

FRANKLIN DELANO ROOSEVELT AND THE GERMAN ANTI-NAZI RESISTANCE

On July 20, 1944, a bomb exploded in Adolf Hitler's **Führerhauptquartier** near Rastenburg, East Prussia. Under the leadership of Count Claus Schenck von Stauffenberg a conspiracy to overthrow the Nazi government had come close to fruition. The conspirators wanted to create a decent Germany which would fulfill its proper role among the nations of the world. Yet the plot failed. Many of the conspirators were tried and executed through the Nazi People's Court. The activities of the anti-Nazi Resistance reach back to the early years of the Hitler regime. As early as the Sudetenland crisis of 1938, highly placed members of the Army began to play a significant role in the Resistance. Their goal of overthrowing the Nazi regime became increasingly urgent as they realized that Hitler spelled disaster for Germany.

In the immediate post-World War II years little was publicized about the story of the German Resistance. The Cold War and the birth of the Federal Republic of Germany in 1949 witnessed a growing flow of publications dealing with this topic. Today there is an abundance of Resistance literature. Hans Rothfels' *German Opposition to Hitler* (1948) and Gerhard Ritter's *Carl Goerdeler and the German Resistance* (1956) belong to the early major works. Today Peter Hoffman's *The History of the German Resistance* (1969) and *Der Widerstand gegen den National Sozialismus* (1985), edited by Jürgen Schmäedecke and Peter Steinbach, must be considered the leading reference works in the field. They include all aspects of Resistance history. Karl Dietrich Bracher's essay "Zur Widerstands-Problematik in 'Rechtsdiktaturen' die deutsche Erfahrung" in *Deutschland zwischen Krieg und Frieden: Festschrift für Hans-Adolf Jacobsen* (1991) is likely the most recent contribution by the noted Bonn scholar to the field of Resistance history. It presents a concise summary of Bracher's comprehensive knowledge of the history and the problems of Resistance, which addresses many of the questions pertaining to the story of the Resistance. Yet some issues continue to demand the historian's attention,

among them the problem of the generally non-productive relationship between members of the Resistance and representatives of the Roosevelt Administration and the White House itself. The major source for investigating this problem are the documents which are collectively referred to as the "Breaker Reports," which are deposited in the National Archives in Washington D.C. This article is largely based on those documents.

Contacts between members of the anti-Hitler Resistance and members of the Roosevelt Administration existed from the early years of the Hitler regime until after the July 20, 1944, assassination attempt on the dictator's life. During the late summer and early fall of 1937, Dr. Carl Gordeler, the former Lord Mayor of Leipzig and the later "motor of the Resistance," visited with the endorsement of the Hitler government Canada and the United States. The official purpose of Gordeler's journey was to gather facts about these countries and to report his findings to Berlin. In the States Gordeler met Secretary of State Cordell Hull, Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson, Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau, George Messersmith of the Department of State and former President Hoover. Goerdeler had two goals, he wanted to strengthen the "Peace Party" in Hitler's circle by emphasizing the strength of the Western democracies. He also wanted to establish a personal relationship with influential personalities of the Administration so that a basis of operation and perhaps mutual trust could be created for the establishment of good relations between a new German government and the American government should the Hitler government be replaced.

In October, 1939, a few weeks after Germany's invasion of Poland, Adam von Trott zu Solz, Rhodes Scholar and employee of the German Foreign Office, arrived in America to participate in a convention of the Institute of Pacific Relations. Trott travelled with the approval of Foreign Minister von Ribbentrop. In his request for approval of the journey he stated that through the convention he would

obtain valuable insights into power-politics in the Pacific area as well as the political and economic involvement of Great Britain and the U.S.A. He emphasized how much Great Britain relied on American support. Trott wrote that he would be able to use his many contacts, among them Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson, Colonel William Donovan and President Roosevelt's friend Harry Hopkins "in the service of Germany." State Secretary Weizsäcker supported Trott's request to keep the United States from entering the war.

During his approximately three-month stay in the States, Adam von Trott zu Solz met and interacted with private and public personalities, among them Hamilton Fisk Strong, editor of the journal *Foreign Affairs*, Robert Baldwin of the American Civil Liberties Union, Felix Morley, editor of the *Washington Post*, and Supreme Court justice Felix Frankfurter, a personal friend of President Roosevelt.

