreme executive of the entire university.¹ The Humboldtian University emphasized a humanistic approach to learning, that is, a completely disinterested and politically aloof sojourn towards a greater human understanding of the world, with philosophy acting as “the glue between the different disciplines and faculties.”²

This cool rationality soon came into conflict with the fervent and emotional “community of the people” (*Volksgemeinschaft*) promoted by Nazism. Hitler valued universities only insofar as they could be utilized as party organs for the promotion of *völkische* ideas, or possibly for the technological research they could provide to further the war effort. He voiced this opinion in a speech to journalists the day after *Kristallnacht* in 1938:

When I look at our intellectual strata—alas, one needs them; otherwise one could some day—I don’t know—exterminate them or

¹JEREMY NOAKES, “The Ivory Towerd under Siege: German Universities in the Third Reich”, *Journal of European Studies* 23 (1993), no. 4, 384.

²MARGIT SZÖLLOSI-JÄNZE, ed., *Science in the Third Reich*, (Berg, 2001), 37-38.

something. But unfortunately one needs them. But when I look at these intellectual strata and imagine their behavior and examine their attitude to myself and to our work, I almost feel afraid.³

The impact of Nazism on the makeup of the German university began with the Law for the Restoration of the Civil Service in April, 1933, which saw the expulsion of Jews and left-wing party members totaling approximately 15% of all faculty.⁴ Ultimately 14-17% of all university teachers emigrated under the Nazi regime.⁵

Subsequent years saw the implementation of *Gleichschaltung* or “coordination” in German universities. However, there remained deep chasms within the party over how to approach universities and the Nazis “did not undertake a systematic reconstruction of the university system,” but rather efforts remained spontaneous and chaotic; a typical situation in all facets of Nazi administration.⁶ The irrationality of National Socialist ideology made it “inappropriate as a basis for academic activity.”⁷

However, there were numerous important changes, including the adoption of the *Führerprinzip* or “leader principle” by granting the Rector much more power to act as a Führer within the university, reducing the senate to a purely advisory role.⁸ In addition, the newly established Reich Ministry

³HENRY FRIEDLANDER and SYBIL MILTON, eds., *The Holocaust: Ideology, Bureaucracy, and Genocide*, (Kraus International Publications, 1980), 209.

⁴SZÖLLOSI-JÄNZE, 44.

⁵KLAUS HENTSCHEL, ed., *Physics and National Socialism: An Anthology of Primary Sources*, (Birkhäuser Verlag, 1996), lvi.

⁶SZÖLLOSI-JÄNZE, 45.

⁷NOAKES, 398.

⁸Ibid., 385.

of Education (REM) established two new organizations: the *Studentenschaft* and the *Dozentenschaft* in order to increase the influence of younger generations as they were more likely to be sympathetic with Nazi aims. The Nazi leadership wished to form a “new type of academic appropriate to the new political and social order” that should be “more of a youth leader than a bookish scholar.”⁹

The end result, however, was a surprisingly large maintenance of power by the established academic elites. They maintained the right to suggest appointments for Rector and new faculty members; suggestions which were rarely denied by the REM.¹⁰ This is best demonstrated by the failed *deutsche Physik* or “Aryan Physics” movement led by Philip Lenard and Johannes Stark (see Figure 1) that rejected Einstein’s relativity as a corruptive Jewish theory. This nazification of physics was soundly trumped by Max von Laue and other physicists.¹¹

The beginning of war with the invasion of Poland in 1939 necessitated large amounts of war-directed research. To meet this need, new Kaiser Wilhelm Institutes were founded. The Kaiser Wilhelm Society (*Kaiser Wilhelm Gesellschaft*) had been founded in 1911 as a private, industrial-funded institute to promote the advancement of German science. During the war, new institutes were set up that focused on agricultural, biological, and weapons research for the advancement of “living space” (*Lebensraum*) and “blood and

⁹Ibid., 390.

¹⁰Ibid., 385.

¹¹FRIEDLANDER and MILTON, 153-158.

