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“You see it too simply:” Freya von Moltke Looks Back on the Kreisau Circle

Rachel Freudenburg, with Andreas Thomas, Jenny Gesualdo, and Priscilla Loh

During the Third Reich, Freya and Helmuth von Moltke’s home in Kreisau served as a gathering place for a group of Germans who actively resisted Hitler. These friends, who later became known collectively as the Kreisau Circle, began making plans for a democratic German government to be put into place after Hitler’s demise.¹ At the time of the group’s founding, however, the mere suggestion of the Führer’s downfall was considered an act of treason. On 17 March 2002, Andreas Thomas, Jenny Gesualdo, and I, Rachel Freudenburg, interviewed Freya von Moltke at her home in Four Wells, Vermont in order to learn more about the Kreisau Circle.² Throughout the interview, Countess von Moltke returned again and again to the phrase, “you see it too simply,” a mantra that directed our attention to the incredible complexity of the materials—the lives, events, relationships, objects, governments, institutions, and places—that are the object of historians’ curiosity. Is not every historical summary, to some degree, an oversimplification? And must we not be wary of judging and interpreting the past through the ideals, values and beliefs of the present, even though these are, to be sure, our only means of approaching history?

Freya von Moltke was born in Cologne in 1911 to Ada and Carl Theodor Deichmann. Her father was the director of the Deichmann Bank until 1931, when the institution went under. She had two

brothers, Carl and Hans Deichmann, who were “good anti-Nazis” just like their sister. In 1930, Freya passed the Abitur, the German university entrance exam, and began studying law. While vacationing in Austria, she met Helmuth James Graf von Moltke, a fellow law student and heir to Kreisau, the Moltke family estate in Silesia. In 1931, Freya and Helmuth married and, after spending some time in Berlin where she finished up her law degree (Dr. jur., 1935) at the Humboldt University, the newlyweds moved east to Kreisau.³ “I had not much inkling of what was to come,” von Moltke explains.

By the end of 1945, the unimaginable had come to pass. Freya had joined the fight against Hitler, she had risked her own safety, had lost her husband, and had been evacuated from her home. Her postwar accomplishments are equally impressive: Freya von Moltke has authored several books on her life in Kreisau, the Kreisau Circle, and Helmuth James von Moltke. Von Moltke has received numerous awards for both her role in the resistance to Hitler and her important work as a chronicler of the Kreisau Circle.⁴ Today, through her involvement with the Kreisau Foundation, she continues to champion the cause of intercultural understanding in Europe. We did not know what to expect at her home, but the person who greeted us offered homemade applesauce and the best beet soup we had ever tasted. Was this grandmotherly figure the same woman who had stood up to Hitler and fought ferociously for her husband’s life? Or had we been seeing things too simply?



Frau Freya von Moltke at her home in Vermont.(Andreas Thomas)

Kreisau

Freya von Moltke, whose encounter with Kreisau has lasted the better part of a lifetime, always describes the place with more than a hint of fondness in her voice: “Kreisau is a small village in Silesia which used to be East Germany, and as a consequence of the Second World War, is now Polish. It was what one used to call an estate of the family von Moltke, but it was also a beautiful, big, running farm.”⁵ She was immediately enchanted with the place, for reasons that had little to do with its landscape and innate charm: “Well, I was very much in love, and therefore I didn’t care where I was going. I wanted to be near that person, Helmuth James von Moltke, and anything that was around him and of importance to him was important to me. So my change-over from western Germany to eastern Germany was very quick—although the people in West Germany said, ‘Oh, that poor child is going so far East.’ It didn’t seem that way to me.” She adds that, “it was a different life because I was a city girl,” yet as she reflects upon the place and its beauty, one realizes that nothing suited this city girl more than the rural lifestyle.

The first few years of her marriage were spent in Berlin witnessing the events leading to the Third Reich and soon, “the political situation in Germany became very difficult. It was practically civil war before the Nazis came to power because there were not only the Nazis’ semi-military groups, but there were also military groups from the Left. It was generally really chaotic in Germany, and so we saw the rise, and we witnessed the ups and downs because the National Socialists won in the elections and also lost in the elections, and so it was a long, downward path that led to National Socialism.”

The von Moltkes often appear as some of the few upper-class people who, right from the start, opposed Nazism, with most active resisters only turning against the regime quite late in the war.⁶ According to Freya von Moltke, this is a much too heroic view of historical reality: “There were quite a lot of people who were opposed, but of course the methods of the Nazis pushed them into the underground, or killed them, or put them into concentration camps.”⁷

Indeed, the von Moltkes merely belonged to what remained of the opposition to Nazism after the Nazis were through murdering, imprisoning, torturing and ostracizing those who did not share their views. There was ample opportunity to leave Germany, but the von Moltkes chose to stay instead. Helmuth's mother hailed from South Africa, and in 1934, Helmuth and Freya visited family there. "Actually we went to South Africa and of course there they said don't go back but we wanted to go back. First of all because of the farm. Second because Helmuth was the eldest in a group of five and his parents had died or were dying. And last, and that was the most important reason, Helmuth went back as an opponent. He wanted to be an opponent of National Socialism in Germany."

