

## *How much opposition was there to the Nazi regime?*

**CHAPTER OVERVIEW** **SOURCE 17.1** Sophie Scholl, a student at Munich university and one of the leaders of the White Rose group

'What we have written and said is in the minds of all of you, but you lack the courage to say it aloud.' Thus spoke the brave Sophie Scholl during her trial before a People's Court in 1943. She was executed for distributing anti-government pamphlets. Her statement raises a number of issues about the German people's attitude to Nazism and in particular:

- Were most Germans privately critical of the Nazi regime or did public acceptance reflect genuine support?
- Was the limited amount of opposition a reflection of a lack of courage or of the problems potential opponents faced?



In this chapter we examine the difficult and sensitive issue of how much opposition there was in Nazi Germany. The general impression is of little opposition and there is much evidence of Hitler's genuine popularity. Furthermore, the Third Reich was overthrown not by the German people but by the massive military might of the Soviet Union, the United States of America and their allies. Such internal opposition as there was had little effect on the course of events. This has led some historians to follow Sophie Scholl's criticism of the Germans as lacking courage. We must, however, be cautious.

We have already seen that many Germans gained greatly from Hitler's domestic policies, and so had good reason not to oppose the regime. Hitler's undoubted foreign policy successes until 1941 (see Chapters 20 and 21) reinforced this support. (It was not until 1943 that many Germans wavered in their loyalty to the regime.) Furthermore, there was a fierce repressive machinery, reinforced by widespread denunciations (see Chapter 11), that made open criticism of the regime a brave, and perhaps foolhardy, act. Opposition could cost you your job, freedom or life. The dilemma was particularly acute for civil servants. Many welcomed the new regime but others had to decide whether to continue to work for the government while trying to limit its harm, or to dissociate themselves totally from the regime. This could be a hard decision, as the comments in Sources 17.2–5 illustrate. We might like to think that if we had lived in Nazi Germany we would have opposed Nazism, but careful reflection might lead to a different conclusion. We shall try to assess how many Germans, like Sophie Scholl, tried to oppose the regime in the following subsections:

- A** What opposition was there to the Nazi regime? (pp. 318–25)
- B** How can the historian judge the degree of opposition and support in Nazi Germany? (pp. 326–9)
- C** Humour as resistance (pp. 329–30)
- D** Review: How much opposition was there to the Nazi regime? (pp. 331–3)

Why is the question of the degree of German opposition to Nazism a sensitive one?

### ACTIVITY

- 1 List five groups of people who might have been opposed to the Nazi regime.
- 2 List the various forms that opposition might take.
- 3 Consider the tables below of factors favouring opposition to a government and those making opposition difficult. (The factors encouraging opposition cover both reasons why people might be discontented with a regime and possible opportunities for them to organise opposition activities.)
  - a) Write down those factors that applied during the Third Reich.
  - b) What conclusions do you draw?

#### Factors encouraging opposition

Rising unemployment

Food shortages

General perception that the country is going downhill

Foreign policy failures

Divided government

Weak leader

Free elections

Range of political parties

Potential opposition groups prepared to co-operate

#### Factors making effective opposition difficult

Powerful secret police

Arbitrary imprisonment

Government control of the media

One-party state

Tradition of respect for authority

Loyal army

No independent trade unions

Network of government informers

- 4 Read Sources 17.2–7. What reasons are given why resistance was difficult?

**SOURCE 17.2** Foreign Minister State Secretary Bülow who stayed on in his job after 1933

*One cannot leave one's country in the lurch because it has a bad government.*

**SOURCE 17.3** General Werner von Fritsch, Commander-in-Chief of the army, 1934–8

*We cannot change politics; we must do our duty silently.*

**SOURCE 17.4** Ewald von Kleist-Schmenzin, a conservative Prussian landowner

*Do you think that when you board an express train, the driver of which is deranged, you can somehow take over the controls?*

**SOURCE 17.5** Ambassador Prittwitz on resigning in 1933

*One must only put oneself at the disposal of a government for which certain basic values of humanity are sacred. Coming to terms with inhuman principles in order to avoid something allegedly worse leads to disaster.*

**SOURCE 17.6** Dr Schuster, an anti-Nazi teacher, describes his various options

- 1 Emigrate.
- 2 Resign, write alternative books for the future.
- 3 Stay and publicly defy the headmaster, and be sent to prison.
- 4 [which he adopts] *I am trying through the teaching of geography to do everything in my power to give the boys knowledge and I hope later on, judgement, so that when, as they grow older, the Nazi fever dies down and it again becomes possible to offer some opposition they may be prepared . . . There are four or five masters who are non-Nazis left in our school now, and we all work on the same plan. If we leave, four Nazis will come in and there will be no honest teaching in the whole school . . . If we went to America and left others to it, would that be honest, or are the only honest people those in prison cells? If only there could be some collective action among teachers. But we cannot meet in conference, we cannot have a newspaper.*

**SOURCE 17.7** Emmi Bonhöffer, sister-in-law of Dietrich Bonhöffer, interviewed in the 1989 TV programme *Führer*

*There was no resistance movement and there couldn't be. Nowhere in the world can develop a resistance movement when people feel better from day to day. Resistance: we were stones in a torrent, and the water crashed over us.*

**FOCUS ROUTE**

- 1 Describe the main forms of opposition to the Nazi regime.
- 2 Explain why there was comparatively little opposition.

## **A** What opposition was there to the Nazi regime?

**In what ways did people oppose the regime?**

**ACTIVITY**

As you read Source 17.8, identify the actions Linnert took and how he tried to escape detection.

**SOURCE 17.8** SPD member Ludwig Linnert tried to resist the regime from 1933 until his arrest in 1938

*Justice, freedom and culture – and yes socialism – forced us to warn people and arouse their consciences by distributing illegal leaflets, and writing slogans on the streets, in public squares and on walls . . .*

*Until my imprisonment . . . [a small grocer's] shop acted as a kind of resistance centre . . . Political contacts made themselves known to us by asking for loaf sugar, which we didn't keep and wasn't really available at that time. Or, when they bought other things, they would put their coins down on the counter in a square pattern, with a fifth coin in the middle . . .*

*We had also begun to make our own leaflets. We had a typewriter with movable typefaces, a copy machine and, most important, stacks of paper, which were purchased cautiously in small amounts from many different shops. We posted the first leaflets, mainly in the letter boxes of flats in working-class districts . . . We wore rubber gloves when we made these leaflets, so as not to leave behind any fingerprints . . .*

*As late as 1937 we had made leaflets in the flat and then scattered them just before dawn from the back of our motorbike on the streets leading to the factories in Sendling. We knew the dangers of what we were doing. There was no heroism; we didn't want to be martyrs. We wanted to survive to see the better future that we hoped for.*

During the 1980s and 1990s, many historians have made great efforts to discover the evidence provided by accounts such as that of Linnert in Source 17.8. They have shifted their focus from the decisions of people in government to the activities of ordinary people that can be classified as popular opposition.