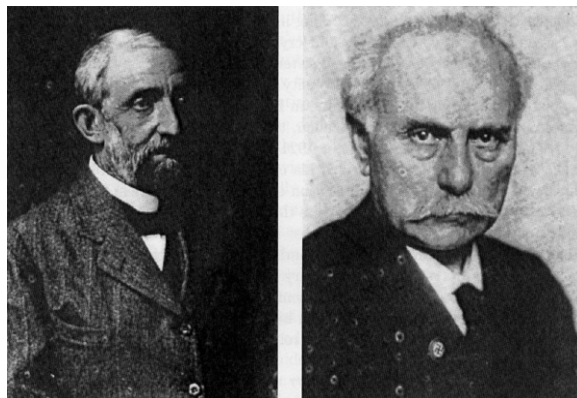


Figure 1: Philip Lenard and Johannes Stark
KLAUS HENTSCHEL, ed., *Physics and National Socialism: An Anthology of Primary Sources*, (Birkhäuser Verlag, 1996), 52

soil” (*Blut und Boden*) policies.¹² These societies demonstrate the emphasis placed on weapons research, culminating in the rocket designs developed at Peenemünde (see Figure 2) and the nuclear program led by Werner Heisenberg (see Figure 3).

2.2 The Reaction in the Universities

To gain an understanding of the reaction of academics to National Socialism, it is first necessary to consider the social and political situation promulgated by the Weimar inter-war period. The heavy burden placed on Germany by the Versailles Treaty created a profound sense of unrest, resulting in a

¹²MONIKA RENNEBERG and MARK WALKER, eds., *Science, Technology, and National Socialism*, (Cambridge University Press, 1994), 147.

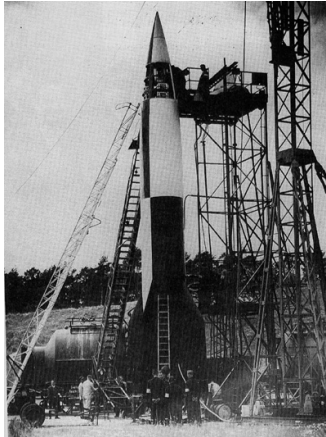


Figure 2: A V2 Rocket Prototype

MONIKA RENNEBERG and MARK WALKER, eds., *Science, Technology, and National Socialism*, (Cambridge University Press, 1994), 63

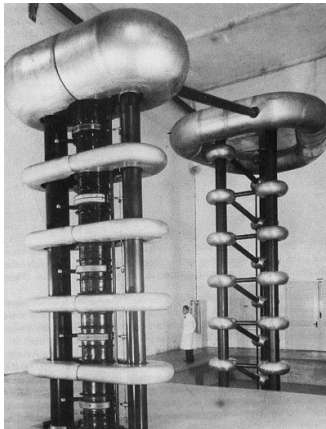


Figure 3: A Neutron Generator

MONIKA RENNEBERG and MARK WALKER, eds., *Science, Technology, and National Socialism*, (Cambridge University Press, 1994), 280-281

distrust of democracy. Academics felt nostalgia for the glorious days of the *Kaiserreich* and “expressed enthusiasm for the destruction of federalism as well as of political parties and democracy.”¹³ The historian Jeremy Noakes summarizes the atmosphere among the intelligentsia as follows:

The cultural climate in Weimar encouraged a fatal loss of confidence in the value of rational enquiry and debate and inevitably this put in question the whole purpose of universities and of academics.¹⁴

Amidst this turbulent storm, it is unsurprising to hear that many faculty members of universities latched onto the coattails of National Socialism to pull them up from the uncertainty of the Weimar period. Those that did not actively support Nazism offered little resistance. Victor Klemperer, a man forced out of his faculty position at the University of Dresden, commented on the guilt of the faculty in his diary:

If one day ... the fate of the vanquished lay in my hands, then I would let all the ordinary folk go and even some of the leaders, who might after all have had honorable intentions ... but I would have all the intellectuals strung up, and the professors three feet higher than the rest; they would be left hanging from the lampposts for as long as was compatible with hygiene.¹⁵

¹³KAREN SCHÖNWALDER, “The Fascination of Power: Historical Scholarship in Nazi Germany”, *History Workshop Journal* 43 (1997), 134.

¹⁴NOAKES, 376.