President Roosevelt and F.B.I. Chief Edgar Hoover must have considered von Trott an important enough person to have him shadowed by agents of the Bureau throughout his stay in the United States. According to F.B.I. reports, Trott was "soliciting the assistance of prominent individuals in the U.S.A. to support a movement involving the overthrow of the present regime in Germany."¹ Hoover also pointed out that von Trott believed that the socialist circles in Germany and the Soviet Union would have to cooperate, that the future Germany would have to consist of a socialist life-style in a peaceful Europe, and that ultimately the world would be socialist. German victory, Trott said, was not obvious. The allied powers would have to give a new Germany "a chance" if the resistance effort were able to set aside Hitler, "but if these powers deny us this chance (then) we will not continue to seek their aid but we must consider them our enemies." In a memorandum for the Department of State, Trott suggests that the Allies afford the German anti-Hitler Resistance freedom of action and asks that they not take advantage of the moment of military weakness which would necessarily follow from Hitler's overthrow. He further asks that the American government not subscribe to the war-guilt thesis of World War I

and that it declare its war-aims openly. The war, von Trott insisted, should be ended quickly. An organization for European cooperation should be created. In England, von Trott maintained, there was an influential group which should not be trusted. This group might be willing to conclude a peace with Germany under non-acceptable terms.² Trott's ideas expressed in the memorandum came to the attention of Secretary of State Cordell Hull, Under-Secretary Sumner Welles, Secretary of the Treasury Morgenthau, Justice Frankfurter and President Roosevelt. Trott's immediate contact person in the Roosevelt Administration was Under-Secretary of State George Messersmith. Trott sought in vain to confer with the President himself.

Historian Margaret Boveri holds Felix Frankfurter responsible for preventing Trott's meeting the President, an allegation that Frankfurter denied.³ Moreover, Boveri asserts that "Roosevelt's temporary attention changed to mistrust and rejection. From this time on he was convinced that Germany must be punished and rendered innocuous."⁴

The State Department file on Trott's activities carries the heading "Espionage Activities."⁵ In a later memorandum to Alexander Kirk, U.S. Charge d'Affaires in Berlin, Messersmith advised caution in future dealings with Trott because of the latter's contacts with persons who were working for the Hitler government, although, so he says "this maybe the price that Trott has to pay to enjoy his freedom of movement."⁶

According to Hans Rothfels' pioneering chapter on **Friedensfühler** (peace probings) with the Allied powers, Trott's message was relayed to F.D.R. directly through the former German Chancellor Heinrich Brüning, who supposedly visited the White House in December, 1939. Initially, President Roosevelt seems to have been interested in supporting the German Resistance, but "soon thereafter and because of the influence of persons in F.D.R.'s closer environment, he declared further contacts to be uncalled for."⁷

In March 1940, Under-Secretary Sumner Welles visited Berlin on a peace mission. During his stay he met Adolf Hitler and the

former Reichminister Hjalmar Schacht. Schacht informed Sumner Welles that there were generals in Germany who were willing to overthrow the Hitler regime, if they received Allied guarantees that Germany would obtain a fitting position among the nations of the world and that it would not be treated as it had been in 1918. Essentially Schacht made the same request in Berlin that Trott had made in the States.

German military victories did not deter representatives of the Resistance from searching for opportunities to remain in contact with the Roosevelt Administration or at least with U.S. citizens who, through their position, would possibly have access to the White House. One such opportunity seemed to offer itself through the American entrepreneur Federico Stallforth. Stallforth had been involved in business deals between the U.S. and the Weimar Republic. He had personal contacts with political leaders such as Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini, Pope Pius XII, the Kennedys and Dwight D. Eisenhower. During late June and early July, 1940, Stallforth had seen Hermann Goring, who supposedly submitted a peace plan to him for the settlement of European issues, which was then turned down by Churchill and President Roosevelt. Stallforth travelled at this time with the official approval of the Nazi-Government⁸. For some time in 1941, Stallforth enjoyed the support of S.S. Obergruppenführer Heydrich, who was reacting positively to the American entrepreneur's plan to influence American public opinion in favor of Germany and against Great Britain. Stallforth suggested that he might be able to delay or perhaps even prevent America's anticipated entry into World War II. The Auswärtige Amt discovered early in April, 1941, that Stallforth was not to be trusted, that he served his own personal and financial interests only. Hjalmar Schacht had called Stallforth "a dubious person who was not always reliable."⁹ Ilse von Hassell, wife of the former German ambassador in Rome and prominent member of the Resistance, wrote that her husband "never totally lost his reservations in regard to the legitimacy of Stallforth."¹⁰ In spite of these suspi-

cions the American entrepreneur succeeded in meeting representatives of the anti-Hitler group, including high-ranking military leaders and Ulrich von Hassell. To them Stallforth suggested the creation of a constitutional monarchy and the overthrow of the Hitler-Göring regime. This would please the British and it would make peace with Great Britain possible.¹¹