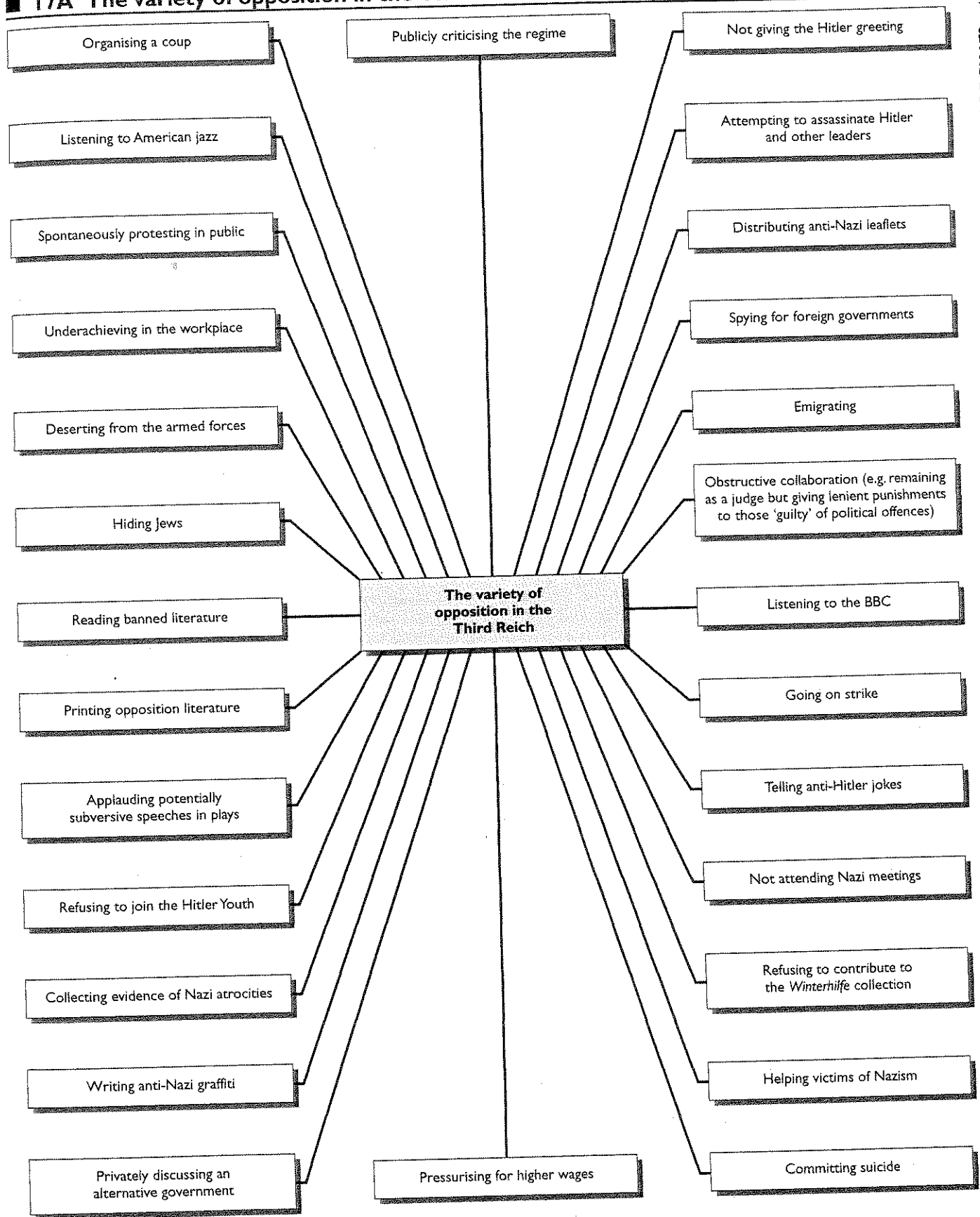
**ACTIVITY**

- 1 Read the following list of seven possible reactions to the Nazi regime. Write them out in a line, with the most hostile attitude towards the regime on the left, moving towards the most positive on the right.

Nonconformity  
 Acceptance  
 Resistance  
 Participation  
 Enthusiasm  
 Protest  
 Commitment

- 2 The three furthest to the left have been classified as opposition activities. Study Chart 17A which illustrates the various forms of opposition activities that have been recorded in the Third Reich. Select two examples of each of the three opposition categories above. (Remember that such classifications are more a matter of degree than of distinct categories.)

# 17A The variety of opposition in the Third Reich



It could be argued that some of these actions might be inspired by purely private or non-political reasons. Which of the above actions might fit into this category?

### Opposition, resistance and nonconformity

Until recently, historians studying opposition to the Nazi regime tended to concentrate on public criticism of policies, such as that by Bishop Galen over euthanasia, and attempts to assassinate Hitler, most famously the July 1944 Bomb Plot. Since the 1980s some historians have shifted their focus from these fairly isolated acts of opposition to study the behaviour of ordinary people, and to see opposition in broader terms. They have identified a broad range of opposition activities, from minor to major. Minor opposition might be grumbling at the lack of butter; major could be challenging the whole regime. Minor might take place in private, major in public. Minor could involve people with little power. Major could include powerful leaders.

### Assassination attempts

The most drastic acts of resistance that could have led to the collapse of the whole regime were assassination attempts on Hitler. There were numerous individual and group plans to assassinate Hitler, especially from 1939, some of which came very near to success. Some of the best documented are listed in the table below.