Even as opponents of German fascism, the von Moltkes were, at first, unprepared for what would eventually happen, "because we were not victims. We were actually treated extremely well because the Nazis honored very much one of the ancestors of my husband." This ancestor was the Field Marshall von Moltke whose efforts on the battlefield during the Bismarck era (1866, 1867, 1870) had earned the family not only the right to use the titles "count" and "countess," but also a prominent place in German history.⁸ "Helmuth was not a direct ancestor but we were the next in line to him [the field marshal], and he had won two wars for Germany, and the Nazis admired him greatly. My husband was the legal heir and therefore they treated us with respect. No doubt about it." Partially as a result of his family's heritage, Helmuth von Moltke was promoted into the Nazi government's High Command—a position that he exploited as much as possible to undermine Nazi lawlessness.

One of the many paradoxes of the German resistance movement is that those who were most firmly established in the bureaucracy of the Third Reich were in the best position to dismantle it. As time went on, though, Helmuth von Moltke's opportunities for on-the-job resistance diminished drastically. He was no longer able to assist Jewish colleagues or to work for Jewish clients, and his repeated attempts to urge the government to abide by the rule of law and humanitarian standards were, increasingly, an exercise in futility. When it became clear that clandestine activity was in order, Freya backed her husband unconditionally. "Well, he told me once that he was going to seriously involve himself and said more or less, 'this you have to know, and I can only do it if you are with me.' Of course I

was with him, so I said, yes, I thought we should do it.” And so, in 1940, Helmuth and Peter von Yorck, another Count from the Eastern regions, began laying the groundwork for what was to become the Kreisau Circle. Carefully and cautiously, the two made contacts and found people who shared their vision of a non-fascist Germany.

The Kreisau Circle

Freya von Moltke describes the process of assembling what was to become the Kreisau Circle as nothing short of arduous. Peter von Yorck and Helmuth von Moltke carefully sought out “people who objected, who were opposed to National Socialism and were trying to envisage a better Germany beyond National Socialism, which at the time seemed completely impossible. It all started when Hitler had his greatest successes in France in 1940; it was a way of keeping one’s own integrity intact and finding something to oppose at this time of frustration and despair, because opposition—I have to make this quite clear—was absolutely illegal and impossible. There was nothing in Nazi Germany like free speech. [...] To bring together such a group was in itself a big undertaking. It took a lot of time, but also a lot of confidence, a lot of trust. People who would go in for such things were in danger, and so it was a very demanding question to ask somebody to join.”

The Kreisau Circle’s agenda was to prepare for X-day, the day after Hitler’s complete military defeat, by having a plan for a new nation in place and ready to be implemented. Freya von Moltke explains: “the goal of the Kreisau Circle was to think through what a better Germany would have to be organized like. After all, the one attempt to practice democracy had failed. The Nazis had been able to overcome the Weimar Republic. So the big question was: ‘How can I make democrats out of Germans who had not been able, really, to run a democracy properly?’ And they had very diverse ideas, and some of these ideas, if you read what was written down, seem inappropriate today but the questions they asked were all the right questions. Questions such as how to build a new democracy that has many sides to it. How to build a new economy and whether it should be free or not free. What should the universities be like? There were thousands of questions, of course. And the group itself had to be like a democracy. It had to have opposing opponents. They were all opponents of National Socialism, but within the group itself, they had

different political views. We had capitalists and socialists. We had Catholics and Protestants. We had younger people and older people. This was a carefully brought together group.” Even the group’s two main leaders, Peter von Yorck and Helmuth von Moltke, who were both members of the Eastern German aristocracy, were on opposite sides of the political spectrum: “Helmuth was interested in socialism, to put it mildly. And Peter von Yorck was much more conservative and his friends were much more conservative. So the two between them brought really an interesting lot of people together.”

At the center were the von Moltkes, Helmuth and Freya, and the Yorck von Wartenburgs, Peter and Marion, but the group was actually a loosely connected network of friends, rather than an actual association with a set membership list. Even so, a review of its “members” does reflect the political diversity for which Yorck and von Moltke strove. Jesuit priests (Alfred Delp and Lothar König) were brought into dialogue with representatives from the Protestant Churches (Harald Poelchau and Eugen Gerstenmeier); Communists (Julius Leber) faced off with Nazis (Fritz-Dietlof Graf von der Schulenburg); members of the aristocracy (Hans-Bernd von Haefthen and Adam von Trott zu Solz) worked with union organizers (Hermann Maass and Wilhelm Leuschner). The group also included individuals from several different areas of expertise including economists (Carl Dietrich von Trotha and Margrit von Trotha) and educators (Adolf Reichwein). Finally, a list of participants would be incomplete without the names Carlo Mierendorff, Theo Haubach, Gustav Dahrendorf, Paulus van Husen, and Theodor Steltzer.⁹



Graf Yorck von Wartenburg, a conspirator in the July 1944 assassination attempt against Hitler, at the People's Court. (Rijksinstituut voor Oorlogsdocumentatie)

Interestingly, the friends never called themselves the “Kreisau Circle.” The name, which came into use during the Nazis’ investigations into the groups’ activities,¹⁰ was derived from the three large meetings held at the Moltke family estate in 1941–1942.¹¹ As with any label, “Kreisau Circle” both is and is not accurate. Freya von Moltke explains that prior to these three large gatherings, there were actually “hundreds of small meetings that took place in Berlin, and in Munich but mostly in Berlin, and mostly in the apartment of our friends the Yorcks.” Because of the dangers associated with their work, it was only possible to meet in twos and threes, and even then, fears of being discovered were incessant. Eventually, larger assemblies became necessary, for “it was important to have a chance to integrate what the different smaller circles had worked on. So these bigger meetings were organized in order to formulate what had been done and to get agreement on what had been done, and Kreisau was a very good place to do it because we people in the country were used to having big weekend visits and nobody much cared or paid attention. So when Helmuth said he wanted to have big weekends with his coworkers, it seemed quite natural. And so we had these three meetings, but only three. And it’s quite extraordinary that the group should have the name it does because it should really be named after the small house of the Yorcks in Berlin, but on the other hand these integrative meetings were important. And also the big driver in that group was always my husband, Helmuth. He could get them all to work, so to speak. He complained when there was no progress made in the smaller groups. He pushed them and got us all together in Kreisau.”

