

Traitors or Allies? German Right-Wing Movements and the Memorialization of the National Conservative Resistance to Hitler

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ABSTRACT

After the Second World War, most former Nazis were certain that they (and their *Führer*) would have won the war if there had not been a national-conservative opposition among the traditional elites, i. e. diplomats, bureaucrats, and the officer corps.

It took the West German political mainstream years to adopt the notion of resistance to Hitler as part of a positive tradition. By 1990, however, it had become received wisdom that men like Colonel Claus Graf Stauffenberg were positive examples of how some, albeit very few, had stood up against injustice and repression. Only on the extreme right fringe could authors still defame the resisters as *traitors*.

The *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD), started in 2013 as a Eurosceptic party, was soon hijacked by elements of the far Right. One example is the New Right's discussion of the resistance. While some proclaim that "Stauffenberg was a traitor", others claim the 1944 opposition for their own heritage. By harnessing it for their cause, the memory of the conspiracy and its generally positive connotations in German public opinion, the German New Right is attempting to attract centre or centre-right voters who are disappointed with Angela Merkel's pro-European policies.

KEYWORDS

Resistance to Hitler; German right-wing politics; AfD.



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Until 1990, Nazi opinions had been a taboo in German society at large. In that year, however, the *Junge Freiheit* (*Young Freedom*), until then a student-made amateur publication, went commercial. It developed into a neo-conservative publication which was definitely on the margin of the German mainstream, and many would qualify it as entirely right-wing. However, it appealed to intellectuals and middle-class readers, rather than pander to the dumb football-hooligan Nazi public. For the first time in decades, there was an attempt to give German right-wing political tendencies an *acceptable* face.

One of the actual faces used to achieve this was the charismatic leader of the military conspiracy against Hitler, Colonel Claus Graf Stauffenberg, who had conducted the attempt on Hitler's life and ensuing coup d'état in July 1944. He came from a very old family, part of the Swabian nobility, and from his early days he had been active in the group of disciples surrounding the esoteric, neoconservative writer Stefan George. For the New Right, that made Stauffenberg an ideal person to adopt and thus help them gain respectability.

Another means to achieve this objective was to involve one of the last surviving members of the conspiracy, Philipp Baron von Boeselager, and persuade him to grant the paper an interview, and even to write the foreword to a collective volume about *The Nation's Heroes* edited by *Junge Freiheit*.¹ Boeselager, a staunch Catholic, had been a lifelong member of the Christian Democrat Party, but had left when it agreed to a compromise in legislation permitting abortions under certain circumstances. In his dotage, he saw no reason not to lend his support the neoconservative journal. Boeselager died in 2008, aged 90.

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In 2013, a newly-founded German political party entered the stage: the *Alternative für Deutschland* (*Alternative for Germany* – AfD). Initially a party created by Eurosceptics, in particular those opposing the Euro as a common currency, it was gradually taken over by more right-wing and more radical political elements, with its original founders leaving the party one by one in several waves of radicalisation. If the *Junge Freiheit* marked the attempt to render the New Right socially acceptable, the AfD developed into being its political expression.

In the federal elections of 2017, AfD was the third-strongest party, with 12.6 percent of the vote,² but in the recent 2021 elections, support in the polls dropped to 10.3 percent.³ What many observers find worrying, though, is that it now clearly dominates in the southern half of the former GDR, i.e. the states of Saxony (where it won all but three constituencies) and Thuringia. Coincidentally, these are among the regions where Hitler's Nazi party had its stronghold until 1933.⁴

1. "Er war ein deutscher Held", *Junge Freiheit*, 2-5-2008.

2. *Die Bundeswahlleiterin*, https://www.bundeswahlleiter.de/info/presse/mitteilungen/bundestagswahl-2017/34_17_endgueltiges_ergebnis.html (last retrieved 23-11-2021).

3. *Die Bundeswahlleiterin*, https://www.bundeswahlleiter.de/info/presse/mitteilungen/bundestagswahl-2021/52_21_endgueltiges-ergebnis.html, (last retrieved 23-11-2021).