ASSASSINATION ATTEMPTS				
Date	Who	Plan	What happened?	Result
1935-6	Jewish students	Assassination	Nothing. No opportunity	--
9 Nov 1938	Student: Maurice Bavaud	Shoot Hitler at annual Munich parade	Couldn't get shot in	Executed (1941)
9 Nov 1939	Socialist cabinet-maker Georg Elser	Plant bomb in beer-hall where Hitler was speaking	Hitler left early because of fog. Bomb went off and killed four people	Arrested and executed (1945)
June 1940	Police Chief Friedrich von Schulenburg	Assassination at victory parade	Parade called off	--
Feb 1943	Army Command at Kharkov	Kill Hitler when he visited	Hitler changed his plans	--
March 1943	Major-General Henning von Tresckow and Lieutenant Fabian von Schlabrendorff	Place bomb on Hitler's plane	Fuse worked, but bomb did not ignite as it was too cold	--
March 1943	Colonel Rudolf von Gersdorff	Keep next to Hitler at an exhibition with a bomb	Hitler unexpectedly late	--
Dec 1943	Major Axel von dem Bussche	Blow himself and Hitler up at a uniform exhibition	Building bombed by RAF so the visit was cancelled	--
July 1944	Colonel Claus von Stauffenberg	Three bomb attempts	Briefcase, which exploded on the third attempt, had been moved further away from Hitler. He was shaken but not among the four killed	Over 5,000 people executed

**ACTIVITY**

- 1 Look at the dates in column 1 of the table. What point seems to emerge?
- 2 Look at column 2. Are you surprised at the sort of people responsible for most of the attempts?

Can the assassination of political leaders ever be justified?

**Who were the resisters?**

The best chance of replacing the Hitler regime was at the beginning. Until his death in August 1934, President Hindenburg could have dismissed Hitler as Chancellor. Alternatively, opposition parties and trade unions might have organised a general strike. However, unemployment was high, opposition elements were divided and many people did not expect Hitler to remain in power for long. The fact that Hitler had been appointed legally reinforced civil servants' instinct to obey the government. The army was appeased (conciliated) by the Night of the Long Knives, and then tied to Hitler by its oath. There was also a widespread hope of a national revival, led by the charismatic Hitler, after the divisions and failings of Weimar governments.

After 1934 there was no legal way to remove Hitler. Opposition activity was banned. Critics who remained in Germany had to resort to clandestine (secret) activity. This made co-ordination virtually impossible. There were various acts of opposition but they remained isolated, partly because of massive support for the government, shown in a series of plebiscites after 1934. Even allowing for intimidation, most historians argue that these reflect considerable popular enthusiasm. In many ways this is not surprising. The early victims of the Third Reich were unpopular: for example Communists, SA leaders, Jews, even political parties and trade unions. Hitler was also careful to control more radical Nazi ideas. Furthermore, his policies were increasingly successful, especially in reducing unemployment and in foreign policy. There was a general wave of optimism, reinforced by effective government propaganda. Critics suffered arbitrary (unjustified) arrest. Thus a mixture of successful policies, propaganda and repression reduced opposition.

During the Third Reich there were some plans to overthrow the government, most notably in the army, but generally opposition took the form of non-co-operation rather than resistance. However, in a totalitarian regime, which aims to mobilise all the people within its structures, non-compliance, even non-commitment, can be deemed opposition. The number of actual resisters was small; their aims and methods varied. The story of 'resistance' is really that of a hundred subgroups and thousands of individuals. This was easier in institutions, such as the Churches and the army, that gave opponents opportunities to meet for apparently legitimate reasons. They had a legal organisation, meeting places and a clear value system; the army also had a code of secrecy at the top.

As historians complete further work on local archives, more evidence of a variety of forms of dissent emerged. Thus the Marxist historian Mason studying the working class identified considerable non-conformism, such as absenteeism, and even wildcat strikes and industrial sabotage. Kershaw's studies of public opinion have highlighted large-scale grumbling, and Peukert's studies of Hamburg and Cologne have identified considerable opposition among young people. The estimated 1.5 million Germans who were sent to concentration camps and the 500,000 who left Germany between 1933 and 1939 have also been used as some indication of widespread opposition to the regime.

## Groups providing some opposition to the Nazi regime

### **The Churches (see pages 306–15)**

Amongst Protestants, the Confessional Church fairly successfully resisted nazification, but it was more concerned to defend the Church than to weaken the regime itself.

The Catholic hierarchy initially co-operated, but mass opposition of the laity to government interference modified government attacks on the Catholic Church. Catholic clergy criticised sterilisation, then euthanasia.

Overall, the Churches concentrated on protecting their own positions, and as institutions did not pose a threat to the regime. However, they remained an obstacle to a fully totalitarian state. Some brave individuals resisted and hundreds of pastors and priests were imprisoned and killed.

### **Youth (see pages 276–91)**

Various alternative and opposition youth groups developed, including Swing Youth and the Edelweiss Pirates. There were some organised university groups, for example the White Rose group in Munich from 1941 to 1943: its objective was 'to strive for the renewal of the mortally wounded German spirit'. In contact with groups at other universities, the White Rose was inspired by the sermons of Bishop Galen. Its members secretly distributed leaflets on such topics as 'Is not every decent German today ashamed of his government?' and 'Germany's name will remain disgraced forever unless German youth finally rises up immediately, takes revenge, and atones, smashes its torturers, and builds a new, spiritual Europe.' They printed details about euthanasia programmes and the atrocities on the Eastern Front. They were arrested and their leaders, the brother and sister Hans and Sophie Scholl, were executed.

### **The army**

Aristocratic officers generally remained suspicious of Hitler and Nazism. They initially co-operated, but later relations broke down as concern grew that Hitler was too radical in foreign policy. General Beck's plan to arrest Hitler in 1938 was ruined by Hitler's success at the Munich conference (see page 391). Several officers were subsequently involved in failed assassination attempts, most notably in the July 1944 Bomb Plot.

There was also, surprisingly, considerable opposition activity in the Abwehr, the German military intelligence organisation. From 1935 it was headed by Admiral Canaris who tolerated resistance activities and helped Jews leave during the war. The Abwehr was absorbed into the SS in 1944 during a clampdown on opposition.

### **Government and the Civil Service**

Initially, there were some critics within the government: for example, in June 1934 Papen pleaded in a speech for greater freedom and in August 1935 Schacht deplored anti-semitic violence. Some government officials planned an alternative government and maintained contacts with other opponents.

