July 20, 1944 was both the apex and the nadir of the German Widerstand, the moment when years of planning finally came to fruition and then, suddenly, collapsed. On that day Colonel Claus von Stauffenberg, the leading member of the military Widerstand, planted an explosive device hidden in a briefcase under the conference table at Hitler's East Prussian headquarters, the Wolfschanze. The resulting explosion killed several people, and Stauffenberg returned to Berlin secure in the knowledge that he had succeeded in his patriotic—and treasonous—act. But when news came that Hitler had in fact survived, plans for a coup d'état quickly evaporated. Colonel-General Friedrich Fromm, Stauffenberg's commanding officer who was himself implicated in the plot, arrested Stauffenberg and Colonel-General Ludwig Beck. After summary courts martial, Fromm had Stauffenberg and several others executed. Beck, who was to have served as Regent in the new Provisional Government, was allowed to save face by committing suicide. Stauffenberg's last words in front of the firing squad were “Long live holy Germany!”

Since that fateful day, the members of the conspiracy to kill Hitler have been alternately depicted as martyrs and traitors, freedom fighters and reactionaries, universal heroes and German nationalists. Many argue that, despite their opposition to National Socialism, the majority of the conspirators were wedded to political ideas that in the words of historian Hans Mommsen, “did not yet seem historically obsolete,” even though they had indeed become so. It may seem that to criticize the conspirators for their inability to predict the future course of German political development is an exercise in malicious posthumous defamation, an attempt to besmirch the good names of the only people within Germany who had the courage to stand up to the Nazi regime, and who gave their lives in the process. But this
issue of politics is not about defamation of character—it is crucial. In post-war Germany, politicians of all sorts have sought to expropriate the memory of the Widerstand for political ends. It is not only fair, then, to ask what the members of the Widerstand thought politically; it is imperative for a proper understanding of recent German history. Here it becomes clear that the ideas of the conspirators were, indeed, "obsolete," and not at all in keeping with the values of the German Federal Republic in which they have become enshrined as national heroes.

**Historiography and Politics in the Federal Republic**

It is difficult—and perhaps not wise—to attempt to separate popular reactions to the July 20 coup inside and outside of Germany from the judgments made by historians. What is surprising is that for all of the disagreements regarding the historiography of July 20, the initial reactions from the Allied and Nazi camps were remarkably similar. Adolf Hitler famously branded his would-be assassins as a "very small clique of ambitious, unscrupulous, and at the same time criminally stupid officers," and attributed his survival to divine providence. The *New York Times* compared the conspirators and their methods to that of the "gangster's lurid underworld," while the *New York Herald Tribune* remarked cold-heartedly, "Let the generals kill the corporal, or vice-versa, preferably both." Winston Churchill echoed the *Herald Tribune* when he expressed delight at the fact that his enemies were devouring themselves. The official Allied position stated that "we endorse the judgment of the generals if not their motives," while clarifying that the Allies would welcome a new government, but only provided that it was willing to surrender. For the Allies, whose sole goal was military victory, the coup seemed a desperate attempt to win last-minute concessions, which were not forthcoming.

Humiliated by their defeat and occupation, the German public largely continued to agree with the original judgment of their dead Führer regarding the July 20 conspirators after the war's end. Even by 1952, a survey showed that 40 percent of West Germans felt that the conspirators should be judged positively, and only 20 percent approved of their resistance during wartime. Emmi Bonhoeffer, wife of Klaus and sister-in-law of Dietrich, both members of the resistance, recalled the experience of her daughter Cornelia. Upon revealing her father's identity to a stranger, the girl was met with a condescending "poor little traitor's kid." Rosemarie Reichwein, wife of Adolf Reichwein, a Socialist member of the resistance, found that the public reaction was both critical and ambivalent towards the conspirators. Most people simply did not understand the conspirators' motives, nor did they attempt to learn about them. But this public reaction also manifested itself in forms far more menacing than the occasional cruel remark from a stranger. By the early 1950s, numerous right-wing politicians in Germany openly denounced the conspirators' behavior as treasonous. Otto-
Ernst Remer, who had actually participated in crushing the coup attempt in 1944, went so far as to say that the surviving conspirators should be tried as traitors.8