4. Karl Dietrich BRACHER, *Stufen der Machtergreifung*, Frankfurt, Ullstein 1974 (=Die nationalsozialistische Machtergreifung, 1), pp. 57-78; Michael WILDT, *Geschichte des Nationalsozialismus*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008, pp. 58-66; Hans-Ulrich THAMER, *Die NSDAP. Von der Gründung bis zum Ende des Dritten Reiches*, Munich, Beck, 2020, passim; Richard J. EVANS, *The Third Reich in History and Memory*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2015, passim.

The AfD soon adopted resistance against Hitler as part of its intellectual frame of reference. In 2018, it again took up the theme of *resistance* (*Widerstand*) and linked it with Stauffenberg.

Let us take a look back and revisit both the opposition against Hitler and its ideological appropriation from 1945 to the present.

The attempted *coup d'état*

On 20 July 1944, German officers tried to kill Hitler by means of a bomb, and to make use of the ensuing period of uncertainty to stage a *coup d'état*, end Nazi rule and terminate the war; both the bomb attempt and the putsch failed.⁵

The Nazi press limited its reporting largely to the attempt on Hitler's life; during the afternoon of 20 July, the Nazi regime, the secret police and the other security organs had largely failed in their duties, and there seemed no need to emphasize to the German public that it had been a group of Army officers who had put an end to the uprising.⁶

The leading conspirators were shot that same night, but many others were arrested, tried in the infamous People's Court, and eventually hanged. They included politicians, trade unionists, diplomats, and even SS officials.⁷ In its political views, however, the opposition movement had held largely national-conservative beliefs, what the Nazis would have referred to as "reactionary".⁸

Pre- and post-1945

The Nazi propaganda line that the bomb plot had been orchestrated by a tiny clique of disgruntled officers was, however, difficult to maintain once the high ranks and prominent names of many of the conspirators became known, along with the participation of high-ranking civilian conspirators. Even so, apart from the moral turpitude the regime tried to ascribe to the opposition, the Nazis successfully created the impression that it was opposition among military officers that had sabotaged the war effort in general. The story ran that, now as this opposition had been quashed, the Reich's situation would improve. Initially, this was accepted, and a substantial majority of Germans continued to believe in Hitler until early 1945. And it was only once the hoped-for substantial improvement did not materialize that the majority become war-weary. As we all know, Germany surrendered on 8 May 1945.

5. For an overview, see Peter HOFFMANN, *The History of the German Resistance, 1933-1945*, Cambridge (Mass.), MIT Press, 1977, and more recently, Winfried HEINEMANN, *Operation "Valkyrie". A Military History of the 20 July 1944 Plot*, Berlin, de Gruyter 2022 (=de Gruyter Studies in Military History, 2).

6. Winfried HEINEMANN, "Das Ende des Staatsstreichs. Die Niederschlagung des 20. Juli 1944 im Bendlerblock", *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, 68 (2020).

7. Cf. Linda von KEYSERLINGK-REHBEIN, *Nur eine "ganz kleine Clique"? Die NS-Ermittlungen über das Netzwerk vom 20. Juli 1944*, Berlin, Lukas, 2018.

8. For the social aims of the group, cf. Hans MOMMSEN, "Social Views and Constitutional Plans of the Resistance", in Walter SCHMITTHENNER and Hans BUCHHEIM (eds.), *The German Resistance to Hitler*, London, Batsford, 1970; for its foreign policies, cf. Hermann GRAML, "Resistance Thinking on Foreign Policy", in Walter SCHMITTHENNER and Hans BUCHHEIM, (eds.), *The German Resistance to Hitler*, London, Batsford, 1970.



What, then, was the attitude of West Germans (and this paper will limit itself to the Federal Republic and exclude the state-controlled historical discourse in the GDR) to this phenomenon of anti-Nazi resistance once the war was over and the Nazi dictatorship had ended?