¹⁵VICTOR KLEMPERER, *I Will Bear Witness: A Diary of the Nazi Years 1933-1941*, trans. by Martin Chalmers, (Modern Library, 1999), 184.

Many academics supported national socialism to further their own ambitions. This careerism was especially prominent among young individuals, but we have already seen that older professors still retained much of their previous status. What then explains their collaborationism? Because of the heavy risks involved with active resistance, they seemed to steer a course based upon “immunity deriving from a continuing commitment to traditional standards of scholarship,” that is, they attempted to hide themselves in their work in order to remove guilt for being passive.¹⁶

There were, however, professors and faculty members who actively supported the Nazi regime. Many historians saw themselves as arbiters of the German people; they felt themselves to be “priveleged interpreters of Germany’s destiny.”¹⁷ As such, they were fond of the idea of a *völkische* history based upon the experiences of the German race rather than Germany as a political entity, thereby paralleling National Socialist ideology. In his commencement address at the University of Heidelberg in 1933, the historian Willy Andreas waved his banner in support of the new regime:

National Socialism has become Germany’s destiny. It must fulfill its mission. If it fails, or if it does not succeed in finding the solutions to decisive problems, Germany will be doomed and, sooner or later, the whole continent will descend into chaos.¹⁸

Martin Heidegger, the renowned philosopher, served as Rector of Freiburg

¹⁶NOAKES, 399.

¹⁷SCHÖNWALDER, 139.

¹⁸Ibid., 133.

University in the early days of Nazism. Beginning in 1919, Heidegger had become convinced of a stagnation of philosophy in German universities. He wished to reformulate philosophy through a crisis which would “disrupt it and compel it to radically rework its basic concepts.”¹⁹ He wished to bring about a metamorphosis of the university into a “site for the transformation of human existence.”²⁰ To achieve this aim, he willingly allied himself with Nazism and faithfully carried out Hitler’s policy of *Gleichschaltung* to curry favor with the Nazi leadership. Heidegger hoped to do away with traditional academic boundaries, and to include the proletariat in intellectual discourse at the university level. To achieve this aim, he fully exercised his absolute powers as Rector resulting in the “destruction of the remnants of any autonomy the university still preserved.”²¹

Thus we see Heidegger represented the archetypal collaborationist, adopting Nazi ideals in order to gain personal power. Heidegger’s goals predated Nazism and did not include racism, absolving him from some guilt. But Heidegger provided National Socialism with “an intellectual fig leaf with which to cover its project of naked barbarism.”²²

In addition these staunch supporters of the Nazi regime there were those who actively resisted, although they remained a precious few. Kurt Huber

¹⁹ALAN MILCHMAN and ALAN ROSENBERG, “Martin Heidegger and the University as a Site for the Transformation of Human Existence”, *Review of Politics* 59 (1997), no. 1, 81.

²⁰Ibid., 78.

²¹Ibid., 90.

²²Ibid., 92.

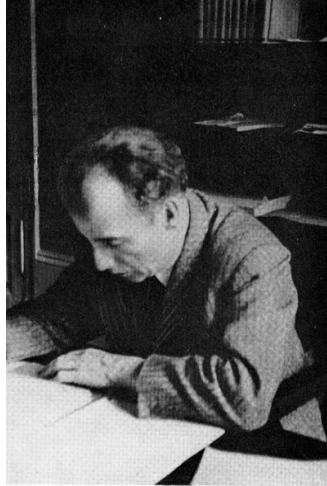


Figure 4: Kurt Huber

ANNEDORE LEBER, ed., *Conscience in Revolt: Sixty-four Stories of Resistance in Germany 1933-1945*, (Associated Booksellers, 1957), 42-45

(see Figure 4) was a professor of philosophy at the University of Munich and became involved with the *White Rose* group, drafting some of their leaflets. Before being executed on July 13, 1943 he addressed the People's Court:

There is a point at which the law become immoral and unethical; that point is reached when it becomes a cloak for the cowardice that dares not stand up against blatant violations of justice ... My warning to reflect on the lasting principles essential to the existence of a constitutional state is the supreme need of our time ... History will vindicate what I now say and do; of that I am quite sure.²³

²³ANNEDORE LEBER, ed., *Conscience in Revolt: Sixty-four Stories of Resistance in Germany 1933-1945*, (Associated Booksellers, 1957), 4-45.