In October, 1941, Stallforth had reported to Roosevelt about his contact with the Resistance and its plans. F.D.R. was elated over these revelations.¹² But a few weeks later Stallforth was declared *persona non grata* at the White House.¹³ Stallforth thought that F.D.R. had changed his mind about dealing with the German anti-Hitler Resistance for political reasons. In order to be re-elected, so Roosevelt thought, he needed to enter the war on the side of Great Britain. An incident which sheds light on President Roosevelt's reaction to the Resistance and its attempts to obtain American support is his refusal to receive Louis P. Lochner of the Berlin Office of the Associated Press. Lochner had met representatives of the anti-Hitler group on several occasions, especially in November, 1941, in the home of Dr. Joseph Winner, former Reichstag representative for the Catholic Center Party. Lochner was asked to inform the American President of the existence and the activities of the Resistance. The President was to let them know his preference for a future German government. A secret code was to facilitate direct radio contact between the Resistance and the White House.¹⁴

The entry of the United States into World War II with the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and Hitler's subsequent declaration of war against the United States increased America's interest in the internal affairs of Nazi-Germany and the German Resistance. To have a regular channel to the highest level of the German government providing useful information offered an opportunity not to be missed. Thus, in November, 1942, Colonel William J. Donovan, head of the Office of Strategic Services, appointed Alan Welsh Dulles Legal Assistant to the American minister in Bern, Switzerland. Through Dulles and

Donovan, the German Resistance had a line of communication to the White House. The German Resistance's messenger was Hans Bernd Gisevius, officially German Vice Consul in Switzerland. Gisevius enjoyed the protection of the Abwehr, the German equivalent of the Office of Strategic Services. Another go-between for Dulles and Gisevius was Mary Bancroft, who had become a friend of both. Messages about the anti-Hitler group were sent with increasing frequency, especially as the summer of 1944 approached and plans to assassinate Adolf Hitler and topple the Nazi-regime were maturing. Especially important messages from Dulles/Donovan were accompanied by a brief cover-note from William, "Wild Bill" Donovan to Roosevelt's personal secretary Grace Tulley. These cover-notes read, "Dear Grace: Would you please make sure that the President sees this." Miss Tulley assured me in a personal interview that she did make sure that F.D.R. saw those messages. Thus we know that President Roosevelt was well informed about the German Resistance. Eleanor Roosevelt wrote a brief letter to this author stating that her husband knew about the Resistance, "but it was little."¹⁵

While the flow of information from Berlin to Bern and from Bern to Washington, including the White House, was steady, the response in the opposite direction was thin. The Resistance desired an endorsement and recognition of their existence and support of their proposed action to overthrow the Hitler regime. They desired an Allied declaration that they — the Allies — would recognize the new Germany and that they would favor a just and fair peace. The unconditional surrender formula of early 1943 was the opposite of what the anti-Nazi Resistance had asked for.

Understandably, the opposition in Germany was frustrated, but so was the O.S.S.'s spokesman in Bern, Alan Welsh Dulles. In a message of January, 1944, Dulles wrote, "I would appreciate hearing of any indication with which you would supply me regarding what you would be interested in achieving via the Breakers (code-name for the Resistance). I do not understand what our policy is and

what offers, if any, we could give to any resistance movement."¹⁶ A detailed message which Dulles forwarded to Washington notes that labor leaders of the Resistance urge F.D.R. and Churchill to reveal practical goals for the future of Central Europe. Military victory will mean little, the note insisted, if the uncertainty of the situation were not clarified in the near future; "peace will be quickly lost and new dictatorships may take the place of the one in Central Europe." The labor leaders of the German Opposition also raised the specter of a Central Europe in despair which would be a fertile field for the growth of communism. Bombs and air leaflets should not be dropped at the same time.¹⁷

Five days before the assassination attempt on July 20, 1944, O.S.S. Bern suggested to Washington that F.D.R. issue a declaration in which he should state that the Allies do not intend the destruction of Germany. The declaration should also encourage anti-Nazi forces.¹⁸ O.S.S. Chief Donovan did not react favorably. He wired back to Bern that "your jobs have all involved merely the passive acceptance of intelligence regarding the desire of the Breakers to find some way out. You have done no bargaining of any kind."¹⁹

One concern was the Soviet Union, which apparently had no knowledge of the O.S.S.'s dealings with the anti-Hitler Opposition. General Watts and Ambassador Winant in London agreed to inform the Soviets,²⁰ but Bern opposed the London position and at the same time wired to London that the Breakers were entirely on their own and had received neither encouragement nor political news.²¹ The decision to release or not release information to Moscow was left with Washington.