Soon after 1945, the first publications came out trying to portray the German Resistance in a better light, in the eyes of both the German public and the Allies. Most influential among them was that by Hans Rothfels, a conservative professor of history from Königsberg (now Kaliningrad), who had been forced into exile in 1933 because of his Jewish ancestry. The title of his book, *The German Opposition to Hitler: An Appraisal*,⁹ made clear what Rothfels' intentions were: to appraise, even to praise, the resistance. This was less a scholarly analysis (for which there would in fact have not been a sufficient source base), but an attempt to convince readers of the resistance movement's moral qualities¹⁰.

Despite all these efforts, in 1952, two thirds of all West Germans still believed that Germany would have won the war if military resistance to it had not interfered. At the same time, among former career officers, 59 percent viewed the attempt on Hitler's life and the ensuing coup in a negative light¹¹.

On the other hand, the (very few) survivors of the resistance movement found themselves sidelined in West German politics. Let us consider, for example, three politicians who joined the Christian Democrat party (CDU), as well as the post-war alliance of the former centre-left Catholic *Zentrum* party and several liberal Protestant political groups.

Jakob Kaiser stood for the Catholic, social-minded, left-of-centre elements within the CDU. He was the real founder of the Christian Democrat Workers' alliance within the party (CDA). However, his ambition was to bridge the gap between capitalism and communism while simultaneously keeping Germany at an equal distance from the Soviet Union and the *capitalist* United States and Britain. His creed ("We need to be a bridge between East and West" – "*Wir haben Brücke zu sein*")¹² obviously left him at odds with Chancellor Konrad Adenauer's strict orientation towards the West; Jakob Kaiser was fobbed off with a rather unimportant ministerial post.¹³

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9. Hans ROTHFELS, *The German Opposition to Hitler. An Appraisal*, Chicago, Henry Regnery Company, 1948. Also Hans ROTHFELS, *Die deutsche Opposition gegen Hitler. Eine Würdigung*, Krefeld, Scherpe, 1949.

10. For an overview of West German policies re handling the Nazi past, see Magnus BRECHTKEN (ed.), *Aufarbeitung des Nationalsozialismus. Ein Kompendium*, Göttingen, Wallstein, 2021; for the memorialization of the resistance more specifically, see Michael PARAK, and Ruth WUNNICKE (eds.), *Vereinnahmung von Demokratiegeschichte durch Rechtspopulismus*, Berlin, GDW/Gegen Vergessen, 2019

11. For an overview, see Hans MOMMSEN, "Die Geschichte des deutschen Widerstands im Lichte der neueren Forschung", *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte. Beilage zur Wochenzeitung "Das Parlament"*, B 50/86, 13-12-1986, p. 4.

12. See the title of a posthumous publication of his collected works: Jakob KAISER, *Wir haben Brücke zu sein. Reden, Äußerungen und Aufsätze zur Deutschlandpolitik*, ed. by Christian HACKE, Cologne, Mittler, 1988.

13. Hans-Peter SCHWARZ, *Adenauer. Der Aufstieg: 1876-1952*, Stuttgart, dva, 1986, pp. 881 and 907.

After the war, Theodor Steltzer was instrumental in the founding of the CDU in Schleswig-Holstein. In 1946, the British authorities made him the first post-war Prime Minister of the state, but he had to resign the year after for lack of public support.

Eugen Gerstenmaier had been a member of the Kreisau Circle. After 1945, he was part of the Protestant wing of the CDU. From 1954 to 1969, he presided over the German parliament, the Bundestag.¹⁴

None of them ever belonged to the inner circle of power.

The Remer Trial 1952

After the federal Republic had been founded in 1949, old and new Nazis soon raised their heads again. One of them was *Generalmajor* Otto Ernst Remer who, he claimed, had put down the coup d'état after Hitler had ordered him to do so over the telephone. Remer campaigned for the Socialist Reich Party (*Sozialistische Reichspartei*, SRP), which he himself had co-founded, in the region between Hanover and Hamburg. In several speeches, he referred to the conspirators as “traitors paid from abroad”.¹⁵

This in turn caused the regional prosecutor-general, a returned Jewish émigré called Fritz Bauer,¹⁶ to bring charges against Remer, and on 15 March 1952 the court sentenced Remer to three months in jail. The significant event was not the prison sentence as such (Remer anyway managed to escape to Latin America rather than go to jail), but the fact that, for the first time, a German court had ruled that the conspiracy had been morally justified. Throughout the 1950s, acceptance of individuals that took part in the resistance among the German public continuously increased until, by the end of the 1960s, a stable majority of Germans believed the opposition to the Nazis had been morally and politically right.

