

The history of Nazi Germany is a topic which, for the most part, is discussed with little variability in the story. In a majority of the narratives, Hitler's rise to power led to the somewhat mindless transformation of the masses into National Socialists who followed and obeyed without question. Certainly little credit is given to those groups who worked to challenge the popular ideals that Hitler eventually did inspire in the minds of a majority of Germans, either willingly or forcefully. One of the most recognized of these groups was *Die Weisse Rose*, or the White Rose. This group was composed mainly of students from the University of Munich, many of whom were at the time considered to be perfect Germans. These students spread flyers and pamphlets throughout Munich and various regions of Germany in an attempt to enlighten the people to the true evils of Hitler's regime. Simply their resistance is surprising enough; even more so is the fact that these so-called "perfect Germans" were able to see through Nazi teachings and doctrine and the fanfare to uncover the darker side of Hitler's rule. Various questions arise from the actions taken by the White Rose, particularly what conditions had to be present in Germany at the time for the young students to take such drastic action, and why the group would have continued to oppose the government even under the threat of arrest and execution. Overall, the actions of the White Rose could easily be attributed to the evils seen by the group's members and their unwillingness to live under the hateful rule of the Nazis.

In order to fully grasp the meaning behind the White Rose and their actions, it is first important to understand how the social structure of Germany changed as a result of Hitler's rise to power. As a way to force popular opinion, "the Nazis made sure that the immoral things they were introducing into the Third Reich were always made 'legal'

through such devices as the Enabling Act¹, [and] the Nuremburg Laws,”² among others. Hitler’s power and influence were derived mainly from the popular backing of the National Socialist movement, which had been used prior to 1933 to gain support of the Nazi Party. The goal of this movement was to form a national community which, in theory, would work toward a utopian goal. After the Nazi seizure of power in 1933, Hitler continued to use this ideology in order to bend opinions and thoughts toward the Nazis. At first, this came in the form of rallies and mass organizations; soon, however, the populace became disillusioned with these acts of nationalism.³ After the decline of public support, Hitler resorted to acts of coercion and terrorism in order to force popular opinion in favor of the Nazis and National Socialism. Nazi police forces, usually the Gestapo, “extended their hold on society by means of totalitarian controls and sanctions,”⁴ as a way to punish those whose opinions differed from the norm. The role of the Gestapo was arguably the most crucial obstacle faced by resistance groups such as the White Rose. Their presence “played a vital role in establishing and enforcing the strictest possible parameters on behavior, so that there emerged in Germany an extreme example of ... a ‘surveillance’ or ‘panoptic’ society.”⁵ Such strong measures used to form and contain public opinion make it difficult to believe that the members of the White Rose could have gone to such lengths to change the view of society.

¹ The Enabling Act of 1933 granted Hitler and his cabinet complete lawmaking powers. Adrienne Yerdon, “Hitler’s Successful Rise to Power and its Effects on the German Judiciary,” Ithaca College, <http://www.ithaca.edu/history-/journal/papers/fa03Hitler.htm>, (accessed November 9, 2012).

² The Nuremburg Laws, passed in 1935, officially took away the citizenship of German Jews and forbade marriage between Jews and non-Jews. Christian Leitz, *The Third Reich*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 2000), 200. David R. Biesel, “Building the Nazi Mindset,” *Journal of Pshychohistory* 37, no. 4 (Spring 2010): 368, <http://-web.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.umw.edu/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=8ccb115f-88af-41a2-93a7-055b703b-6edd%40sessionmgr112&vid=6&hid=104>, (accessed November 9, 2012).

³ Detlev J. K. Peukert, *Inside Nazi Germany*, trans. Richard Deveson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 187-188.

⁴ Peukert, *Inside Nazi Germany*, 198.

⁵ Leitz, 183.

