



## READING: From Bystanders to Resisters

By 1942 rumors of mass murder reached Germany. People there had to decide how to respond. Among the few to act on what they learned were Hans Scholl and his younger sister Sophie. In the spring of 1942, they and a friend, Christoph Probst, formed a small group known as the White Rose. In July, the group published a leaflet that boldly stated: "We want to inform you of the fact that since the conquest of Poland, 300,000 Jews in that country have been murdered in the most bestial manner. Here we see the most terrible crime against the dignity of man, a crime that has no analogy in human history... Why do the German people react in such an apathetic way to these revolting and inhuman crimes?"

The following February, the Nazis arrested the Scholls and Probst and brought them to trial. The three freely admitted that they were responsible for the leaflets. Sophie Scholl told the judges. "Somebody, after all, had to make a start. What we wrote and said is also believed by many others. They just don't dare to express themselves as we did." She, her brother Hans, and Probst were found guilty and guillotined later that same day. Soon after their deaths, three other members – a university professor named Kurt Huber and two students, Alexander Schmorell and Willi Graf – were also tried, convicted, and beheaded.

Although the Nazis were able to destroy the White Rose, they could not stop their message from being heard. Helmuth von Moltke, a German aristocrat, smuggled copies to friends in neutral countries. They, in turn, sent them to the Allies who reproduced each leaflet and then dropped thousands of copies over German cities. The information in the leaflets came as no surprise to Moltke. As a lawyer who worked for the German Intelligence Service, he had been aware of the murders for some time.

After the invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, Moltke wrote to his wife of "reports that in transports of prisoners or Jews only 20 percent arrive, that there is starvation in the prisoner-of-war camps, that typhoid and all the other deficiency epidemics have broken out, that our own people are breaking down from exhaustion. What will happen when the nation as a whole realizes that this war is lost, and lost differently from the last one? With a blood-guilt that cannot be atoned for in our lifetime and can never be forgotten, with an economy that is completely ruined? Will men arise capable of distilling contrition and penance from this punishment, and so, gradually, a new strength to live? Or will everything go under in chaos?"<sup>1</sup>

In September, in yet another letter, he observed.

An officer reports that ammunition produced in violation of international law was found on Russians: dum-dum bullets. That they were such could be proved by the evidence of the Medical Officer, one Panning, who used the ammunition in a large-scale experimental execution of Jews. This produced the following results: such and such was the effect of the projectile when fired at the head, such when fired at the chest, such in abdominal shots, such when limbs were hit. The results were available in the form of a scientific study so that the violation of international law could be proved without a doubt. That surely is the height of bestiality and depravity and there is nothing one can do.<sup>2</sup>

By late October, Moltke was asking, "How is one to bear the burden of complicity?... In France there are extensive shootings while I write. Certainly more than a thousand people are murdered in this way every day and another thousand German men are habituated to murder. And all this is child's play compared with what is happening in Poland and Russia. May I know this and yet sit at my table in my heated flat and have tea? Don't I thereby become guilty too? What shall I say when I am asked, and what did you do during that time?"<sup>3</sup>

Moltke sought an answer to that question by meeting secretly with a number of other prominent Germans at Kreisau, his country estate. There they considered ways of fighting the Nazis and building a new Germany after the war. By the summer of 1944, a few members of the Kreisau circle were ready to act, but

not Moltke. He argued, "Let Hitler live. He and his party must bear responsibility to the end of the fatal destiny for which they have prepared for the German people; only in this way can the National Socialist ideology be obliterated."

On July 20, a member of the group, Claus von Stauffenberg, placed a briefcase containing explosives under a massive table around which Hitler and his staff were scheduled to meet later that day. The bomb exploded as planned, but the table blunted the damage. As a result, Hitler and other top officials survived the explosion. They promptly retaliated by executing nearly twelve thousand people, including Moltke who knew of the plan but did not take part in it. Before his execution in January, 1945, Moltke wrote his sons, ages six and three.

Throughout an entire life, even at school, I have fought against a spirit of narrowness and unfreedom, of arrogance and lack of respect for others, of intolerance and the absolute, the merciless consistency among the Germans, which found its expression in the National Socialist state. I exerted myself to help to overcome this spirit with its evil consequences, such as excessive nationalism, racial persecution, lack of faith, and materialism.<sup>4</sup>

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\*from *Facing History and Ourselves: Holocaust and Human Behavior* (Facing History and Ourselves National Foundation, Brookline, Massachusetts) 1994, pp. 373-376.

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### CONNECTIONS...Questions for Classroom Discussion

- Friederich Reck-Malleczewen, a staunch monarchist who fought in World War I, kept a journal from 1936 until his murder at Dachau in 1944. In March 1943, he wrote of the Scholls:

I never saw these two young people. In my rural isolation, I got only bits and pieces of what they were doing, but the significance of what I heard was such that I could hardly believe it. The Scholls are the first in Germany to have had the courage to witness for the truth... On their gravestones let these words be carved, and let this entire people, which has lived in deepest degradation these last ten years, blush when it reads them:... "He who knows how to die can never be enslaved." We will all of us, someday, have to make a pilgrimage to their graves, and stand before them, ashamed.<sup>5</sup>

Why do you think Reck-Malleczewen believes that it takes courage to "witness for the truth?" What does he mean when he says, "We will all of us, someday... stand before them, ashamed?" What is he suggesting about the responsibility of bystanders? Would Moltke agree?

- Moltke wrote, "Certainly more than a thousand people are murdered in this way every day and another thousand German men are habituated to murder." Why do you think he looks at murder in terms of its effect on both the victim and the perpetrator? What does it mean to live in a society where thousands have been "habituated to murder"?
- Moltke asked, "How is one to bear the burden of complicity?" What is complicity? Is his complicity a result of his knowledge of mass murders? Or of his failure to act on that knowledge?
- On July 21, 1944, Reck-Malleczewen wrote:

And now the attempt to assassinate Hitler... Ah, now, really, gentlemen, this is a little late. You made this monster, and as long as things were going well you gave him whatever he wanted. You turned Germany over to this archcriminal, you swore allegiance to him by every incredible oath he chose to put before you...

And now you are betraying him, as yesterday you betrayed the Republic, and as the day before yesterday, you betrayed the Monarchy. Oh, I don't doubt that if this coup had succeeded, we, and what remains of the material substance of this country, would have been saved. I am sorry, the whole of this nation is sorry, that you failed.<sup>6</sup>

What distinction does Reck-Malleczewen make between the actions of the White Rose and those of Stauffenberg and his associates? How important is that distinction? How would you assess the actions of the Scholls and their friends? Of Moltke and Stauffenberg?

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<sup>1</sup> *Letters to Freya, 1939-1945* by Helmuth James von Moltke, , ed. and trans. Beate Ruhm von Oppen (Knopf), 1990, pp. 155-156.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 160.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in *The Nazi Years: A Documentary History* ed. by Joachim Remakby (Prentice-Hall), 1969, p. 170.

<sup>5</sup> *Diary of a Man in Despair* by Friederich Reck-Malleczewen, trans. Paul Rubens (Collier Books), 1970, pp. 179-181.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 195-196.

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