### Judiciary

Some judges tried to maintain proper standards of justice despite an increasingly arbitrary system, with the growing intervention of the SS and the special courts (see page 194).

### The workers

German workers had the numerical but not organisational strength to provide major opposition to the regime. Furthermore, many had good reasons to support the new, dynamic government. They had no legal organisations that could be used for opposition, but there were strikes (an estimated 400 between 1933 and 1935) and other forms of pressure were put on the government. Many workers maintained their links with illegal political parties (see below). Overy has also identified some 'no-go' areas for Nazi officials in some working-class districts of industrial cities.

### Opposition parties

All political parties (except the ruling Nazi Party) were banned in July 1933, and were hit by a wave of arrests of their leaders; but left-wing parties continued some illegal activities. The SPD in exile (SOPADE) was based in Prague and organised some underground groups, such as the Berlin Red Patrol and the Hanover Socialist Front. They distributed underground leaflets and tried to start a whispering propaganda campaign.

The KPD formed underground cells, even in DAF, but two-thirds of their members were arrested. The Rote Kapelle (Red Orchestra) spy organisation sent information to the USSR. It was smashed in 1942 by the Abwehr.

### Traditional elites

Among some of the elites there was considerable discussion of replacing Hitler, especially in the Kreisau Circle on Count Helmuth von Moltke's estate. This was a small group of officers and professionals who had come together in 1933 to oppose Hitler. In August 1943 they drew up the Basic Principles for a New Order, which was a plan for a new Germany, with an open society and equal justice for all.

Are there occasions when it is right to break the law?





**The army officer: General Ludwig Beck (1880–1944)**

Beck described President Hindenburg's death on 2 August 1934 as the blackest day of his life. Hitler proclaimed himself Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces and made Beck the army's chief-of-staff (1935–8). In May 1938, Hitler told the generals of his unalterable aim to attack Czechoslovakia. Beck was opposed, as the army was not ready for general war. He tried to organise all the chiefs-of-staff to threaten resignation over Hitler's radical approach, but the new Commander-in-Chief General Walther von Brauchitsch failed to give his support. In August 1938 Beck resigned, commenting to a colleague: 'What is that dog doing to our beautiful Germany?' Beck conceived a plan for a march on Berlin, but called it off after Hitler gained the Sudetenland. Many other generals, aware of the plotting, had a wait-and-see attitude to these activities. Beck remained in contact with various opposition circles. In 1944 he was shot for his involvement in the Bomb Plot.

**The army officer: Colonel Claus Schenk Graf von Stauffenberg (1907–44)**

Colonel Stauffenberg was an aristocratic soldier. An able and ambitious officer, he was in the army High Command by 1940. He had a monarchist distaste for Hitler and was horrified by SS barbarities in the USSR. In September 1942, at the army High Command, one general urged that they must tell Hitler the truth about the military disaster. Stauffenberg replied, 'It is not a question of telling him the truth, but of killing him, and I am prepared to do it.' In 1943 Stauffenberg was wounded in North Africa and lost his right hand, half of his left hand and his left eye. In July 1944 he twice took bombs into Hitler's headquarters, but did not use them as Himmler and Goering were not present. On 29 July he went ahead anyway, but Hitler was only wounded. At least 5,000 people said to be 'involved' were executed.



**The army officer: General Hans Oster (1887–1945)**

Oster was a member of the General Staff, serving in the Ministry of Defence, and then in the Abwehr. He became alienated by the 1934 killing of General Schleicher in the aftermath of the Night of the Long Knives. In 1938 he advised Britain to stand firm against Hitler and sent the British government details of Germany's military plans. He made contact with trade unionists and Socialists who were actively encouraging resistance and was involved in the 1944 Bomb Plot. He died in Flossenbürg concentration camp four days before Allied troops liberated it.

**The civil servant: Carl Friedrich Goerdeler (1884–1945)**

Goerdeler was from a conservative Prussian civil service family. He fought in the First World War, became Mayor of Leipzig from 1923 to 1937, and in 1934 he joined the government, hoping to influence Hitler. Disillusioned when he saw that Hitler was leading Germany to war, he resigned in 1935. He frequently travelled abroad with his anti-Hitler message. He was arrested in the wholesale rounding up of opponents of the regime after the 1944 Bomb Plot, tortured and finally executed in February 1945.



**The pastor: Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–45)**

Bonhoeffer criticised Nazism as incompatible with Christianity and defended its victims. He had contacts with Generals Oster and Beck, and other opposition elements. He tried to get help for resistance from abroad, but in 1943 was sent to Buchenwald and then to Flossenbürg where he was executed in April 1945. (See also page 311.)



**The student: Sophie Scholl (1921–45)**

Scholl was the daughter of a former mayor of Forchtenberg and trained as a teacher. At Munich university she joined the White Rose anti-Nazi group, led by her brother Hans and assisted by Professor Huber. In February 1943 she distributed anti-government pamphlets in the university. She was arrested and tortured for over seventeen hours, but refused to give details of others in the group. She was sentenced to death and guillotined. Her brother Hans, Professor Huber and others in the group were also executed.



**The actor: Joachim Gottschalk (1904–41)**

Gottschalk was a famous actor married to a Jewish woman. He refused to separate from her or perform for *Strength through Joy*. In 1941 he and his wife killed their 8-year-old son and then committed suicide. At their funeral the priest, despite the presence of Nazi supervisors, rejected criticism of their killing of their child, explaining that they had decided not to leave him alone in such a barbaric world.

**The journalist: Carl von Ossietzky (1889–1958)**

Ossietzky fought on the Western Front in the First World War and was determined to prevent another war and to defend democracy in Germany. He was secretary of the German Peace Society and editor of liberal newspapers. During the Weimar Republic he criticised Nazism, militarism and communism. In 1931 he was sentenced to eighteen months' imprisonment on a charge of 'treason and betrayal of military secrets' for exposing secret funds, outside parliamentary control, given to the military for use in the USSR. Released in a Christmas amnesty, he was later arrested during the night of the Reichstag fire. Having been sent to a camp, he was offered release if he signed a declaration to say he had revised his opinion. He refused and died in the camp.