The West German armed forces, too, placed themselves in the tradition of the “anti-totalitarian” resistance, and in Berlin, the courtyard where the first conspirators had been shot was converted into a memorial.¹⁷



14. Peter STEINBACH, *Der 20. Juli 1944. Gesichter des Widerstands*, Berlin, Siedler, 2004, p. 309; Barbara LIER, *Das “Hilfswerk 20. Juli 1944”. Die Geschichte der Hinterbliebenen der Hitler-Attentäter von 1944 bis 1974*, Augsburg, Wißner 2020 (=Schriftenreihe der Forschungsgemeinschaft 20. Juli 1944 e. V., 28), passim.

15. Ruling by the Braunschweig District Court on 15 March 1952 against Generalmajor Remer for slander, Az I K Ms 13/51, in *Die im Braunschweiger Remerprozeß erstatteten moraltheologischen und historischen Gutachten*, 105–136, at p. 107, Peter RÜTTERS, “Zur Instrumentalisierung des ‚20. Juli 1944‘ für die politische Rehabilitierung und gesellschaftliche Integration nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg”, *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft*, 63 (2015), p. 533.

16. For Bauer see Irmtrud WOJAK, *Fritz Bauer. 1903-1968. Eine Biographie*, Munich, Beck, 2009 above all, pp. 265–283.

17. Winfried HEINEMANN, “Der 20. Juli 1944. Gedenken in Bundesrepublik und Bundeswehr”, in Magnus PAHL and Armin WAGNER (eds.), “*Der Führer Adolf Hitler ist tot*”. *Attentat und Staatsstreichversuch am 20. Juli 1944*, Berlin, Be.bra 2019; Henriette SCHUPPENER, “*Ihr trugt die Schande nicht, Ihr wehret Euch*”. *Das Gedenken an den 20. Juli 1944 im Wandel der Zeit*, Augsburg, Wißner, 2017, pp. 152–160.

Popular culture embraced the resistance movement; in 1955, two German film productions vied with one another for audiences – and there were many more such films shot in later years.

The 1960s

This move toward an acceptance of the justification for the attempt and coup did not, however, stop the subject from being exploited by right-wing extremists. In 1962, a highly conservative self-styled *Archive* published in book form the reports that the Secret State Police (the Gestapo) had sent to Hitler about its investigations. This was, and still is, obviously a source of the utmost relevance, but it needs to be treated with more-than-usual criticism of its source: whatever prisoners told the Gestapo was certainly not necessarily the full truth. What is more, the reports do not contain the prisoners' deposition as such, but rather what the Gestapo interpreted from them and what it wanted Hitler to know. Publishing them with no comment meant reiterating the Gestapo's point of view of events. The Munich-based Institute of Contemporary History, founded by Hans Rothfels, complained bitterly about the publication, but was in a bad position as it had previously decided not to itself publish this source.¹⁸

During the 1960s, the right-wing press continued to lambast the resistance movement as being culpable of "High Treason" – let me just quote here the front page of the neo-Nazi flagship *Deutsche National Zeitung* of 13 July 1966: "Stauffenberg's High Treason".¹⁹

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The Federal Republic, as founded in 1949, was by no means a fully sovereign state. Among the areas the three Allied powers had reserved for themselves was internal security, which by that time obviously meant suppressing an assumed Communist uprising. Twenty years later, this was to be rectified by inserting clauses into the constitution which would allow the military to be deployed in case of such internal unrest. Throughout 1968, this was, though, hotly debated, with substantial left-wing protests in the streets. Eventually, the compromise reached was that emergency powers for the state would be included in the constitution, but that in turn the right to resist a dictatorship would equally be enshrined in the constitution, specifically in Article 20 of the *Grundgesetz*.