Christian Resistance?

As early as the 1940s, the Kreisauers were criticized for being long

on idealism and short on pragmatism; however, it must be kept in mind that there was very little one could actually accomplish as a resister in the Third Reich. As Hans Mommsen points out, a good measure of idealism and otherworldliness was perhaps an intellectual prerequisite for the decision to join the resistance.¹² Today, historians speculate that ideological differences between the group's members would have made taking any concrete step nearly impossible.¹³ Nevertheless, one admires the seriousness with which the Kreisau Circle, within a nation that sought to eradicate difference by the most violent means possible, thought about ways to include people of different backgrounds in governmental and social institutions.

Freya von Moltke explains that as time went on, the utopianism that inspired the members of the Kreisau Circle became more and more strongly rooted in European Christianity: "The majority of the people had not gone into this question of Christianity. One took it for granted, learned it in school, and went on with it into life. But the question became much more important with the fact that they really put everything of their lives into [the resistance] and had to face death and were thinking about why they were undertaking such an endeavor. The answers to all these questions brought them much closer to a Christianity they already sort of vaguely belonged to. Even the Socialists, who were the farthest away from thinking on Christian terms, became much more involved with Christianity while all this was going on. So the group decided that the past of Western Europe had been built on Christianity, and felt that the future should also be built on Christianity."

Again, we should not interpret Christianity—a broad term if ever there was one—too simply. The connections between Germany's Churches and the Nazi government have become notorious indeed. What did Christianity mean for the members of the Kreisau Circle? What was the link between their spiritual lives and the ideals that guided their plans for Germany's future? One obvious connection is their agreement that religious freedom (including the "freedom" to be Jewish) should be protected by the state.¹⁴ Additionally, the Kreisau Circle based its plans for Germany's future on principles such as individual liberty, the rule of law, and the state's obligation to protect the individual's rights to peace, property, family, work, and education. Interestingly, though, individual rights did not come without some duties. The members of the Kreisau circle believed that

each person should be involved in political processes at the grass roots level. (If we fantasize, for a brief moment, that we live in a world where everyone is ensnared in the bickering and backbiting of local politics, it is not difficult to see why the group was often castigated for its social utopianism.) The government imagined by the Kreisau Circle featured strong centralization with numerous well-developed, smaller political units. Because of the failures of the Weimar Republic, the members of the Kreisau Circle were reluctant to embrace democracy wholeheartedly. Nonetheless, they did believe that people should be politically active and needed to be trained to think beyond their own immediate interests. Involvement in self-government, they proposed, was one way to achieve this end.¹⁵ They theorized that a government based on small, local groups would encourage the political integration of individuals into their communities. Perhaps the encouragement of a certain communal mentality, whereby persons are taught to empathize with and take responsibility for others without giving up their own individuality, reflects the Kreisau Circle's version of Christianity.

Throughout the interview, we returned again and again to the theme of Christianity, and as we did so, the various meanings this word had for the people of the Kreisau Circle came into sharper focus. Interestingly, our conversation on Helmuth's attitudes toward children fed into thoughts on the way he, and others, began to understand their activities as a specifically Christian pursuit. Freya von Moltke explained that Helmuth had not wanted any children, but that she had. In the end, she prevailed and had two sons, Helmuth Caspar, who was born in 1937, and Konrad, born in 1941. I had trouble imagining Helmuth being against the idea of children because in the photos that survive, he looks like such a doting father. "Oh, but you see it too simply," Freya von Moltke began; "he loved children, but he found life a difficult thing and he didn't want personally to be responsible for life on this earth. But he changed his mind on that, too, and that's quite a good example to show you how the question of Christianity became important. He was not thinking in the same terms anymore; he no longer thought he was the one who did everything. So later on before he died he was very grateful and happy that he left me with two very nice little boys." For Helmuth, coming closer to Christianity meant acknowledging individual limitations and accepting the idea that some higher power was

perhaps in control. Paradoxically, the recognition of limitations enabled oppositional activity.

At other points, Mrs. von Moltke spoke of how her own political attitudes, and those of her friends, changed dramatically during the Third Reich. "We became more public-minded, so to speak, although we could not be public. But our interests became wider and more ambitious. We really wanted to change Germany and for that you needed to have many friends, of course." The resisters of the Kreisau Circle saw themselves as friends first, and political activists second; their friendships were founded on the absolute trust that was necessary in the resistance, and their group was unified through their shared idealistic beliefs. Perhaps the analogy of a religious community is not entirely far-fetched.