**The teacher: Adolf Reichwein (1898–1944)**

After fighting in the First World War, Reichwein became a professor of history and teacher trainer. He joined the SPD. In 1933 the Nazis removed him from his professorship and he became a village schoolteacher. Concerned over the growth of the terror state, he took an increasingly active part in resistance. He became the main link between the Kreisau Circle and other resistance groups, particularly with those among industrial workers. He used his office at the Folklore Museum in Berlin as a cover for many secret meetings and discussions. He was betrayed by a police spy, arrested and imprisoned and finally condemned by the People's Court on 20 October 1944.



**The socialist: Julius Leber (1891–1945)**

After a stint as a war journalist, Leber became leader of the Lübeck SPD. He was a Reichstag deputy from 1924 to 1933. He was arrested on 30 January 1933 and sentenced to twenty months' imprisonment, then rearrested and sent to a concentration camp until 1937. He then resumed political activity and became an outstanding leader of the resistance. He joined the Kreisau Circle, but in June 1944 was arrested at a meeting trying to bring together communist opponents and the Stauffenberg conspirators. A Gestapo spy had betrayed him and in January 1945 he was hanged.



**ACTIVITY**

What do the details of these individuals who resisted show about:

- who resisted
- types of resistance
- the problems they faced
- the nature of the Nazi state?

## **B** How can the historian judge the degree of opposition and support in Nazi Germany?

Although this is a difficult area to research, there is a range of primary sources available. Here we examine two very important groups of sources, which offer contrasting perspectives. Sources 17.9 and 17.10 are from SOPADE, the Social Democratic Party in exile. Source 17.11 is from the Gestapo.

### ACTIVITY

Before you study Sources 17.9–11, consider their likely reliability by answering these questions.

- 1 How reliable do you expect the SOPADE reports to be about
  - a) opposition to the Nazi regime
  - b) support for the Nazi regime?
- 2 How reliable do you expect the Gestapo reports to be about
  - a) opposition to the Nazi regime
  - b) support for the Nazi regime?

#### SOURCE 17.9 SOPADE report, June 1934

*The regime still controls important instruments of power; the comprehensive propaganda apparatus, hundreds of thousands of supporters whose posts and prosperity depend on the continuation of the regime. At the top of the regime are men who have no scruples in the exercise of power and who in the hour of danger will not shrink from the greatest crimes.*

*No system of rule collapses by itself. The weakness of the opposition is the strength of the regime. Its opponents are ideologically and organisationally weak. They are ideologically weak because the great mass are only discontented, they are merely grumblers whose discontent springs simply from economic motives. That is particularly true of the Mittelstand and of the peasantry. The loudest and strongest criticism comes from these groups, but the criticism springs mostly from narrow selfish interest. These groups are least prepared to fight seriously against the regime because they have the least idea of what they should be fighting for . . . Fear of Bolshevism, of chaos, which, in the view particularly of the vast majority of the Mittelstand and peasantry, would follow Hitler's fall, is still the negative basis of the regime as far as the masses are concerned.*

*Its opponents are organisationally weak because it is of the essence of a fascist system that it does not allow its opponents to organise collectively. The forces of 'reaction' [traditional, conservative groups] are extraordinarily fragmented. In informed circles people register no fewer than five monarchist tendencies [supporters of various potential kings]. The labour movement is still split into Socialists and Communists and within the two movements there are numerous factions . . .*

*The attitude of the Church opponents of the regime is not uniform. Their struggle is evidently not least directed towards improving the position of the Churches within the regime . . .*

#### SOURCE 17.10 SOPADE report, 1937

*The number of those who consciously criticise the political objectives of the regime is very small, quite apart from the fact that they cannot give expression to this criticism. And the fact that discontent (about other matters) makes itself loudly felt on numerous occasions also confirms the 'good conscience' of these people in terms of the National Socialist regime. They do not want to return to the past and if anyone told them that their complaints about this or that aspect threaten the foundations of the Third Reich they would probably be very astonished and horrified . . .*

*It becomes increasingly evident that the majority of the people have two faces;*

one which they show to their good and reliable acquaintances; and the other for the authorities, the Party officers, keen Nazis, and for strangers. The private face shows the sharpest criticism of everything that is going on now; the official one beams with optimism and contentment.

**SOURCE 17.11** Düsseldorf Gestapo report, 1937

#### *The Communist movement*

*During the first years after the take-over of power, until about 1936, the Communists tried to expand their party and its various subsidiary organisations. But later they saw clearly that they only endangered those members illegally active inside the country and made it easy for the police to break up the illegal organisations, particularly since the distribution route of a pamphlet could be followed and traced fairly easily . . . Whereas until 1936 the main propaganda emphasis was on distributing lots of pamphlets, at the beginning of 1936 they switched to propaganda by word of mouth, setting up bases in factories, and advocated the so-called popular front [co-operation of anti-Nazi groups].*

*It became apparent that the Communist propaganda described above was already having some success in various factories. After factory meetings at which speakers of the Labour Front had spoken, some of whom were in fact rather clumsy in their statements, the mood of discontent among the workers was apparent in subsequent discussions. In one fairly large factory the speaker from the Labour Front greeted the workers with the German [Nazi] salute: but in reply the workers only mumbled.*

#### *Social Democratic Party*

*In the period covered by the report the SPD has worked mainly by means of the dissemination [spreading] of news. The information that reaches the leadership of the illegal SPD from their news service in Germany is collected there and distributed as information material in Gothic type. The information material that is smuggled into Germany is produced in postcard size editions in small print. The articles appearing in these information leaflets are biased criticisms of Government measures. They are sent only to reliable old SPD people.*

*Apart from this, the illegal activity of the SPD is the same as that outlined in the newly published guidelines for the conspiratorial work of the KPD; the setting up of cells in factories, sports clubs and other organisations. Since the former SPD members carry on propaganda only by word of mouth, it is very difficult to get hold of proof of their illegal activities which would be usable in court.*

*In 1938 we will have to devote particular attention to illegal activity in the factories. Trusted agents have been infiltrated into several big factories in my district who have already provided proof that the KPD and the SPD are carrying out conspiratorial work jointly . . . It is noticeable that no pamphlets whatsoever are distributed; information is only passed on orally.*

### **SOURCE ACTIVITY**

(Marks are given in brackets.)