Ever since the right to resist was include in the German constitution in 1968, both right-wing and left-wing extremists have tried to usurp it. Any kind of radical opposition to the Federal Republic's system of representative democracy has since styled itself as *resistance*. Of late, this has even included resistance to an alleged *health dictatorship*, and right-wingers have no problem adapting a former left-wing slogan

18. *Spiegelbild einer Verschwörung. Die Kaltenbrunner-Berichte an Bormann und Hitler über das Attentat vom 20. Juli 1944. Geheime Dokumente aus dem ehemaligen Reichssicherheitshauptamt*, ed. by ARCHIV PETER FÜR HISTORISCHE UND ZEITGESCHICHTLICHE DOKUMENTATION, Stuttgart, Archiv Peter, 1961; reprinted, albeit with comment, as *Spiegelbild einer Verschwörung* (1984). For a contemporary critique, see Hans BOOMS, "Bemerkungen zu einer fragwürdigen Quellenedition. Die Veröffentlichung der ‚Kaltenbrunner-Berichte‘ vom ‚Archiv Peter‘", *Der Archivar*, 15 (1962).

19. „Stauffenbergs Hochverrat“, in *Deutsche National-Zeitung und Soldatenzeitung*, 28, 15-7-1966, front page.

from the 1970s, namely that: “Where injustice becomes right, resistance becomes an obligation”.²⁰

During the 1960s, the radical right came close to winning a few seats in the federal parliament, the Bundestag. However, while the neo-Nazi National Democratic Party (NPD) did win some seats in state parliaments, it never won enough support to gain success in federal elections. As such, the anti-Nazi consensus in German society was extremely strong, while the NPD never managed to dissociate itself from openly neo-Nazi positions.

Throughout this time, however, revisionist propaganda related to the Second World War continued to be published, and it included revisionist positions about resistance against Hitler. Brochures and leaflets tried to perpetuate the impression that it had been opposition within Germany which had caused the Reich to lose the war. In 1959, one of the officers who had helped put down the insurrection (a peacetime official of the Ministry of Propaganda!), published his memoirs.²¹ That and the proceedings of a *scholarly* conference held in 1978²² serve as good examples of this.

Take this quotation:

From a historical perspective, it must shock us to hear that there were officers in higher staffs who not only did not fulfil their duties for the fighting front, but travelled all over Germany and Europe in matters of resistance in order to prevent victory. We now know the same about members of the Abwehr.

To this day, the question of whether betrayal and resistance were to blame for Germany’s defeat cannot be answered beyond doubt. What is certain, however, is that without this catastrophic scale of betrayal, the blood toll of German soldiers would have been much lower. The fact that betrayal and resistance were largely responsible for the outbreak of the war can no longer be denied.²³

This phenomenon was not limited to German authors: in 1978, the British revisionist writer David Irving published a biography of Field Marshal Erwin Rommel in which he claimed that Rommel’s chief of staff, *Generalleutnant* Dr. Hans Speidel, a member of the anti-Hitler conspiracy, had prevented two Panzer divisions from being sent to the invasion front in time, thus facilitating the success of the Allied landing in Normandy on 6 June 1944.²⁴

This has since been refuted as untrue,²⁵ but at the time, it hit the headlines of even respectable periodicals.

20. This is not a quotation by Bertolt Brecht: <https://falschzitate.blogspot.com/2017/05/wo-recht-zu-unrecht-wird-wird.html>.

21. Hans W. HAGEN, *Zwischen Eid und Befehl. Tatzeugenbericht von den Ereignissen am 20. Juli 1944 in Berlin und Wolfsschanze*, Munich, Türmer, 1959.

22. *Verrat und Widerstand im Dritten Reich. Referate und Arbeitsergebnisse des zeitgeschichtlichen Kongresses der Gesellschaft für Freie Publizistik vom 26.-28. Mai 1978 in Kassel, Coburg, Nation Europa*, 1978.