Women in the Kreisau Circle

Although I had been seeing things too simply throughout most of our conversation, once we turned to the subject of women's lives, I felt I had seen things in too complicated a fashion. Outfitted with the typical preconceptions of a middle-class, working woman at the beginning of the twenty-first century, I asked the Silesian Countess how she had managed, back in the 1930s and 1940s, to juggle her many different duties, roles, and obligations. After all, she had been a mother of two young children, a political activist, and the de facto manager of a farm with over 60 employees all at the same time. She answered, "Oh, that was very easy. You know there was a big background," by which she meant a support staff that assisted in all aspects of her work in Kreisau. "My role was easily defined and quite easily filled, too. I had no difficulties whatsoever, since the context of Kreisau was a very peaceful one. We were busy producing food, and children were busy growing up, and visitors went and came and went, and it was just keeping all these friends together, which was a very female task. And now tasks for females have widened enormously but it's still a very attractive female task to be on the farm and, well, not entirely running it, by no means, there were people who understood much more, but to keep it all together somehow. And that's what I did, and I had no trouble; it was not difficult to do it, not even in the Nazi time."

Accounts and opinions of the roles played by women in the German resistance as a whole vary greatly. In some retellings of

history, women's names are conspicuously absent, even from the indexes of books that are otherwise full to overflowing with detailed information. On the other extreme, feminist journalists and historians claim that the entire German resistance rested on the unique efforts of women. The truth, however, seems to contain much more variety than these two extremes might indicate. Vera Laska, in her book on *Women in the Resistance and in the Holocaust*, points out that in many resistance groups, women operated on an equal footing with men, and even that some essential tasks were entrusted to women because it would have been impossible for men to carry them out.¹⁶ Intelligence missions, for example, were frequently performed by women because they aroused less suspicion. But this is a pattern that may not hold true for all resistance groups. Another way women participated was in their largely invisible work as supporters, as people who "kept the friends together," as Freya von Moltke put it, or who made sure that the men of the resistance had food to eat during times of war and scarcity!

The degree of participation by women in the Kreisau Circle runs the gamut from actively contributing to the plans being laid for the future of Germany on the one hand, to the wife's relatively apolitical role on the other. In general, Mrs. von Moltke sees the women of Kreisau as wives who "supported their husbands" but for the most part stayed out of the limelight. When asked whether she believed that the resistance could have existed without the contributions of women, Freya von Moltke responded, once again, "that is too simply put. I don't think [the men] could have done what they did without women supporting them, and the support from us was very good." Her point is well taken: support should not necessarily be confused with actual political activity, though both were essential to the functioning of the resistance. "Most of the women, the wives, did not know what was going on; some of them were somewhere else. They were not together with their husbands at that time because of the war so they could not take part in [the resistance work]. And as far as they did take part, as Marion Yorck did, and as I myself did, they still could not do the planning. I myself felt completely incompetent. How could I dare to make statements about how parliament should work in the future Germany after the end of Nazism; these were questions that I was not able to answer."

Von Moltke's self-effacing demeanor causes her to undervalue her

own accomplishments, but who can objectively judge him- or herself? Admirably, though, her sense of modesty does not prevent her from appreciating the achievements of other women resisters. She is one of the few chroniclers of the Kreisau Circle to list Margrit von Trotha, Irene Yorck von Wartenburg, and Marion Yorck von Wartenburg as members. She also mentioned von Trotha during the interview: "One of us, Margrit von Trotha, was a trained economist, and she actually did plan with her husband in the group, in one of the small get-togethers in Berlin, but she never came to Kreisau." As these remarks show, it is difficult to make generalizations regarding women's participation, even in a group as small as the Kreisau Circle. Indeed, most of the women associated with this circle were wives of its more active and more visible male members; however, even von Moltke must correct her initial conclusion that women were not involved in the planning by mentioning Margrit von Trotha, the economist. Additionally, Marion Yorck von Wartenburg's memoirs demonstrate that she, too, was intimately involved in the Kreisau Circle's planning at almost every level.¹⁷

Today, some feminists seem frustrated with Freya von Moltke's adherence to more traditional feminine roles, but can she really be faulted for choosing a life that was, for her, both exciting and fulfilling? However, it is not merely her obvious enthusiasm for her career as wife, mother, and farm manager that raises the hackles of today's urban, career-oriented women. Alison Owings, for example, calls von Moltke "humble to the point of inaccuracy" (Owings 245). Indeed, perhaps Owings has a point: "He [Helmuth] was very wise in not telling me everything," Freya remarks. "I didn't know many details [while] living in Kreisau. I couldn't know everything that was going on. Although if you read his letters, he did report very exactly whom he was meeting. But, also, maybe he did it because he himself wanted to keep a diary on what he was doing, and his diary was writing to me everyday. But I never interfered in the details of what he was doing in his anti-Nazi work." Surely there is a significant difference between keeping a diary and desiring to share the details, the very fabric of one's day-to-day existence, with the person one loves. Taken as a whole, the letters, written while Helmuth was working in Berlin and Freya was running operations in Kreisau, bear touching testimony to his deep commitment to her and to their marriage. Unfortunately, Freya only considered *his* letters worthy of being

saved for posterity and did not preserve the missives she wrote to him.

On the other hand, perhaps this explanation, which attributes von Moltke's modesty to the stereotypically feminine tendency to downplay one's own accomplishments, is not entirely to the point. Perhaps Freya von Moltke's "modesty" has more to do with her completely sobering view of history than anything else: "You have to realize how little the German resistance could do anyway," Freya protests, "and that's why it's not recognized very much, neither in Germany nor anywhere else. You can't ask me what women could do, because we women couldn't do anything, and the men couldn't really do very much either. That's the trouble."