- 1 Read Source 17.9. What reasons, stated or implied, are given for
  - a) why opposition was weak [3]
  - b) the strength of the regime? [3]
- 2 Read Source 17.10.
  - a) What points could be extracted from this source to argue that opposition was weak? [2]
  - b) What counter points could be made? [2]
- 3 Read Source 17.11. What light does this source shed on the nature of opposition to Hitler's regime? [4]
- 4 a) How far does Source 17.11 confirm the impression given in Source 17.9 of relations between the Socialists and Communists? [3]
  - b) How might this be explained? [3]
- 5 How valuable are these sources as evidence of opposition to the Nazi regime? [5]

(Total: 25 marks)

## How can historians make effective use of unreliable sources?

The question of the reliability of the sources on opposition in Hitler's Germany and how far we can make judgements from them is discussed in Source 17.12.

**SOURCE 17.12** Kershaw, *The 'Hitler Myth'. Image and Reality in the Third Reich*, pp. 6–8

*The sources for the investigation fall into two main categories: firstly, innumerable internal confidential reports on opinion and morale compiled on a regular basis by German government officials, by the police and justice administrations, by Nazi Party agencies, and by the security service (SD); and, secondly, down to the early years of the war, the rich reports filtering out of Germany to the exiled opponents of the Nazi regime, above all those fed to and circulated by the leadership of the exiled SPD (now calling itself the Sopade) in Prague, then Paris, and finally London . . .*

*Obviously, we cannot quantify Hitler's popularity at any given time during the Third Reich. The reports of the regime's own agents provide us with a large number of varied subjective comments, qualitative judgements on the state of popular opinion. Naturally, people were particularly cautious about making disparaging [critical] comments about the Führer, whatever criticism might be risked about other aspects of Nazi rule. And the citizen's fear of criticising Hitler was compounded [reinforced] by the anxiety of those compiling opinion reports not to offend their superiors. We have to face up to the possibility, therefore, that eulogies [exaggerated statements] of praise in the reports might reflect the opinion – genuine or forced – of the reporter rather than the public.*

*Even if the reported comments faithfully reflect public attitudes, these attitudes may, of course, be themselves the expression of a more or less coerced [forced] conformity rather than of Hitler's genuine popularity. In the nature of things, it is more difficult to interpret the pro-regime comments of the reports, where scepticism about the underlying elements of fear and coercion is bound to prevail, than it is to evaluate the anti-regime comments and actions of the population, which often speak for themselves. A potential danger, therefore, is an over-estimation of oppositional attitudes and a corresponding playing down of genuine approval and consensus. Given the type of material at our disposal, there is no objective or external criterion for solving this difficulty. However imperfect, the historian's judgement, based on patient source criticism, acquaintance with the complete mass of material available from different reporting agencies, and a readiness to read between the lines has to suffice.*

*The reports are not, however, beyond echoing direct criticism of Hitler. From the mid-war years on, a body of adverse comment – unmistakable even if veiled in expression – accumulates, strengthening, therefore, the argument that the positive tenor of the reports before this time had on the whole reflected genuine popularity and the absence of widespread and substantial criticism of Hitler. At the same time, there is sufficient witness – for instance, in the proceedings of the political 'Special Courts' as well as in anonymous letters and the reported activities of 'enemies of the State' – to the kinds of negative comments made about Hitler in the Third Reich, even if these seem, until the middle of the war, to have reflected the views of only a small minority of the population.*

*The Sopade reports naturally contain in-built bias diametrically opposite to that of the internal reports. Sopade reporters gladly seized upon expressions of anti-Nazi sentiment, which they encountered not infrequently in their main milieu of operation among the industrial work-force, and tended at times to err in judgement in the direction of an over-rosy estimation of the extent of underlying opposition to the regime. The editors of the *Deutschland-Berichte* (Germany Reports) are well aware of this danger, as indeed were some of the Sopade's 'Border Secretaries' who were sending in the reports. It is all the more striking and suggestive, therefore, that even this oppositional source is on numerous occasions fully prepared to testify to the power and significance of the Hitler cult and to accept that the Führer's massive popularity even extended to working class circles which had recognisably not been won over to Nazism. Though there are*

some important divergences and a totally different perspective, the Sopade material offers for the most part convincing corroboration of the picture of the Hitler image and its impact which can be gained from the internal sources. There is sufficient evidence, then . . . to be able to point at least in an imprecise way to the pattern of development of Hitler's image, to the curve of his popularity and the reasons behind it.

### ACTIVITY

- 1 Why is there a danger of historians underestimating the degree of genuine approval for Hitler?
- 2 Despite the problems of evidence, how, according to Kershaw, does the historian have to develop his/her account?
- 3 Why does Kershaw argue that evidence of Hitler's popularity in the SOPADE reports is particularly convincing?

## Humour as resistance

The Third Reich denied Germans free expression in most ways. Humour, though, was a possible outlet to express feelings. Anti-Nazi jokes were a low-key expression of resistance to the regime and have been called a form of therapy. F. Hillenbrand, a German who lived in the Third Reich, argues in his book *Underground Humour in Nazi Germany* that the jokes in Nazi Germany reflected the widespread popular discontent that existed and that 'humour . . . reveals most directly the mood of the time' (p. xv).

Telling jokes was a dangerous affair; you needed to take precautions – for example, before whispering, to look suspiciously around in what came to be called 'the German glance'. The penalty for anti-Hitler jokes was death. Jokes were risky and led to many people being sent to camps and executed for undermining morale. Hillenbrand, however, survived. As he explains (p. xviii): 'My point of view is simply that of one who was there and lived in the world which produced these jokes. I laughed at them too, while taking note not to criticise the regime in public, and thus I lived to tell the tale.'

Hillenbrand argues that some jokes were probably produced by the Propaganda Ministry to test underground distribution systems: one, for example, was found to have spread 1,000 miles in one week. Some were also a product of the internecine (bitter) rivalry in the Nazi hierarchy.

On page 350 we give a selection of jokes current in Nazi Germany.