23. Gert SUDHOLT, “Verrat an Deutschland gestern, heute - und morgen?”, in *Verrat und Widerstand im Dritten Reich. Referate und Arbeitsergebnisse des zeitgeschichtlichen Kongresses der Gesellschaft für Freie Publizistik vom 26.-28. Mai 1978 in Kassel, Coburg, Nation Europa*, 1978, p. 124.

24. David IRVING, *The Trail of the Fox. The Life of Field-Marshal Erwin Rommel*, London, Papermac, 1977.

25. Dieter OSE, *Entscheidung im Westen 1944. Der Oberbefehlshaber West und die Abwehr der alliierten Invasion*, Stuttgart, dva, 1982 (=Beiträge zur Militär- und Kriegsgeschichte, 22).



The Radical Right and the New Right

We need to keep the above in mind when assessing how the New German Right tried to adopt the national conservative opposition against the Third Reich for its own purposes.

Figure 1. Stauffenberg and the resistance against the Nazi regime.



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F: <https://www.afd.de/im-gedenken-an-die-mutigen-patrioten-vom-20-juli-1944/> last retrieved 23-11-2021.

This poster explicitly links Stauffenberg's resistance against the Nazi regime, its crimes and its warfare with opposition to today's German parliamentary democracy by unobtrusively referring to its campaign as *Grundgesetz*, i.e. constitution.

In the run-up to the 2017 Bavarian state elections, the AfD went so far as to claim that Sophie Scholl, the female member of the *White Rose* student resistance movement, would vote AfD today, despite her family's protests.

However, in its attitude to the German resistance against Hitler, the AfD is anything but united. In 2018, the chairman of its youth organization in the state of Lower Saxony, Lars Steinke, publicly referred to Stauffenberg as a "traitor":

Stauffenberg war ein Verräter, der bereit war, Millionen von Leben zu riskieren. Wer in der Zeit der Rückzugsgefechte die Führung des eigenen Staates auslöschen und damit Chaos in den eigenen Reihen stiften möchte [...], der ist auch nicht der Feind Hitlers, sondern der Feind des Deutschen Soldaten [...] und damit Feind des Deutschen Volkes und damit auch mein Feind.

Stauffenberg was a traitor who was prepared to risk millions of lives. Anyone who wants to wipe out the leadership of his own state in the time of defensive battles and thus create chaos in his own ranks [...] is not only the enemy of Hitler, but the enemy of the German soldier [...] and thus the enemy of the German people and thus also my enemy.²⁶

26. *Focus*, 2-8-2018 (https://www.focus.de/politik/deutschland/niedersachsen-afd-jugend-chef-bezeichnet-hitler-attentaeter-stauffenberg-als-seinen-feind_id_9348792.html).

He certainly expressed the view of many more radical members, but the party leadership at the federal level, concerned about the AfD's respectable façade, successfully deposed Steinke and kicked him out of the organization.

Other people, who have no open links with the AfD party, are even more aggressive, and implicitly call for violence. An image of Stauffenberg combined with that of a briefcase is obviously designed to evoke the memory of the briefcase that held his bomb on 20 July 1944; combined with the phrase “Merkel – in power for more years than Hitler, and no Stauffenberg in sight” is, then, a thinly-veiled incitement to murder the German Chancellor.²⁷

The Lars Steinke incident is also an indication of the different attitudes between neoconservative and neo-Nazi members within the AfD, and within the German New Right as a whole. In view of the AfD's history of gradual radicalization, it is interesting to contemplate whether this ambiguity will continue, or whether the more openly neo-Nazi tendencies within the party will eventually force it to disown Stauffenberg and side with those who see him as a traitor, much as Remer did in 1952.

Stauffenberg had served in a regiment in the Bavarian town of Bamberg, famous for its Romanesque cathedral. In the 1960s, a memorial plaque was placed in the cathedral, in honour of all those from the regiment who “gave their lives for Germany, our Fatherland”. It was left to speculation whether the five officers who had been executed for their role in the opposition against Hitler were meant to be included or not. Only much later, a much smaller plaque was added referring by name to those five, Stauffenberg being first among them.

