

## **Support, Silence, and Resistance: The Nazification of German Universities during the Third Reich**

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During the Third Reich, German universities were swept up in the ideological frenzy of National Socialism along with the rest of Germany. In 1933, professors from many different disciplines supported Hitler in the form of addresses that were “presented and published in a brochure entitled ‘Vow of Allegiance of the Professors of the German Universities and High-Schools to Adolf Hitler and the National Socialistic [sic] State.’”<sup>1</sup> The teaching profession in Germany was generally nationalistic and student groups were already displaying strong anti-Semitic tendencies before 1933.<sup>2</sup> German universities were ripe for National Socialism in 1933. The enthusiastic support for National Socialism in the universities is further proven by the fact that in 1933, 1700 members of faculty and 313 full professors were removed from their positions; they were removed either because they were of Jewish descent or they had “left-wing sympathies”.<sup>3</sup> This was seen as a purification and nationalization of higher-education. It was carried out because the universities were seen as a way to revitalize Germany’s cultural heritage. The turn to National Socialism was met with enthusiasm from all sides, the professors and students all seemed to support the new project of the Germany University. If one looks at the general atmosphere of the universities at surface level, it may seem that there were no anti-Nazi sentiments or resistance. The nationalistic speeches of University rectors and the general atmosphere of German universities in 1933 and after demonstrate this. Yet, not everyone involved in German higher education were fully enthralled by National Socialism during the Third Reich. The anti-intellectualism of the Nazi Party did not completely agree with the inherent intellectualism

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<sup>1</sup> Georg Bollenbeck, “The Humanities in Germany after 1933: Semantic Transformations and the Nazification of the Disciplines,” in *Nazi Germany and the Humanities*, ed. Wolfgang Bialas and Anson Rabinbach, trans. Thomas La Presti (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2007), 2.

<sup>2</sup> Terrence Prittie, *Germans against Hitler* (London: Hutchinson of London, 1964), 158-59.

<sup>3</sup> Wolfgang Bialas and Anson Rabinbach, *Nazi Germany and the Humanities* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2007), x.

of universities. Some academics dealt with this anti-intellectualism by intentionally obfuscating their research to escape ideological censorship, while other academics openly rose up and defied the regime. A prominent example was the White Rose, a group of students and a professor at the University of Munich.<sup>4</sup> The White Rose became a symbol of resistance and idealism after they were executed for their dissent. A close look at the thoughts and feelings of students and some professors during the Third Reich reveals the presence of anti-Nazi sentiments, and even some outright resistance to the Nazi regime. This resistance was not committed by force; rather, it was done by idealistically and romantically calling for hope and action.

The political atmosphere at German universities before and during the Third Reich demonstrates that students generally supported National Socialism. Youth entering German universities had already adopted nationalistic tendencies before 1933. In 1932, 107,000 young people were members of the Hitler Youth.<sup>5</sup> Even in the 1920s, there was some support for National Socialism from university students. This was especially true in southern Germany where in 1923, students from the University of Munich participated in Hitler's Putsch.<sup>6</sup> Despite the lack of evidence to show that support for Hitler was widespread in German universities during the 1920s, "The Reich Chancellery expressed its concern about the strong influence of Hitler upon students, and on professors as well."<sup>7</sup> The National Socialist German Student Union—abbreviated to NSDStB—was founded in 1926 but did not gain prominence until 1931. In July of 1931, the NSDStB managed to gain control of the national students' union.<sup>8</sup> Students were drawn towards Hitler and the Nazi Party because they called for action in opposition to the "excessive intellectuality of the other purely political groups."<sup>9</sup> Thus, many of the students at German universities supported National Socialism due to their lack of intellectual obfuscation.

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<sup>4</sup> Inge Jens, "Foreword," in *At the Heart of the White Rose: Letters and Diaries of Hans and Sophie Scholl*, by Hans Scholl and Sophie Scholl, trans. J. Maxwell Brownjohn (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1987), vii.

<sup>5</sup> Prittie, *Germans against Hitler*, 156.

<sup>6</sup> Geoffrey J. Giles, *Students and National Socialism in Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 27.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>9</sup> Giles, *Students and National Socialism*, 61.

Despite the anti-intellectualism of National Socialism, prominent professors from many disciplines jumped at the chance to display public support for the new regime and Hitler. The famous philosopher Martin Heidegger ended his rectoral speech in Freiburg with the phrase “Heil Hitler!”<sup>10</sup> The support of National Socialism from within institutions of higher-education symbolized a “purification, salvation, and new awakening” of intellectual life.<sup>11</sup> In Heidegger’s rectoral address at the University of Freiburg, he speaks of the German university’s role in leading the nation’s spiritual transformation. In the address, Heidegger states that the German university’s historical mission is to become “a place of spiritual legislation.”<sup>12</sup> Heidegger’s support of National Socialism was of huge importance because by 1933, he was already a world-famous thinker. His philosophical influence on educated Germans helped attract them towards supporting Hitler and his regime.<sup>13</sup> After becoming Rector-Führer of the University of Freiburg, Heidegger fully supported Hitler. Very soon after giving his rectoral address, he sent a telegram to Hitler about his plan to bring “the University into line.”<sup>14</sup> There is no question that at the time, Heidegger and some other high profile academics like himself fully supported Hitler and National Socialism.