The End of the Kreisau Circle?

On 19 January 1944, Helmuth von Moltke was arrested because he warned an acquaintance that he was on the Nazis' wanted list. "Then the acquaintance was arrested (because getting away was very difficult in Germany), and he gave Helmuth's name as the one who warned him; and so the Gestapo took Helmuth, too." After this, Freya recalls, "I was cut out completely, that was of course absolutely necessary. I heard nothing anymore about what was going on. I didn't know if anything was still going on because I was in much too dangerous a position, and I could be interrogated, and then how would I stand up to that? I heard, I knew nothing anymore." She continued living at Kreisau, and she was allowed to visit Helmuth once a month and to write to him three times per week. Although this was not much, she recalls, "it seemed helpful to me. I said that I needed to talk about the farm and that we needed his advice and I would come with books to show him and to work. They gave us two hours to sit next to each other and I brought the books, but we never actually dealt with them. We talked of other things."



Helmut Graf von Moltke, at the core of the Kreisau Circle, on trial for the assassination plot against Hitler. (Library of Congress)

Six months after Helmuth was arrested, on 20 July 1944, Colonel von Stauffenberg attempted to assassinate Hitler with a briefcase bomb, but failed. Freya von Moltke first learned about it “through the newspaper,” and recalls that her initial reaction was one of shock, “because I knew we were involved. I knew at once! There was the name of Peter von Yorck immediately, who was at the headquarters, and some [others] of our group were at the headquarters, too. So I knew we were involved. Then the question only was, how much did they find out? It took a while,” she explains, but eventually, the Nazis did find out that Helmuth “was very closely allied to [the conspiracy] and after that I heard nothing anymore, no more letters. So then I knew. Also Helmuth had, at the last meeting, said to me that he would let me know how bad the situation was by saying a certain piece of land should be ploughed one hundred percent, that would be very bad. Fifty percent would show the position and its seriousness. And then he wrote to me in a letter that three quarters should be ploughed. So I knew already it was very dangerous. And then the letters stopped entirely.”¹⁸

Amidst all of this darkness, there were “wonderful miracles that happened during those times.” Freya and Helmuth were granted one such miracle when he was transferred to a new prison. Of all the penitentiaries in the Third Reich, Helmuth was placed in the one where Harald Poelchau, a member of the Kreisau Circle, was chaplain. “So he [Poelchau] started carrying our letters in and out, as if we were writing everyday. I spent most of those last months in Berlin, because again my background allowed this. My sister-in-law, Asta, looked after my children when I was gone, and of course we still had the cook. All those things were different, and so I could be away, and I spent all those months in Berlin.” During these months, she corresponded with Helmuth and worked tirelessly on his defense. One day, she went to Poelchau’s apartment to write to Helmuth, as she did practically every day. But this day was different, for at around three o’clock, Poelchau came home and told her that Helmuth was dead. The date was 23 January 1945. Five decades later, it is not necessarily easy for Freya von Moltke to talk about these events. “But, oh, that is so detailed,” she protests, when I encourage her to tell us more about this fateful day.

Helmuth was put to death for knowing the people who had attempted to assassinate Hitler. Since he was in jail while plans for the dictator’s elimination were being hatched, he himself was not directly involved. Throughout the early 1940s, his own position on the question—should Hitler be terminated?—was complicated. “Of course he wanted Hitler dead,” Freya explains, “but he also wanted him dead at the right time. He thought if he gets killed before the war is over then the same thing [as happened] at the end of the First World War might happen again. Back then, the Germans said, ‘we were never defeated. It was the politicians who did it, who put a dagger into the back of the troops. The military were all really mistreated by the politicians and we could have won the war.’ So he thought the only chance for the future of Germany was for Hitler to really destroy himself and for the Allies to win the war.” If the *Dolchstosslegende*, or “Stab in the Back Legend,” were resurrected, Germany as a nation would not be inclined to reform itself and critique its fascist elements. Instead, it would more likely present itself as a nation that had been “right all along” in following the Nazis. Of course, this was only one of many considerations that had to be pondered carefully before any action could be taken. There were more practical matters, as well, and

everyone feared that “they would probably not succeed, because they had to have somebody armed to do it and how do you get at Hitler? And the generals who could have done it were, as my husband called them, hopeless. They would never do it. And so it was actually [Stauffenberg], a colonel and a cousin of Peter von Yorck, who in the end did it.”

Even after the doomed assassination attempt, Helmuth’s position on the issue remained “difficult, and it stayed so to the end. In prison, where two or three of the group were together, they would talk about such matters on their daily walks in the courtyard. They still discussed this question: was it right to have tried it? Would it have been better to let the war run its course and wait for the very end? But [even before that] the group always discussed whether to get rid of him, and how to get rid of him. And they said, ‘the sooner we get him killed, the fewer have to die.’ And as matter of fact, most of the losses in human life came after the attempt on 20 July 1944; the greatest number of people had to die after July 1944 and throughout 1945. It was really all very tragic.”