Figure 2. Stauffenberg's plaque in Bamberg Cathedral



F.: Author's own photograph.

27. <https://politaufkleber.de/produkt/merkel-laenger-als-hitler-kein-stauffenberg-in-sicht/>, last retrieved 23-11-2021.



In the 2000s, a public memorial was erected honouring three people with links to Bamberg who were killed because of their various ways of opposing the Nazi regime, Stauffenberg among them. The bust depicting Stauffenberg is regularly the object of vitriolic attacks, some of them physical: the monument has been sprayed with an aggressive liquid, and graffiti was sprayed on the back of the monument implying Stauffenberg had been antisemitic.

These left-wing attempts to denounce Stauffenberg and his co-conspirators obviously play into the hands of the right-wing camp by associating these widely-accepted protagonists with right-wing movements.

The Wirmer Flag

Among the many ways in which the German New Right try to appropriate the tradition of the German resistance is its use of a flag devised by the Catholic resistance politician Josef Wirmer, who was also executed in the final months of the war.²⁸ Wirmer had designed a flag in the colours of the German republic, black, red, and gold, as opposed to the black, white, and red flags of the Nazi state. However, Wirmer had organized the three colours in the form of a cross, both to indicate the Christian dimension he felt post-war Germany should display, and to take up the pattern of the Scandinavian flags suggesting neutrality between East and West: a German *Third Way* between Communism and capitalism somewhat like Jakob Kaiser's notion of Germany as a bridge between East and West.

Right-wing demonstrators in many East German cities picked up on this as a focus for anti-immigrant demonstrations. As the demonstrators were unwilling to be openly xenophobic, they claimed to specifically oppose Muslim influence; the cross therefore seeming a good symbol through which to express their views – even if the Christian churches practically unanimously objected to this misappropriation of the cross, and although Wirmer's family also stated categorically that he would not have supported this abuse of his concept. Interestingly, this flag was often to be seen side by side with that of authoritarian Russia.

Right-wing Policies and German Society

The history of populist parties, their successes and failures, is gradually becoming the subject of historical analysis, rather than that of the political scientists.²⁹ That is why, by way of conclusion, we will take a historian's look at how the pre-1933 Nazi Party came to be as successful as it undoubtedly was, and whether there are any parallels between it and the New Right in today's Germany.

28. Maria-Magdalena HERMES, "Josef Wirmer, der Brückenbauer im Widerstand", in Rafaela HIEMANN and Christoph STUDDT (eds.), "*Weder überflüssig noch unterlegen*". *Neue Forschungen zum Widerstand im "Dritten Reich"*, Augsburg, Wißner, 2016 (=Schriftenreihe der Forschungsgemeinschaft 20. Juli 1944 e. V., 18).

29. See Uwe BACKES and Patrick MOREAU, *Europas moderner Rechtsextremismus. Ideologien, Akteure, Erfolgsbedingungen und Gefährdungspotentiale*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2021 as well as the recent paper Morten REITMAYER, "Populismus als Untersuchungsfeld der Zeitgeschichte. Ein kritischer Forschungsbericht", *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, 69 (2021).

How did the Nazi Party manage to come to power? Until about 1929, it had been one of many, largely obscure, parties on the political right of the Weimar Republic, whose policies were anti-parliamentarian, anti-semitic, albeit with a number of socialist elements, but decidedly anti-communist and prone to political violence, proletarian in attitude and voter basis, and unlikely to ever get beyond the three to five percent of votes it could hope for on a good day.³⁰