A description of contacts between the Roosevelt Administration or self-appointed representatives of the United States and members of the anti-Hitler Opposition and an evaluation of the reception of these "contacts" leaves one major question unanswered: why did the Resistance receive neither support nor even encouragement from the F.D.R. Administration? The answer can only be speculative. It was not President Roosevelt's prac-

tice to make marginal comments on messages that came to his desk. Nor are we privy to the deliberations in the White House Map Room, which was the place where important discussions took place. No minutes were kept. No tapes were produced. Yet, some tentative answers are possible:

- (1) Roosevelt and his administration did not entirely trust the representatives of the Resistance. Their credentials led to the fear of duplicity. Leaders of the Resistance were often identical with the conservative Prussian Junker class.
- (2) There was concern about the Soviet Union. One did not want to give Stalin more reason to suspect the loyalty and reliability of his partners in the West. The interests of the Western Allies would not be served by another Soviet-German rapprochement. Allied-Soviet cooperation was considered essential to achieve victory and had to be safeguarded.
- (3) There was no assurance that the Resistance would be successful in riding Germany of the Nazi regime. What would be the consequence of a civil war in Germany? Would such a conflict possibly see the Western powers and the Soviet Union on opposite sides?
- (4) If the anti-Hitler Opposition were to succeed, how would one deal with the new government of the "other, the decent Germany"? Again, there would be at least the potential for a West-East split which may have been an intention of the Resistance.
- (5) President Roosevelt did not relish the thought of a possible repetition of 1918/1919, when a new German government had to be dealt with. It was inside the Weimar Republic that the "stab-in-the-back legend," which helped the Nazis come to power, had grown.
- (6) By July, 1944, weeks after the successful invasion, victory, so one thought, was close at hand. A complete victory over Germany, accompanied by an uncondi-

tional surrender appeared to create a more solid basis of bringing about peace in Europe. Roosevelt was the politician who preferred to deal with political/military realities rather than with indefinite and insecure potentialities. Often, when F.D.R. was asked what his ideas were for peace, he answered "let us win the war first", and so it was with Germany and its anti-Hitler Resistance.

In retrospect it is possible to appreciate the Roosevelt Administration's non-supportive behavior. It makes the efforts of the Resistance shine the brighter. They can claim that their ultimate motivation to overthrow the Nazi regime was ethical, that they acted in spite of only slim chances of success. They acted because their conscience ordered them to do so.

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NOTES

¹Hoover to General Watson, Secretary to the President, White House, January 16, 1940.

²Department of State, MS 862.20211.

³*Der Verrat im zwanzigsten Jahrhundert* (Hamburg 1956), 72-73.

⁴Boveri, 72-73.

⁵State Department #862.20211.

⁶Messersmith to Kirk, December 8, 1939, Memorandum for the File, Department of State, Assistant Secretary, #862.20211.

⁷Rothfels, *Die deutsche Opposition gegen Hitler*, Fischer Bücherei 1958, 145.

⁸Auswärtiges Amt, Inland II G, 517, 217293, 217290, 217292.

⁹Hjalmar Schacht to author, January 6, 1958; February 9, 1957.

¹⁰Ilse von Hassell to author, June 11, 1957.

¹¹Whitney/Stallforth-Donovan Memorandum.

¹²Stallforth, in an interview with author.

¹³Stallforth, in an interview with author; cf. Georg Schöllén, *U. v. Hassell, 1881-1944 Ein Konservativer in der Opposition* (1990), 25 ff.

¹⁴Rothfels, *Verrat*, 146.

¹⁵Mrs. Roosevelt to the author, personal letter.

¹⁶O.S.S., Official Dispatch from Bern, 27 January, 1944.

¹⁷Dulles from Bern, 27 Jan. 1944.

¹⁸O.S.S. Bern, 15 July 1944, Breakers, #4111-12.

¹⁹O.S.S. director to Bern, 26 July, 1944.

²⁰Ustravic, London-Bern, Breakers #62869, 24 July, 1944.

²¹O.S.S. Bern to London, July 26, 1944, #855-7.



*Immigrant children waiting for processing at Ellis Island.
Courtesy National Park Service: Statue of Liberty National Monument.*