Members of the Kreisau Circle on trial. (Library of Congress)

Just as women participated in the resistance in many different capacities, they also experienced Nazi persecution and the demise of the Third Reich in a variety of ways. As Freya von Moltke explains, “the Communists suffered the most bloody persecution, and there also the women were killed.” After the attempt on Hitler’s life, many women of the Kreisau Circle lost their husbands and were imprisoned themselves. “Women were put into jail but were released after three, four months, and I think it had to do with the fact that it wasn’t popular for these women to be in jail. They probably all were known as fairly normal creatures and why should they be made into criminals? It was toward the end of the war, and the Nazis could not risk that, so all came free.”¹⁹

The story of women in the resistance is also often a story of widowhood, but as Mrs. von Moltke points out, “you have to realize that not only did the resisters die but millions of ordinary soldiers died. So the life of Germany after the end of the war was very much in the hands of single women; their predicament played a big role. In that respect we were no different from other women. Everybody had to try and make their way again. We were all challenged to lead more independent lives.”

Since the women of the Kreisau Circle survived the end of the Third Reich in greater numbers than did their male counterparts, they were entrusted with telling their group’s history, and their contributions in this area are impressive to say the least. Freya von Moltke, Rosemarie Reichwein, and Marion Yorck von Wartenburg all published their experiences of the resistance in memoir form, and have given historians valuable insights into the Kreisau Circle.²⁰ In addition to these memoirs, Annedore Leber published a two-volume set of biographical portraits of resistance fighters from the Kreisau Circle and many other resistance groups.²¹ Finally, it was often women who had the foresight to preserve actual documents and letters that, today, bear witness to the extraordinary work accomplished by those who opposed Hitler. This was not always an easy task. Freya von Moltke, for example, moved Helmuth’s letters from one building to another during the war’s chaotic last weeks. At one point, they were even hidden in a beehive. “I got stung a little bit,” she admits, “but as every beekeeper knows, beehives have two compartments. The bees retire into one compartment during the winter. You hang up frames in the upper part and these are ready for them to use. Then

they start building; they build comb up into them, and some are filled up with honey. But that's all empty in the wintertime because they only use the lower part, so I could put Helmuth's letters in the upper part." Many years after they emerged from the beehive, von Moltke began the task of transcribing and publishing these letters. The resulting book, *Briefe an Freya (Letters to Freya)*, was honored with the Geschwister-Scholl prize.

For those most intimately involved in resistance activities, it is difficult to name the date when it was all over; indeed for many, the resistance will never end. In one of his many essays on the topic, David Clay Large describes the resistance as an ongoing project that did not end, or even become unnecessary, after Germany's defeat in 1945.²² Surely, for resisters who lived to see the summer of 1945, their involvement in the opposition during the Third Reich shaped their lives in the postwar era. Some members of the Kreisau Circle, such as Eugen Gerstenmaier, remained politically active and later ascended to top positions in government.²³ Women, too, embarked on postwar careers: The lawyer Marion Yorck (a.k.a. Yorck von Wartenburg) became a judge in the Juvenile Court of Berlin after the war ended. Rosemarie Reichwein opened a physical therapy clinic in Germany where she treated children and trained a new generation of therapists. Both of these women brought the ideals of the Kreisau Circle—a belief in value of individual freedom and the respect for personal dignity—to bear in their professional lives after 1945.

Why Resist?

None of the plans laid out by the Kreisau Circle was ever put into practice. In part, this had to do with the fact that "the Allies set up German democracy according to their own pattern, and maybe also some of the suggestions of the plans [of the Kreisau circle] wouldn't have worked." Still, one asks if the resisters were nothing more than suicidal idealists? Freya von Moltke responds: "I personally have always felt that what Helmuth did was worth doing, even though it was a complete failure. Of course, you don't believe in the futility, you always have hope, or faith, or whatever you call it, in what you are doing. And I think this kind of activity—to object and then to stand for what you believe in—is one of the most important human activities to this day. It takes different shapes in different parts of society. In the Nazi times it took the shape of resistance, of wanting

to do something because you couldn't bear just doing nothing. After a while, my husband wasn't even allowed to help Jewish people anymore. No, it was illegal to do that after a while. I mean, what you could do was so narrowly limited. But that you stand up, that is still as important as it ever was."

Lest we interpret these remarks too simply, Mrs. von Moltke explained that this human quality, this "interest in more than oneself and this readiness to stand for what one believes in," was not the exclusive possession of resistance fighters. It was also very much a part of the Nazi movement. "It's a human quality and that human quality is distributed in very different quantities in different people, and wherever in the world it is, it will be put to work. It will always have results of some kind because it's this human quality that really moves the world on, for better or for worse. Also history sometimes uses awful actions of human beings to further mankind. And I think mankind has to learn. I still believe that we can learn to live more peacefully together on this earth, although it seems completely hopeless, at times. And I think that's what keeps us human beings going on." Here, we begin to tread on discomfiting terrain where the lines dividing good from evil begin to vanish. Countess von Moltke touches on issues that can inspire both hope and despair. Her theory that human history can, in some instances, progress through "awful" actions was a mainstay of the Nazis' own ideology—a fact that makes us, today, reluctant to embrace it uncritically in any context. On the other hand, where would we be without at least a scrap of hope for the betterment of humanity? And—more to the point—would there have been any resistance at all without the conviction that oppositional activity would bring some good into the world, even if it did not enjoy immediate success?

Kreisau Today

The fact that there was a resistance at all was not without future political consequences, even if, in the first few years after World War II, resisters were still considered traitors by many Germans. David Clay Large's work explores how this attitude gradually changed and how postwar German governments eventually embraced the resistance, and even used it to shape a national past upon which a more sanguine German future could be built. The relationship between Germany's ongoing process of

Vergangenheitsbewältigung, or coming to terms with its past, and the German resistance is a complicated one. What position should the history of the German resistance occupy in Germany's present national identity? One cannot condone a history that would falsify reality and present Germans in general as opponents to Hitler; factual evidence shows that, in every social class, active resisters comprised a small minority of the German population. However, it would also be a mistake for historians, and those who fashion Germany's identity as a nation, to omit from the picture the small group of people who opposed Nazism.