Peter Drucker, an Austrian-born American scholar, was a visiting lecturer at Frankfurt University in 1933. His memoir entitled *Adventures of a Bystander* provides a firsthand account of the political atmosphere of German universities at the beginning of the Third Reich. While he was at Frankfurt University, Drucker wrote and published a book about Friedrich Julius Stahl, a 19th-century Jewish political philosopher. The book was “immediately banned and publicly burned.”<sup>15</sup> The Nazis anti-intellectualism scared scholars like Drucker. The fear of German universities being taken over by the Nazis was shared among many

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<sup>10</sup> Bollenback, “Nazification of the Disciplines”, 2.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>12</sup> Martin Heidegger, “The Self-Assertion of the German University: Address, Delivered on the Solemn Assumption of the Rectorate of the University Freiburg the Rectorate 1933/34: Facts and Thoughts,” ed. Hermann Heidegger, trans. Karsten Harries, *The Review of Metaphysics*, vol. 38, no. 3 (March 1985): 479.

<sup>13</sup> Yvonne Sherratt, *Hitler’s Philosophers* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013), 106-07.

<sup>14</sup> Sherratt, *Hitler’s Philosophers*, 117-18.

<sup>15</sup> Peter Drucker, *Adventures of a Bystander* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1979), 160-61.

of Drucker's colleagues at Frankfurt University. In 1933, Frankfurt University was "the most self-confidently liberal of major German universities, with a faculty that prided itself on its allegiance to scholarship, freedom of conscience, and democracy."<sup>16</sup> In the inaugural meeting with the Nazi commissar of Frankfurt, the new commissar, "launched into a tirade of abuse, filth, and four-letter words such as had rarely been heard in the barracks and never before in academia."<sup>17</sup> This display of outright anti-intellectualism and hatred prompted some professors to leave with their Jewish colleagues. It also prompted Drucker to make his decision to leave Germany.<sup>18</sup> Drucker's account of Frankfurt University's reaction to National Socialism demonstrates that not all professors were supportive of the regime. Frankfurt was, however, a liberal stronghold, some other universities—particularly in southern Germany—had more openly supportive scholars of National Socialism.

Despite the general support for National Socialism in German universities, it was not completely widespread. Some academics only supported the regime to protect themselves; for example, Bialis and Rabinbach argue that the "reason for the ostentatious displays of loyalty in 1933 was that academics were well aware that the Nazis had nothing but contempt for them."<sup>19</sup> Academics, particularly those involved in the humanities, knew they would be under close watch because of the anti-intellectual tendencies of the Nazi regime. Therefore, many of them adjusted their academic pursuits in order to serve the Nazi regime. Yet, there is a tough disinclination to be made between the scholars who served the regime to advance their personal position in academia and the ones who did so because they sincerely supported National Socialism.<sup>20</sup> This distinction is not black and white, and is not a distinction that can be objectively made. For a lot of German philosophers, Nazism "played at best a symbolic function."<sup>21</sup> This means that while many of them adjusted their academic pursuits on a surface level to serve the regime, this was only due to the flexibility of philosophy and the lack of a clear policy about the humanities under

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Bialis and Rabinbach, *Nazi Germany and the Humanities*, xiv.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, xxvii.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, xxviii.

National Socialism.<sup>22</sup> Despite the fact that some academics did not support the anti-intellectualism of the Nazi regime, the majority of them did not openly dissent against or resist the purging of Jewish academics from universities. Yvonne Sherratt states that “If any small number of professors disapproved of the ethos of the ruling regime, they certainly kept their views to themselves. If dissent could be discerned at all, it was only through omission, so whereas one group of philosophers were rabidly Nazi, others retreated into a realm of abstract scholarship, and as the years went by a silence descended like a thick fog.”<sup>23</sup> Therefore, in Nazi Germany, many students and professors were supportive of the regime and the ones who were not, stayed silent in order to protect themselves from persecution.

