

# The British Foreign Office and the German Resistance to Hitler



Proponents of nonviolence are often challenged by the claim that “nonviolence wouldn’t work against the Nazis.” Seldom is this statement backed up by any evidence or argument. The very existence of ruthless Nazi killers is taken to be a definitive justification for military methods.

There are various ways to respond. One is to point out that nonviolent action was seldom actually used against the Nazis: usually there was *no* resistance. Another is to point to the effectiveness of nonviolent action against the Nazis on a number of occasions. Jacques Semelin’s superb new book *Unarmed Against Hitler* is the best reference on this issue.

But rather than accepting the challenge of arguing that nonviolent methods could have stopped Hitler once he had established a regime based on terror and launched a war, another option is to turn the attention in a different direction. An important argument is that within Germany there were highly placed opponents of Nazism who were doing what they could to undermine Hitler’s rule. The existence of this opposition movement has long been known, as described for example in the book by Hans Rothfels. What is not so well known is the role of the British government in refusing to help the opposition or even heed its warnings. This story is told in an eye-opening book by Patricia Meehan, *The Unnecessary War*.

Before the outbreak of World War II, there were opponents of Hitler in many high positions in Germany, including top officials in the German Foreign Ministry, the military high command and the police. Their position was a delicate one. If they became too open about their views, they were likely to be arrested and possibly executed. After all, within their own country they were considered by the ruling Nazi Party as traitors to an elected government. But because they recognised the evil of the Nazis and opposed both the internal repression in Germany and the planned external aggression, they were willing to take personal risks for the greater good. The high-level opponents of Hitler were not principled practitioners of nonviolent action - for example, they used secrecy and favoured the threat of force against Nazi aggression - but their experiences are instructive for nonviolent activists nonetheless.

The elite opponents of Hitler looked for external support, and most of all they looked to Britain, which had the greatest moral standing at the time. Hence, the German opposition set up numerous channels of communication with British officials. They did everything they could to convince the British government to take a stand against Hitler.

In the 1920s and 1930s, the British could have opposed Hitler, but did not. Meehan, though, looks especially at the late 1930s, when Hitler made his greatest diplomatic coups. One key moment was the crisis over Czechoslovakia in 1938. Hitler threatened to attack unless his demands for territory were met.

The German opposition made extraordinary efforts to alert the British and to urge them to take a stand against Hitler's demands. They provided detailed information about German military and economic weakness, from the very highest sources. This was supplemented by information from leading German industrialists. They also organised detailed plans to take power from the Nazis and to set up a moderate government that would renounce aggression.

Leading Nazis portrayed Germany as a country unified in spirit and unified in its

demands for territory to unite the Germanic peoples. In reality, there was considerable opposition. Industrial production was in a shambles and the military was weak. Organised labour, drafted to build the Siegfried line to protect against an invasion from France, obstructed work with strikes, go-slows and poor work that ensured that the fortifications were pathetically weak.

So what did the British government do with this information? Nothing. The frantic and risky warnings from the German opposition were dismissed by the British Foreign Office, which was convinced that Hitler was strong and needed to be pacified.

The German opposition was ready to act against Hitler. They waited only for a forceful statement from the British government against Hitler's designs against Czechoslovakia. But all the opposition's plans were for naught. Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain took the initiative to personally meet with Hitler at Munich and did everything possible to pressure the Czechoslovak government to accept Hitler's demands. The result was that Czechoslovakia, which had a powerful military force, was ceded to the Nazis without a struggle.

The story of the British Foreign Office's repeated refusals to act on information, warnings and pleas from the German opposition, told through memos, is a depressing one. Even after Hitler's diplomatic bluff over Czechoslovakia succeeded - a terrible blow to the opposition - they continued their efforts to alert the British. They continued to be disappointed.

Once the war began and it was obvious that the German opposition's concerns were valid, the Foreign Office became concerned about how their refusal to take action in the late 1930s might appear. They continued to offer no help to the German opposition.