Figure 5: Adolf Reichwein

ANNEDORE LEBER, ed., *Conscience in Revolt: Sixty-four Stories of Resistance in Germany 1933-1945*, (Associated Booksellers, 1957), 62-65

Adolf Reichwein (see Figure 5), a professor at the Teachers' College in Halle, was an devout Social Democrat and vocally opposed Hitler's ascension to power. He was thus removed from his professorship, and later became involved in the assassination attempt on Hitler in 1944. He was executed on October 20.

These men represent a depressingly small minority among university faculty. For the rest, the reaction to Nazism can be summarized by a general sense of complacency and a dedication to passivity.

3 Students

3.1 Nazi Policy towards Students

Nazism took a fundamentally hostile stance toward university students, in spite of their generally earnest support. Nazi Policy towards students was characterized by stricter regulation than in the inter-war period, and a disdain of “frivolous” studies (i.e. those not aimed at the war effort), since Hitler considered university study “to be of such limited importance that it could easily be dispensed with for a while without adverse effect on the nation.”²⁴

Indeed, Nazism’s “rejection of the humanistic and idealist foundations of *Bildung*” had a profound effect upon the importance of the university in the Reich.²⁵ In 1939, this attitude led to the closure of most German universities, except for a few select campuses.²⁶

In direct opposition to this move, the armed services and the Labor Service began offering extended leave for medical students, in order to ensure a steady supply of doctors for the war effort. Such a number of soldiers took advantage of this offer, that it was cancelled in February of 1943 in favor of a “extension matriculation” program that enabled soldiers at the front to enroll in a university by extension. This was fervently supported

²⁴GEOFFREY GILES, “German Students and Higher Education Policy in the Second World War”, *Central European History* 17 (1984), no. 4, 331.

²⁵NOAKES, 381.

²⁶GILES, 331.

by university administrators because of their need to seem productive to the Reich amidst the aforementioned skepticism shown to the intelligentsia. This created a rapid surge in enrollment in major universities, so much so that by 1943, more extension students matriculated at the University of Hamburg than normal students.²⁷ The rapid increase in enrollment further resulted in the necessary reopening of universities across Germany.

The enrollment in universities was drastically reduced in the early days of Nazism (1933-1935), but saw a resurgence in 1937 due to the influx of soldiers, and remained relatively constant throughout the war years. The war also saw a drastic increase in the number of female students (see Table 1). There existed a broad shift away from the arts and humanities to more applied disciplines, with particular emphasis on medicine and chemistry.²⁸ In general, the quality of graduates, however, declined markedly under the Nazi regime, due to the time-consuming party indoctrination activities sponsored by the Reich Student Leadership under Gustav Adolf Scheel. These included “vacations” which forced students to work in factories and on farms as dictated by the requirement that all students spend six months engaged in physical labor from 1933 on.²⁹ Average grades at universities decreased accordingly. The historian Geoffrey J. Giles notes:

Those who remained behind on campus were the physically unfit,

²⁷Ibid., 336.

²⁸Ibid., 347-351.

²⁹Ibid., 342.

<i>Year</i>	<i>Number of Female Students</i>	<i>Percentage of Total students</i>
1932	19,997	16%
1940	12,797	26%
1943	27,442	47%

Table 1: Female Student Enrollment in Nazi Germany
 GEOFFREY GILES, “German Students and Higher Education Policy in the Second World War”, *Central European History* 17 (1984), no. 4, 335

and the young waiting for call-up: none of them represented the kind of political elite that the Reich Student Leadership had been struggling to mold for the past several years.³⁰

Nazi policy towards students was *not* overly concerned with racial regulation (there were some protests by Scheel to Goebbels about interracial dating³¹), but this was carried out by the students themselves because of their deep-rooted enthusiasm and support for Nazism.