Today, the history of the Kreisau Circle also contributes to the formation of European identity. After the Iron Curtain was drawn back, in the early 1990s, Freya von Moltke relinquished her ownership claims on Kreisau and on 10 July 1990, the "Kreisau Foundation for Mutual Understanding in Europe" was formed.²⁴ Monetary contributions from Germany, Poland, and other countries paid for the transformation of the Freya's former home into a conference center and international meeting place for young and old. Von Moltke is pleased with the remodeling: "Our farmyard was generously laid out with a field and around it the most attractive farm buildings. But that field was filled with untidiness when it was a farm yard. It had wagons and it had a silo and it had a huge dung heap, and the cows were in a building that had beautifully vaulted pillars so that we always said it's such a pity to have the cows in this beautiful building. Well, that's the cafeteria now."

The mission statement of the new Kreisau clearly makes connections with the past: "The Krzyzowa Foundation for Mutual Understanding is a Polish nongovernmental organization dedicated to raising the level of social and political understanding between people from different countries. The Foundation bases its work on the tradition of a German resistance movement against the Nazis, the Kreisau Circle."²⁵ Indeed, the members of the Kreisau Circle had always been anti-racist and internationally savvy: "I was very much opposed to racism. We had Jewish friends whom we cherished. We thought nationalism was much overdone. We did not like the imperialistic claims that Germany had," Freya explains. "We were standing up for people, and for cooperation between nations. That's what the Kreisau people did; we were completely European in our outlook." When it was suggested that this internationalism was surely

not viewed as patriotic during Hitler's time, she answered, "well, patriotism was not to be patriotic."

Today, there is still much work to be done before Europe becomes comfortable with its multinational and multicultural identity. As Freya von Moltke points out, "the devil is in the details. To bring it [European integration] about is a very difficult thing. All the old differences between the European units are still there, and this makes Europe so attractive, but it also makes it hard for the Europeans to get together." As Europe continues along this arduous path toward integration, the effects of the German resistance are finally being felt. Mrs. von Moltke explains that without knowing that there was a German resistance, "the Poles really could never have made friends with the people in Germany after all the dreadful things that the Germans did to the Poles." Currently, all generations of the von Moltke family are dedicated to carrying on the legacy of Kreisau. In 1999, Mrs. von Moltke was distinguished for her efforts on behalf of German-Polish understanding with the "Bridge Prize of the city of GölitZ/Zgorzelec." She and her sons and grandchildren are all still involved in running the Kreisau Center and preserving the legacy of the Kreisau Circle.

Conclusion

One of the most chilling lessons taught by the history of Nazism is that the desire and ability to resist, and to act independently, can be eliminated—or very nearly eliminated—from a vast population. But do the lessons learned here apply beyond Germany's shifting borders? During the Historians' Debate of the 1990s, the keepers of the past argued vehemently over the status of the Holocaust in global history. The debate's central questions revolved around the use of the comparative and the superlative: was this the worst thing ever to have happened? And, were the Nazis really the worst people ever to have lived? Or were they just as evil as, less evil, or more evil than mass murderers from other times and places? Is it right, scholars asked themselves, to compare other genocides to the Holocaust? Is not every event unique, and is not this uniqueness lost as soon as comparisons are made?²⁶ To grant the Nazis a special status would be to see the situation too simply, or would it?

Throughout her life, Freya von Moltke has energetically devoted herself to educating others about the resistance, and the new Kreisau

Center is an important component of her pedagogical mission. At the Kreisau Center, she explains, “we have an exhibition on resistance. It not only shows the Kreisau Circle, which is of course very well documented there, but it also shows resistance in the Eastern world, in Poland, in Russia, and in Czechoslovakia. All these countries have had resistance. Sometimes it was directed against the Russian occupation and not against their own administration, but of course it was also often against their own government, too. And people said, ‘how can you compare these resistances? They are completely different in content and in time.’ And so they are. How do you compare them? But you can very well compare them, you find out, in the way people resisted, and in why they resisted. Lots of people resisted, and the human element in it is everywhere the same. That is very gratifying, and it is something we are trying to show that to the young people who come to Kreisau, to see how necessary it was, and still is.”

NOTES

- ¹ Ger van Roon, *Neuordnung im Widerstand. Der Kreisauer Kreis innerhalb der deutschen Widerstandsbewegung* (Munich: R. Oldenbourg, 1967).
- ² The interview was videotaped by Jenny Gesualdo and Andreas Thomas, photographed by Andreas Thomas, and transcribed by Priscilla Loh. All quotations of Mrs. von Moltke are taken from this interview.
- ³ Alison Owings, “Mrs. Freya von Moltke: A Modest Woman of the Resistance,” *Frauen: German Women Recall the Third Reich* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993), pp. 245-265.
- ⁴ Helmuth James von Moltke, Beate Ruhm von Oppen, and Freya von Moltke, *Briefe an Freya: 1939–1945* (Munich: Beck, 1991). This volume has been translated by Beate Ruhm von Oppen, *Letters to Freya* (New York: Knopf, 1990). Annedore Leber and Freya von Moltke, *Für und wieder: Entscheidungen in Deutschland* (Berlin: Mosaik, 1962); Freya von Moltke, Eva Hoffmann, Ingo Hermann, *Die Kreisauerin: Gespräch mit Eva Hoffmann in der Reihe “Zeugen des Jahrhunderts”* (Göttingen: Lamuv, 1962); Freya von Moltke, *Erinnerungen an Kreisau. 1930–1945* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1997).
- ⁵ For a fuller description of Freya von Moltke’s life at Kreisau, as well as an account of the harrowing last weeks of the Second World War, see *Erinnerungen an Kreisau*.