There is evidence that some students and academics did not stay silent in their protest against the regime. The University of Munich based White Rose, for example, wrote and published leaflets that openly criticized Hitler and the Nazis. Among this group was Kurt Huber, a professor of philosophy and musicology at the University of Munich during the Third Reich, who was “conservative, nationalistic and a romantic, perfect fodder for the Nazis.”<sup>24</sup> Huber did not subscribe to National Socialism, in fact, he “regarded Hitler as a destroyer of German values, not as their embodiment.”<sup>25</sup> As a conservative Catholic, Huber saw National Socialism as a despicable ideology and sometimes he could not hide his contempt. The student members of the White Rose sat in on Huber’s lectures where he commented on “the rights of individuals, the importance of religion and compassion to one’s fellow man.”<sup>26</sup> Huber used his expertise in the school of philosophy known as German Idealism to combat Nazism from the classroom. The German Idealists were philosophers that Nazi-supporter scholars like Heidegger used to justify National Socialism. Huber on the other hand, used the German Idealists to speak out against the Nazi regime. His lectures on German philosophy inspired Hans and Sophie Scholl to form the White Rose—a group that resisted National Socialism with their philosophically “idealistic” and “romantic” words.<sup>27</sup> The White

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, xv.

<sup>23</sup> Sherratt, *Hitler’s Philosophers*, 207.

<sup>24</sup> Sherratt, *Hitler’s Philosophers*, 213.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 215.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

Rose produced six leaflets that openly attacked and criticized the Nazi regime. These leaflets are evidence that there was some open resistance to National Socialism from within the German universities. Huber's inspiring words and hatred of Nazism sparked a flame in the hearts of the members belonging to the White Rose. He inspired them to use the intellectualism that the Nazis despised and speak out, rather than stay silent like the majority of the academic community.<sup>28</sup>

The first leaflet demonstrates that Huber's words had a strong effect on the Scholl siblings and their friends. In the opening lines of the first leaflet, the White Rose academically addresses their nation's silence and lack of action in the wake of National Socialism: "Goethe speaks of the Germans as a tragic people, like the Jews and the Greeks, but today it would appear that they are a spineless, will-less herd of hangers-on, who now—the marrow sucked out of their bones, robbed of their center stability—are waiting to be hounded to their destruction. So, it seems—but it is not so. Rather, by means of gradual, treacherous, systematic abuse, the system has put every man into a spiritual prison."<sup>29</sup> They took Huber's call to action and intellectually attacked National Socialism from within the University. In the second leaflet, they address the anti-intellectualism of National Socialism: "It is impossible to engage in intellectual discourse with National Socialism because it is not an intellectually defensible program."<sup>30</sup> The White Rose offered a scathing intellectual and emotional critique of National Socialism. The final leaflet, before the group was caught, was written by Kurt Huber himself. In the final leaflet, Huber calls on the German people to "fight against the party! Get out of the party organizations ... Get out of the lecture rooms of the SS corporals and sergeants and the party bootlickers! We want genuine learning and real freedom of opinion."<sup>31</sup> This final leaflet represents the legacy of the White Rose—their allegiance to the love of wisdom and their call for resistance. The White Rose's demand for justice demonstrates that not everyone at German universities supported National Socialism. In 1943, the core members of the White Rose were arrested, tried,

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<sup>28</sup> Sherratt, *Hitler's Philosophers*, 219.

<sup>29</sup> Inge Scholl, *The White Rose*, trans. Arthur R. Shultz (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1983), 74.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

and executed for their rebellious activities.<sup>32</sup> Their intellectual dissent from within the University became a symbol of resistance to the German people. Terence Prittie states that “Millions of Germans had become accustomed to reading between the lines, in a country where every printed word was supposed to be censored ... To most of these Germans the story of the ‘White Rose’ suggested an epic of courage and idealism.”<sup>33</sup> The White Rose was a loud voice of hope amongst the silence of German academics during the Third Reich. They used their intellectual abilities to combat National Socialism in opposition to the many academics who either supported the regime or stayed silent due to fear of persecution.

In Nazi Germany, the universities were generally very supportive of National Socialism. The universities already displayed anti-Semitic tendencies prior to 1933, both on the part of professors and students, as many any professors welcomed the regime in 1933 and did not speak out against the removal of their Jewish colleagues. The removal of Jewish faculty and the Nazification of the disciplines was seen as a steppingstone in Germany’s cultural revival. Heidegger pointed towards this in his rectoral address when stated that German universities have the duty and destiny to become the center of a national-spiritual transformation. Other academics, like those at Frankfurt University in 1933, found the National Socialist ideology disgusting; some left with their Jewish colleagues and others, like Peter Drucker, left the country. Drucker’s memoir shows that support for National Socialism and their anti-Semitism was not completely widespread. This is further demonstrated by the obfuscation of academic work within the humanities—these silent scholars did not speak out or leave, but they also did not openly endorse the regime. The silence and intentional muddying of the waters in German academia was not acceptable to everyone. Those like Kurt Huber and the White Rose at the University of Munich stood their ground in the face of the Third Reich’s anti-intellectualism by publicly attacking National Socialism’s cruelty and totalitarianism. Huber and the White Rose represented the loud minority that openly opposed Hitler and the Nazis from within the German universities. The White Rose and their activities demonstrate that not all voices in German academia were silenced by the regime.

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<sup>32</sup> Giles, *Students and National Socialism*, 299.

<sup>33</sup> Prittie, *Germans against Hitler*, 176.

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