3.2 The Reaction of Students to Nazism

Nazism was bolstered by a generally positive and supportive attitude of students towards the new regime. Students all across Germany had rallied to the cause of nationalism at the outbreak of war in 1914, and the defeat in 1917 combined with the outrageous demands of the Versailles treaty caused outrage among the students and a sense of dissatisfaction with the Weimar regime. Combined with bleak economic prospects during the reparations-

³⁰ibid., 337.

³¹Ibid., 340.

induced depression, discontent among students was rampant during the late inter-war period. It should come as no surprise then, that students “formed the vanguard of the Nazi campaign against the Universities.”³²

Students founded the National Socialist Students’ Association (NSDStB - *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Studentenbund*) which won a majority in the German Student Council in 1931, before the rise of Hitler, thus showing the early popularity of the Nazi movement among students. Many students entering universities (especially in the war years) had already been indoctrinated by Nazi propaganda in the Hitler Youth and the League of German Maidens (BDM - *Bund Deutsche Madels*). University students also began to practice “defense sports” (*Wehrsport*) in the early 1930’s, carrying out various paramilitary activities, such as “campaigns of intimidation against Jewish Professors.”³³ They also carried out the famous book burnings of pacifist or dissident authors soon after Hitler’s ascension to power.

Students were particularly vindictive against professors as a rift between the bourgeois student and the aristocratic university professor had been growing during the Weimar years in the form of a “generation gap.” Indeed, the desire “not to be thought out of touch with the current mood” was a major driving force of professors’ often reluctant adoption of Nazism.

But there existed an important dichotomy in the attitude of students that arose from their unique situation: while they were generally supportive

³²NOAKES, 376.

³³Ibid., 377.

of the Nazi movement and the unification of Germanic peoples under the Third Reich, they were not completely supportive of the war effort. Hitler's own attitude towards university education has been shown to be anything but accepting, and the very existence of universities was called into question during the Nazi regime. For this reason, those students who were not fervent Nazis (which was the vast majority of them) remained relatively aloof and "threw themselves into their academic work so fully that they had no interest in the political activities of the NSDStB."³⁴

Therefore, there existed little active resistance in the universities among students. Casual dissent was commonplace, but because of a lack of solidarity and coordination, serious resistance remained dormant except in a few cases such as the famous *White Rose* group that produced anti-war leaflets in 1943. Sophie Scholl (see Figure 6) of the *White Rose* commented on the aloofness of students in her diary on 13 January, 1941:

Even the young people, and there were lots in the train, weren't young any more, they seemed to think the only purpose of youth is pleasure. But my family and friends—even if they were sometimes clumsy or ignorant, were at least full of goodwill—full of the will to do what is good.³⁵

³⁴GILES, 339.

³⁵LEBER, 18.

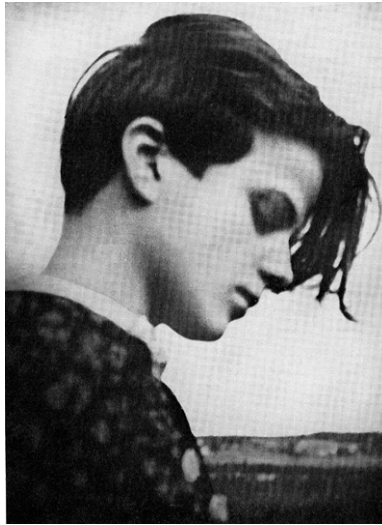


Figure 6: Sophie Scholl

ANNEDORE LEBER, ed., *Conscience in Revolt: Sixty-four Stories of Resistance in Germany 1933-1945*, (Associated Booksellers, 1957), 16-19

4 Concluding Remarks

National Socialism caused great turmoil within German universities due to the myriad of uncoordinated efforts to transform the traditional university into a modern, *völkische* one. We have seen that students were, in general, accepting of the ideals of Nazism, and most faculty chose to hide in their “ivory tower” of scholarship. The most remarkable characteristic of the reaction to Nazism in the German universities is simply its nonexistence. Both faculty and students remained eerily quiet amidst terrible atrocities.

Arguably, the threat of retaliation from the Gestapo and SS made any kind of serious resistance futile. However, in Western society the university has long been a bastion of liberalism, protest, and a questioning of the political status quo. This tradition was abandoned in Nazi Germany, and modern readers should take this lesson to heart.

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