**SOURCE 17.13** F. Hillenbrand, *Underground Humour in Nazi Germany*, 1994, pp. xv, xviii

*Many people found in the telling of such jokes their only means of protest against the police state in which they lived. These jokes provided welcome emotional release from pressure and restrictions 'from above' and from the daily pinpricks of the hordes of Nazi officials of the lesser order, the 'little Hitlers' in their obscene brown uniforms, who got on the wick of so many Germans. Thus underground humour had some therapeutic value for the millions living in the prison-without-bars which Germany had now become, even in peacetime. This became even more true when war broke out.*

## Nazi leaders

The ideal German:  
As blond as Hitler,  
As tall as Goebbels,  
As slim as Goering,  
and as chaste as Röhm.

Nazis abbreviated everything, so some jokes used this practice to create new units of measurement:  
'Hit' – the number of promises a man can make in a time-span of fourteen years without keeping any of them.  
'Goer' – the maximum amount of tin a man can wear on his chest without falling flat on his face.  
'Goeb' – the minimum amount of energy required to switch off 100,000 radio receivers simultaneously, or, alternatively, the maximum extent to which a person can pull his mouth open without actually splitting his face.  
'Ley' – the maximum time during which a man can speak without saying a single sensible thing.

What do you make of the fact that there was a similar joke in Fascist Italy?

## Repression

The Munich cabaret artist Weiss-Ferdl: 'Can you imagine, my friend Adolf has given me his picture, and he has even signed it! Now I've got a problem – shall I hang him, or shall I put him against a wall?'

## The Nazi Party

On a visit to a factory (so the story goes), Ley asked the manager about the political views of the factory workers.  
Ley: Tell me, have you still got any Social Democrats with you?  
Manager: Oh yes, about half the workforce.  
Ley: How dreadful. But surely no Commies?  
Manager: Oh yes, about a third of the men.  
Ley: Really! What about Democrats etc.?  
Manager: They make up the remaining 20 per cent.  
Ley: Good gracious! Haven't you got any Nazis at all?  
Manager: Oh yes, of course, all of them are Nazis!

Someone opens his mouth too wide and as a result spends several weeks of ideological training in a concentration camp. After his discharge he is asked by a friend what life was like there. 'Excellent!' he replies. 'At 9 a.m. we were served breakfast in our bedrooms. Then some light work for those who wanted to work, and some sport for those who didn't. Lunch was plain but good and afterwards again some light work. For supper we were served some open sandwiches and pudding. In the evening we had lectures or a film, or we played games.'

The questioner is much impressed. 'Incredible!' he says. 'All those lies we hear about the concentration camps! The other day I met Meier who had just been released from one; he told me rather different stories about his camp!'

'Well, yes, but then Meier is back in his camp again!'

## Jews

It is 1933. A Jew appears at a register office with an urgent request to be permitted to change his name. The official seems very reluctant at first but eventually asks the Jew his name.

'My name is Adolf Stinkfoot.'

'Well,' says the official, 'in that case I think I can accede to your request. Which new name have you chosen?'

'Maurice Stinkfoot.'

Some Nazis surround an old Jew and ask him who is responsible for the war. 'The Jews,' he answers. And then he adds, 'and the cyclists.'

'Why the cyclists?' ask the puzzled Nazis.

'Why the Jews?' replies the old man.

An SS officer who has just arrested a Jew says to him, 'I have one glass eye. If you guess correctly which it is, I'll let you go.' To this the prisoner replies, 'It is the left one.'

'Correct!' exclaims the officer. 'How did you manage to guess?' 'Oh,' says the Jew, 'your left eye has such a human, compassionate expression!'

A Jew is arrested during the war, having been denounced for killing a Nazi at 10 p.m. and then eating the brain of his victim. This is his defence: in the first place a Nazi hasn't got any brain. Secondly, a Jew doesn't eat anything that comes from a pig. And thirdly, he could not have killed the Nazi at 10 p.m. because at that time everybody listens to the BBC broadcast.

## ACTIVITY

- Which jokes do you consider the most powerful criticism of the Nazi regime?
- Explain the role of humour in Nazi Germany.

Do you agree with Hillenbrand's comment on the value of jokes as a historical source that 'humour... reveals most directly the mood of the time?'

## Hitler Youth

A little boy is crying because he has lost his way. A policeman on his beat tries to console him and asks him what he is doing so far from home. The boy answers between sobs, 'I've just been to a Hitler Youth leadership conference.'

## Foreign policy

Q What is the difference between Chamberlain and Hitler?

A Chamberlain takes his weekends in the country, but Hitler takes whole countries in a weekend.

Q Why are the new frontier posts in the Third Reich now equipped with wheels?  
A In order to facilitate Hitler's new territorial demands in continental Europe.

## D Review: How much opposition was there to the Nazi regime?

Historians continue to debate how Germans responded to Nazi rule. Far more evidence has become available, especially since the collapse of the secretive east German state, the German Democratic Republic. Historians have embarked on a considerable examination of local archives that has led to a fuller picture of what life was like on the ground. Use of oral history techniques has reinforced this 'everyday life/*Alltagsgeschichte*' approach. It has led to greater awareness of the complexity and confusion of the Nazi state in Germany, and the variety of responses possible in varied situations.

This is well illustrated by Reinhard Mann's survey of Gestapo proceedings based on an examination of 825 cases from 70,000 Gestapo files in Düsseldorf. It gives an indication of the nature of everyday opposition within the Third Reich.

**SOURCE 17.14** Dissident behaviour as recorded in a random sample of cases in the files of the Düsseldorf Gestapo 1933–45; from R. Mann, *Protest und Kontrolle*, p. 180. Most cases date from 1933–5, with a steady decline after 1937

DISSIDENT BEHAVIOUR	NUMBER	%
<b>Continuation of forbidden organisations:</b>		
Continuation of illegal political parties and associations*	204	
Continuation of forbidden religious associations and sects	15	
Continuation of dissolved associations and activity for the forbidden youth groups	26	
<b>Total</b>	<b>245</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>Nonconforming behaviour in everyday life:</b>		
Nonconforming verbal utterances	203	
Nonconforming work or leisure activities	38	
<b>Total</b>	<b>241</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>Other forms of nonconformity:</b>		
Acquiring or spreading of forbidden printed matter	37	
Listening to foreign radio	20	
Political passivity	7	
Assorted others	75	
<b>Total</b>	<b>139</b>	<b>17</b>
Conventional criminality	96	12
Breaking administrative control measures (e.g. residency requirements)	104	13
<b>Overall total</b>	<b>825</b>	<b>100</b>

\* Of the 204 cases, 61 concerned the KPD and 44 the SPD.