- ⁶ Hans Mommsen, “Bürgerlicher (nationalkonservativer) Widerstand,” *Lexikon des deutschen Widerstands*, 2 vols., eds Wolfgang Benz and Walter Pehle (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1994), 1: 55-67.
- ⁷ Peter Hoffmann, *The History of the German Resistance. 1933–1945*, Richard Barry, trans. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1977), pp. 1-17. Hoffmann supplies gruesome statistics regarding the Nazis’ suppression of the resistance during the first few years of the Third Reich.
- ⁸ This ancestry is briefly recounted in most biographies of Helmuth James von Moltke, including: Michael Balfour and Julian Frisby, *Helmuth von Moltke. A Leader Against Hitler* (London: Macmillan, 1972).
- ⁹ Kurt Finker, *Graf Moltke und der Kreisauer Kreis* (Berlin: Dietz, 1993), pp. 105-176. Hans Rothfels, *The German Opposition to Hitler: An Assessment*, trans. Lawrence Wilson (London: Oswald Wolff, 1961), pp. 108-124.
- ¹⁰ Moltke, *Erinnerungen*, p. 49.
- ¹¹ The first meeting (22–25 May 1942) was devoted to schools, universities and the relationship between church and state; the second (16–18 October 1942) dealt with governmental restructuring, economic reform, and union representation; the third and final meeting (12–14 June 1943) was devoted to foreign policy and the treatment of Nazi criminals (Moltke, *Erinnerungen*), pp. 58-64. Transcripts of the documents drawn up at these meetings can be found in Roman Bleistein, ed., *Dossier: Kreisauer Kreis. Dokumente aus dem Widerstand gegen den Nationalsozialismus* (Frankfurt am Main: Josef Knecht, 1987).
- ¹² Mommsen, p. 66.
- ¹³ Hoffmann, p. 192, Finker, p. 267.
- ¹⁴ At the conference, *Confront! Resistance in Nazi Germany* (Boston College, 17 April 2002), Freya von Moltke said it was assumed, without question, that Jews would be included, with the same rights as everyone else, in the future Gemany imagined by the Kreisau Circle.
- ¹⁵ Freya von Moltke points out that this structure, based on small groups as the kernels of democracy, is important even today. “What’s interesting now is that the Polish people, are very much interested in this idea which was so central in the planning of the Germans [of the Kreisau Circle], that the small units should be there to teach democracy. The small units that you were taking part in your hospitals, your school, your co-op were run, all the non-governmental organizations now which didn’t exist to the extent as they do now. That should teach democracy.”
- ¹⁶ Vera Laska, *Women in the Resistance and in the Holocaust. The Voices of Eyewitnesses* (London: Greenwood Press, 1983), pp. 4-8. See also Dr.

Wittenstein's similar views in his chapter on The White Rose circle published in this volume.

¹⁷ Marion Yorck von Wartenburg, *The Power of Solitude. My Life in the German Resistance*, trans. Julie M. Winter (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2000).

¹⁸ Thomas Childers documents more precisely the degree to which the Kreisau Circle was not simply associated with those who attempted the killing, but in fact instrumental in encouraging the coup to go forward. Thomas Childers, "The Kreisau Circle and the Twentieth of July," *Contending with Hitler: Varieties of German Resistance in the Third Reich*, ed. David Clay Large (Washington, D.C.: German Historical Institute, 1991), pp. 99-117.

¹⁹ Marion von Yorck describes the time she spent in solitary confinement in *The Power of Solitude*.

²⁰ Rosemarie Reichwein, *Die Jahre mit Adolf Reichwein prägten mein Leben* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1999).

²¹ Annedore Leber, Willy Brandt, and K.D. Bracher, eds. *Das Gewissen steht auf* (Berlin: Mosaik Verlag, 1954) and *Das Gewissen entscheidet* (Berlin: Mosaik Verlag, 1957).

²² Michael Geyer, "Resistance as Ongoing Project: Visions of Order, Obligations to Strangers, and Struggles for Civil Society, 1933-1990," *Resistance Against the Third Reich, 1933-1990*, Michael Geyer and John W. Boyer, eds. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 323-350.

²³ David Clay Large, "Uses of the Past: The Anti-Nazi Resistance Legacy in the Federal Republic of Germany," *Contending with Hitler: Varieties of German Resistance in the Third Reich*, ed. David Clay Large (Washington D.C.: German Historical Institute, 1991), pp. 163-182.

²⁴ <http://www.goerlitz.de/de/rathaus/presse/amtsblatt/22-1999/moltke.html>

²⁵ <http://www.krzyzowa.org.pl/main.en.tcl>. 2002.

²⁶ Rudolf Augstein, ed. *Historikerstreit: die Dokumentation der Kontroverse um die Einzigartigkeit der nationalsozialistischen Judenvernichtung* (Munich: R. Piper, 1987).