There were several unsuccessful attempts on Hitler's life. The only one that became known during the war was in 1944. In the aftermath, many leading members of the German opposition were tried and exe-

cuted. Thousands died in a post-coup purge. The British Foreign Office was pleased! This meant that opposition members would no longer be available to point out the failures of the Foreign Office to take action against Hitler. Here is an extract from a memo from John Wheeler-Bennett, a historian in the Foreign Office Political Intelligence Department: *"It may now be said with some definiteness that we are better off with things as they are today than if the plot of July 20th had succeeded and Hitler had been assassinated... By the failure of the plot we have been spared the embarrassments, both at home and in the United States, which might have resulted from such a move, and, moreover, the present purge is presumably removing from the scene numerous individuals which might have caused us difficulty, not only had the plot succeeded, but also after the defeat of a Nazi Germany... The Gestapo and the SS have done us an appreciable service in removing a selection of those who would undoubtedly have posed as 'good' Germans after the war.... It is to our advantage therefore that the purge should continue, since the killing of Germans by Germans will save us from future embarrassments of many kinds."* The Foreign Office had long refused to accept that there could be any 'good' Germans.

Not all the opposition leaders were killed in the purge, however. Several were in foreign diplomatic postings. After the war, some of them were brought before the war crimes tribunal. They contacted their friends in the British Foreign Office for support in showing that they had been active opponents of Nazism. Alas, the Foreign Office declined to help. In a tremendous miscarriage of justice, Ernst von Weizsacker, former head of the German Foreign Ministry and an energetic member of the opposition, was sentenced to prison, in spite of an outpouring of support from numerous well-known anti-Nazis from many countries.

Weizsacker and others wrote their side of the story and told about the failure of the western leaders to stand up to Hitler. The British Foreign Office carefully considered how to respond to this challenge. One method was to denigrate the Ger-

man opposition. At one stage the publication of carefully censored documents was planned, but in the end the main method was a coverup of the historical record.

There are many lessons that can be learned from this incredible story. One is that one of the greatest weaknesses of any dictatorship is lack of internal support. Providing support to the internal opposition is of crucial importance. The allied governments undermined the opposition not only by refusing to listen to its warnings and refusing to take a stand against Hitler, but also by demanding unconditional surrender instead of offering a gesture of support, however moderate, to any post-Nazi government. By demanding unconditional surrender in the war, the allies helped to make it difficult for the opposition to recruit support.

Another message is that taking a principled, open stand can be incredibly effective. The British government refused to take such a stand against Hitler when it would have had the most impact.

Perhaps the most important message is that opponents of repression and aggression should not rely on governments to take action. The German opposition looked to the British government and was repeatedly disappointed. Unfortunately, this pattern has been repeated over and over. For example, after the military coups in Fiji in 1987, members of the ousted government tried to gain

support by visiting government leaders in New Zealand, Australia, Britain and elsewhere. It did them little good. For dictatorships to be supported by other governments is the rule rather than the exception. The United States government, among others, supported Saddam Hussein's bloody regime in Iraq for years before the Gulf war. The Australian government, among others, has supported the Indonesian government, lending tacit support to the genocide in East Timor.

Another lesson from *The Unnecessary War* is that it is wise not to trust history as written by the victors. World War II is routinely presented as a necessary war against an otherwise unstoppable regime. The role of other governments in accommodating Hitler and the Nazis has been suppressed, as has the rehabilitation and recruitment of Nazi criminals by western governments after the war, as documented for example in books by Tom Bower and Christopher Simpson.

In discussions about the Nazis, it is usual to assume that there were only two options: do nothing or go to war. This was certainly the assumption of the British government, which preferred to deal with the legal German government, to believe its rhetoric about German unity and to dismiss the opposition as self-interested and ineffectual. Neville Chamberlain's stance of appeasement is often equated with pacifism. Actually, it was just acquiescence.

The idea of nonviolent action is an alternative to the usual limited choice between acquiescence and violence. When someone challenges you with the claim "nonviolence wouldn't work against the Nazis," you might reply "what would you have done if you had worked in the British Foreign Office in 1938 and leading German opponents of Hitler told you they were ready to act to topple the Nazi regime if only the British government would make a forceful statement condemning Hitler's designs against Czechoslovakia?" Not a simple question! That's precisely the point. Issues concerning the Nazis and nonviolence are not nearly as obvious as they are usually made out to be.

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#### References

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