### ACTIVITY

To what extent does Source 17.14 support the evidence you have already studied about the nature of opposition in Nazi Germany?

### ACTIVITY

- Kershaw has added a new chapter on opposition to the 1993 edition of his 1985 book *The Nazi Dictatorship. Problems and Perspectives of Interpretation*. He has called it 'Resistance without the People'.
  - What is he implying about the nature of opposition to the Nazi regime?
  - Why do you think he has only recently added such a chapter to his book?
- Kershaw has argued that the more totalitarian a regime is, the more opposition there will be. Can you explain this apparent paradox?
- 'The lack of opposition in the Third Reich shows that most Germans supported the Nazi government.' Do you agree?

What are the advantages and disadvantages of 'history from below'?



## Historians' assessments

**SOURCE 17.15** M. Housden, 'Germans and their opposition to the Third Reich' in *History Review*, No. 19, September 1994, pp. 38–40

*The most significant efforts at resistance came from the establishment sections of German society, that is to say the minor nobility, civil servants and, most notably, members of the officer corps . . .*

*In the Third Reich, a person needed courage just to say 'hello' in the street to someone wearing a yellow star. For that reason we must be careful not to undervalue the achievements of anyone who did anything, no matter how small, to subvert the Nazi order. Equally we must stand in awe of the self-sacrificial heroism of a person such as von Stauffenberg. But just as we value bravery, we need to maintain a sense of proportion.*

*Both workers and Christians refused to conform to Nazi demands in noteworthy ways. It appears, however, that worker unrest never became really unmanageable for the regime. The mixed strategies of propaganda incentives, food on the table when it was most required and Gestapo surveillance for the most part ensured the compliance of the working class in public. What opposition there was seems to have been most significant in private life, with groups of like-minded workers meeting secretly in order to keep alive their hopes for a better future. As far as religious nonconformity was concerned, individual priests and parsons doubtless did do much to keep Christian morality alive. At the national level there were also some victories against Nazi social control and policy. Nevertheless, we are left with the sense that countryside religious-based opposition never achieved its full potential. So while Christianity and socialism both encouraged people to live as more than 'heroic robots', they never threatened the functioning of the Nazi system as a whole . . .*

*While very many Germans remained at odds with the Third Reich, only a few exceptional souls, driven by a mixture of bravery and despair, dared express themselves openly. But then, how many of us, today, under similar circumstances, would do different?*

**SOURCE 17.16** J. Hiden, *Republican and Fascist Germany*, 1996, p. 189

*The persecution of hundreds of thousands of Germans by the Hitler regime serves to illustrate that the dissent and nonconformity must have been widespread. Resistance, defined as an organised and sustained attempt to destroy the government, was not.*

**SOURCE 17.17** A. Leber, *Conscience in Revolt*, 1994, p. xiv

*The decision to resist an authority that in the eyes of the public was legally constituted, accepted, and upheld by national institutions and was supported by the broad public was the act of an extremist. Such resistance was perilous both in principle and in reality. No common sense recommended it . . .*

*It is believed that between 1933 and 1945, 3 million were confined for political crimes; 800,000 were sentenced for active resistance; and 32,600 were executed – of these, 12,000 had been convicted of high treason.*

**SOURCE 17.18** D. Peukert, *Inside Nazi Germany*, p. 264

*We must distinguish the many and varied expressions of nonconformist behaviour: the steadfast non-response of traditional environments to National Socialist pressure, and more far-reaching forms of resistance and non-cooperation. Active resistance was only a minority affair. Certainly, as young people's wartime acts of non-compliance illustrate, conflict with the Nazi authorities did not necessarily remain static, and those involved might move from mere assertion of a dissident style to more deliberate acts of protest. In individual cases we can trace an entire 'career', graduating from nonconformist behaviour, via refusal, to protest and resistance. But the cumulative effect of the use of terror against political opponents proclaimed as enemies, of the fragmentising social*

processes and of the cross-cutting devices of integration, was to paralyse even the anti-fascist resistance. Although soon robbed of its mechanisms of political expression by Gestapo terror, the resistance mobilised tens of thousands of people into performing acts of courage and sacrifice, but remained decentralised, disorientated and historically ineffectual. The true historical significance of the resistance was its preservation of non fascist traditions.

... Everyday life under Hitler was thus not mere conformity on the one hand ... and mere 'everyday deprivation', loss of rights and freedoms, on the other: as if there was only a black-and-white division between rulers and ruled, rather than the multiple everyday ambiguities of 'ordinary people' making their choices among the varying greys of active consent, accommodation and nonconformity.

### ACTIVITY

Essay:

- a) Describe the main forms of opposition to the Nazi regime, 1933–45.  
b) Why did Hitler not face more opposition within Germany?

Study the above extracts from the historians' accounts (Sources 17.15–18). Using these and Source 17.14, write your essay. You could organise it around the following points:

- 1 Discussion of the problems of the evidence
- 2 Opposition to what? Hitler, the government, the Nazi Party, particular policies?
- 3 Problems of opposition
  - a) nature of the regime
  - b) nature of opposition forces
  - c) overall
- 4 Forms of opposition
  - a) activities
  - b) by whom
- 5 Effects of opposition

Does the fact that German resistance failed to remove Hitler mean that it is historically unimportant?

### KEY POINTS FROM CHAPTER 17: How much opposition was there to the Nazi regime?

- 1 The best moment to have replaced Hitler was in 1933; after 1934 he could not legally be removed.
- 2 Successful policies, first economic then foreign, made it hard to gain support for opposition activities.
- 3 The power of the police state, backed up by informers, was a further major obstacle.
- 4 There was a range of oppositional responses, from emigration to attempted assassination.
- 5 Most opposition groups were isolated and were unable to co-operate.
- 6 The war made opposition harder, but Germany's defeats from 1943 inspired more attempts to remove Hitler.
- 7 Institutions such as the army and the Churches provided the best opportunities for opposition.
- 8 The most serious moments were probably Beck's plans to remove Hitler in 1938 and the 1944 Bomb Plot.
- 9 Historians disagree on the extent of opposition and the problems opponents faced.
- 10 Aside from assassination attempts, the Nazi regime was secure and was only brought down by a vast coalition of enemy powers.