Aside from the role of the Gestapo in enforcing public opinion, Hitler employed an arguably more ingenious tool for creating a consensus among the people of Germany. Rather than try and sway the opinions and political convictions of the adult masses, he turned to the children of the country. By creating programs such as the *Jungvolk* and *Hitlerjugend*⁶, as well as the *Jugendmadel* and *Bund Deutscher Madel*,⁷ Hitler attempted to create a generation of Germans who would carry only the ideals and opinions of perfect Aryans. Hans Scholl and Sophie Scholl were members of these youth groups. At the time of the Nazi takeover, Hans was fourteen and Sophie was twelve. As with every German child of the time, the Scholl children believed they were a part of the movement which would reunite the divided country.⁸ At the start, Hitler Youth programs were fairly popular, 47 percent of boys formed the *Jungvolk* and 38 percent of boys formed the *Hitlerjugend* by the end of 1933. By 1935, however, participation had begun to grow weaker and as a way to maintain conformity, the Hitler Youth Law of 1935 made youth service compulsory.⁹ In a way, the Hitler Youth groups were extensions of the Gestapo in that they were used to curb opinions to fit Nazi doctrine. In one instance, a group of Hitler Youths dressed in full uniform entered the classrooms of teachers not yet “coordinated” into the movement and “provided new guidelines for teachers, reminding them that although Hitler Youth were pupils, their authority was not to be impaired in the

⁶ *Jungvolk* refers to the youth group of German boys between the ages of 10-14, *Hitlerjugend* also known as HJ refers to the group of German boys ages 14-18. “Hitler’s Boy Soldiers 1939-1945,” The History Place, <http://www.historyplace.com/worldwar2/hitleryouth/hj-boy-soldiers.htm> (accessed November 9, 2012).

⁷ *Jugendmadel* refers to the group of girls ages 10-14, *Bund Deutscher Madel* refers to the group of girls ages 15-21. Detlev J. K. Peukert, “Young People: For or Against the Nazis?” 35, no. 10 (Fall 1985): 17, <http://web.ebsco-host.com.ezproxy.umw.edu/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=e39bf055-c17d-4d15-a886-174954b65757%40-sessionmgr104&vid=4&hid=104>, (accessed November 9, 2012).

⁸ Annette Dumbach and Jud Newborn, *Sophie Scholl & the White Rose*, (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2006), 24.

⁹ Peukert, “Young People: For or Against the Nazis?” 17.

eyes of their classmates.”¹⁰ Knowing the role of the Hitler Youth programs, and the Scholl’s positions in them, it is hard to imagine how or why they would have formed a movement which went against everything they were taught within the programs.

There are several reasons why the White Rose could have been created despite the social conditions of the time. The most immediate in relation to the group’s founder, Hans Scholl, is that his father, Robert Scholl, was a strict opponent of Hitler and his Nazi ideals. Speaking of Hitler’s acts of suppressing individuals opposed to National Socialism, Robert told Hans, “This is war. War against the defenseless individual, war against the happiness and freedom of his children—a terrible crime.”¹¹ His disregard for the punishments threatened by the Gestapo was highly unusual for the time and, in some cases almost resulted in his children being punished. Even after joining their respective Hitler Youth programs, the Scholls continued to share some of their father’s opinions and stubbornness. Robert Scholl despised Nazi policing of ideas, especially in regards to literature. After Hitler outlawed all Jewish literature, Robert refused to empty his bookshelves of the illegal books. Hans Scholl was caught with a book by Jewish author Stefan Zweig and subsequently the book was confiscated.¹² A short time later, Hans helped the Hitler Youth troop over which he was *Fähnleinführer* to make a flag for an upcoming parade through the streets of Ulm.¹³ When a higher group leader saw the flag and began to harass the young member holding it, Hans marched forward and punched the leader, ending in his being stripped of his rank. This was the start of his

¹⁰ Dumbach, 27.

¹¹ Dumbach, 36.

¹² Dumbach, 34.

¹³ *Fähnleinführer* is German word for a squad leader.

opposition.¹⁴ Sophie was just as steadfast in her opinions as her brother. As with her brother and the works of Zweig, Sophie held fast to her opinion that Heinrich Heine, whose works were forbidden, was one of the greatest German writers in history, even saying, "Whoever doesn't know Heine does not know German literature."¹⁵ Although the influence of the HJ and BDM was strong and sought to create a unified ideology among German youths, Hans and Sophie Scholl were able to keep hold of their own opinions thanks in large part to the refusal of their father to follow blindly behind Nazi ideology.