As such, then, Hitler, the party's dictatorial head, changed course: he began to mingle with big money, bankers, and Ruhr industrialists, and he also wooed the Reichswehr leadership. The revolutionary, socialist elements in his ideology were not erased; there was no party manifesto to speak of as the *25 points* formulated in 1920 were allegedly *immutable* so that they had become irrelevant in 1933. Instead, Hitler pushed his movement's anti-communism to the fore and got rid of some of the better-known left-wingers, such as Gregor and Otto Strasser (Otto Strasser went into exile, Gregor was murdered during the *Night of Long Knives* in June 1934). This enabled Hitler to promote himself and his party as the sole hope in the struggle against "Bolshevism".³¹

In this context, Hitler's lack of a clear-cut political programme turned out to be a decided advantage. Conservative voters could persuade themselves that Hitler was a gentleman who would soon rid himself of the more unsavoury elements surrounding him, while small shopkeepers, small-scale farmers and skilled workers hoped he would save them from losing their social status. Hitler's diffuse concepts did not however ever coagulate into a coherent "ideology".³² Instead, their very vagueness created a connectivity with many other groups that was based on the "partial identity of aims"³³.

In his 1924 book *Neubau des Deutschen Reiches (Rebuilding the German Reich)*, the right-wing author Oswald Spengler claimed that the Weimar Republic was not a state, but rather a firm (Weimarer "Republik keine Staatsform, sondern eine Firma").³⁴ This is another concept that today's German right-wingers have adopted in order to delegitimize the current political system.

On the whole, the AfD seems to have followed a course similar to the one that had brought the Nazis to power eighty years before. As we have seen from the example of their attitude to the German resistance against Hitler, they establish a connection with both those who see Stauffenberg as a traitor and those who believe he, and Sophie Scholl, would have voted for them. They try to offer a parliamentary, well-behaved

30. Hans MOMMSEN, "Das Scheitern der Weimarer Republik und der Aufstieg des Nationalsozialismus", in idem, *Von Weimar nach Auschwitz. Zur Geschichte Deutschlands in der Weltkriegsepoche*, Stuttgart, dva, 1999.

31. WILDT, *Geschichte des Nationalsozialismus*, pp. 58-66.

32. Books such as the recent Carl Müller FRÖLAND, *Understanding Nazi Ideology. The Genesis and Impact of a Political Faith*, Jefferson NC, McFarland, 2020, take the existence of such an ideology for granted, overlooking the essentially anti-intellectual and person-oriented, "charismatic" character of Hitler's rule: HERBST, Ludolf, *Hitlers Charisma. Die Erfindung eines deutschen Messias*, Frankfurt, Fischer TB, 2010

33. Wilhelm DEIST, "The Rearmament of the Wehrmacht", in MILITÄRGESCHICHTLICHES FORSCHUNGSAMT (ed.), *Germany and the Second World War, vol. I, The Build-up of German Aggression*, Oxford, OUP, 1990, p. 528.

34. Cited in Silvio KOBEL, *Henning v. Tresckow. Prägende Jahre, geistige Grundlagen, Ambivalenzen*, Berlin, Duncker & Humblot, 2020, p. 333.



façade to middle-class voters while at the same time not antagonizing their lower-class allies: football hooligans, gangs of rockers, and Nazi thugs prone to racist violence. It is a recipe that worked under different conditions: during a period of extreme economic crisis, mass poverty, and a perceived threat from abroad. Compared to that, today's Germany is saturated both territorially and economically. What is more, today's German society knows where right-wing extremism can lead; their forefathers in 1932 had not had the experience of Auschwitz.

Even so, Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde's dictum that "[t]he liberal secularized state lives by prerequisites which it cannot guarantee itself"³⁵ still stands. In other words: if there are not enough democrats left to defend democracy itself, then what? Germany is far from being at that point yet, but as Bertolt Brecht said in his parable about the rise of Hitler: "The womb he crawled from is still going strong."³⁶

35. Ernst Wolfgang BÖCKENFÖRDE, "Die Entstehung des Staates als Vorgang der Säkularisation", in idem, *Recht, Staat, Freiheit. Studien zur Rechtsphilosophie, Staatstheorie und Verfassungsgeschichte*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1991, p. 112.

36. BRECHT, *Der aufhaltsame Aufstieg des Arturo Ui*, epilogue.