Along with their father's influence, the Scholls' experience in the war effort may also have had a profound impact on their willingness to risk their lives. The Hitler Youth groups were not only useful in forming the opinions of young Germans; the boys were often trained in anti-aircraft and anti-tank warfare, while the girls were used to care for the boys; it was not uncommon for boys to be drafted into the German army. In 1940, with the start of British air raids against Berlin, special training camps were set up to train boys ages sixteen to eighteen in the use of pistols, machine-guns, hand grenades and bazookas.¹⁶ By 1943, the German army was stretched so thin that all able-bodied Germans had been drafted into the army; as a result, after January 26, anti-aircraft batteries consisted solely of boys under age 14.¹⁷ In 1937, Hans began his obligatory military service with alternating time at university. In 1940, he was sent to the front in France as a medic.¹⁸ This view of the front lines and the horrors wreaked across

¹⁴ Dumbach, 34-35.

¹⁵ Dumbach, 38.

¹⁶ "Hitler's Boy Soldiers," 2.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Dumbach, 43-44.

Europe by the Nazi army only served to strengthen Hans' stance against the Nazis. For Sophie's part, she paid her price to the country through the National Labor Service. Sophie spent six months at a work camp where she was sent into fields to help farmers whose labor supply had run short; after this she spent another six months in a kindergarten attached to a munitions factory.¹⁹ Although her experiences were less traumatizing than Hans' in that she did not see the military horrors of war, she was able to see how society was changed to fit the Nazi agenda. Both siblings saw first hand what the ideals and actions of Nazi Germany did to society and saw the affects of war, thus strengthening their position against the Nazis.

Assuming the power of the Nazis was so strong, how could the White Rose possibly have hoped to shift public opinion? Their main form of action was to distribute flyers within Munich, essentially their base, and mail them across the rest of the country. These flyers called to question the morals of the Nazi party. There were a total of seven leaflets, six were published and a seventh was in its draft stage when the members were arrested and executed in 1943. These leaflets had many different messages, although the overall meaning was to unite the Germans against Hitler. For example, the second leaflet has one of the strongest messages of this, comparing Hitler and his regime to a cancerous tumor and claiming that "it is our task to find one another again, to spread information from person to person, to keep a steady purpose and to allow ourselves no rest until the last man is persuaded of the urgent need of this struggle against this system."²⁰ The third leaflet was aimed at the moral integrity of the German

¹⁹ Dumbach, 13.

²⁰ "White Rose – Leaflet 2," libcom.org, <http://libcom.org/library/white-rose-leaflet-2>, (accessed November 10, 2012).

people; it questions why the Germans could have stood by and watched the obvious evils of the Nazis.²¹ These leaflets were used as a way to uncover loopholes and failures in the Nazi system and to show the true evil that lay beneath Hitler's captivating words. Unfortunately, the leaflets were also the downfall of the White Rose. On February 18, 1943, Hans and Sophie Scholl were arrested after being caught by a custodian as they dropped leaflets over a balcony at the University of Munich.²² Hans and Sophie, along with Christoph Probst were sentenced to death on February 22, 1943 and executed the same day.²³ Over the course of the year, the remaining members of the White Rose were arrested and either imprisoned or executed on charges of treason. The members of the White Rose risked their lives for what they believed to be a just cause. Although it ended with their deaths, they will forever be remembered as resistors against the evils of Nazi Germany.

The members of the White Rose were able to see past the pomp and circumstance of the Nazi Party as a result of their own personal experiences as well as the influences of those such as Robert Scholl. By spreading leaflets throughout Germany, the group attempted to bring an end to the hold that Hitler had over the German people. Although their actions led to their downfall, the White Rose must always be remembered as a symbol of the ability of a people to unite against oppression and evil.

²¹ "White Rose – Leaflet 3," libcom.org, <http://libcom.org/library/white-rose-leaflet-3>, (accessed November 10, 2012).

²² Dumbach, 145.

²³ Dumbach, 159-161.

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