Within this atmosphere of sharp criticism toward the most visible resisters against Nazi tyranny, it is hardly surprising that a revisionist viewpoint emerged. And so German exile Hans Rothfels, in writing the first scholarly account of the failed coup, attempted to counter what he saw as overly harsh criticisms. He thereby founded what the historian Theodore Hamerow calls the Eulogistic School.9 Rothfels, betraying his bias, begins his book with the declaration that “the historian’s foremost duty should be to pay tribute to the men who worked for the day of reckoning.”10 It was his belief that the key to July 20 was not its success or failure as a political act, but rather the underlying moral principles.11 Certainly from a simple moral standpoint of resisting evil, the conspirators’ actions were unimpeachable. What is most remarkable about Rothfels’ book, written as it is in a defensive manner and addressed to a potentially hostile audience, is that within just a few years it became the historiographical orthodoxy.12

The Cold War changed the tenor of the debate regarding the July 20 conspirators. The theory of collective guilt was now a hindrance to the policies of the United States and Great Britain, and it became necessary to justify support for the new West Germany by insisting that there existed “good” Germans with whom to cooperate.13 The July 20 conspirators, then, became the historical proof that not all Germans had dutifully followed Hitler. Simultaneously, the government of the German Federal Republic saw fit to defend the resisters against criticism by declaring that “their act helped establish the basis upon which a Germany could be rebuilt in cooperation with the free world.” President Theodor Heuss identified the resisters as martyrs and called their resistance “a gift to the German future.”14 More cynically, Konrad Adenauer, Prime Minister and leader of the Christian Democratic Union, exploited the resisters by claiming that his party alone could trace its “historical roots” to the resistance of those committed to Christian values.15 But whether cynical or laudatory, these efforts by politicians clearly indicated a desire to link the deeds of the conspirators to the existence of the Federal Republic, thereby offering legitimacy to the democratic regime. The question then becomes: would the conspirators themselves have wanted to be linked to such a regime?

Also in the mid-1950s, the Eulogistic School became dominant. As the political landscape in the Federal Republic had shifted such that the July 20 conspirators were now heroes, a new school of historiography more critical of the conspirators was starting to rise. One of the questions it attempted to answer was precisely the one posed above. For it soon became clear that to associate the conspirators with democracy was to make the fallacious assumption that any opponent of Nazism must, ipso facto, be a proponent of democracy. In fact, the conspirators expressed a dizzying, and sometimes contradictory, array of political ideas, few of which pointed the way to Germany’s democratic future. Sir John Wheeler-Bennett, who, with his 1954 book, *Nemesis of Power*, founded the Critical School of July 20th
historiography, concedes that "there were certainly elements of democracy" in the Widerstand.\textsuperscript{16} But as the Critical School gained adherents in the 1980s and 1990s, other more recent historians, such as Hamerow, have been unwilling to grant even that much. For Hamerow, it is clear from the writings of the conspirators themselves that these men "fundamentally opposed democratic principles."\textsuperscript{17} The historians of the Critical School do not, however, tend to disparage the honor and courage of the conspirators, even as they question their politics. This sets them apart from the contemporary interpretations as much as from the Eulogistic School. Wheeler-Bennett, for instance, speaking of the conspirators' motives, acknowledges that "there was nothing base about it, nothing dishonourable."\textsuperscript{18} Mommsen concludes that "their enduring heritage lies not in their specific political plans and programs... but, rather, in their insistence on a belief in human dignity and social justice."\textsuperscript{19} This is certainly true, though it is complicated by the actions of post-war politicians; when their heritage is used to promote specific political agendas, discussing and criticizing their specific plans and programs becomes unavoidable.

\textbf{Autonomy within the Nazi State}

The nearly universal tendency towards right-wing political ideas among the major conspirators is explained partly by the fact that leftists were quickly removed from key positions in the Army and state, and were under constant surveillance by the Gestapo, as well as by their own neighbors and friends. Rosemarie Reichwein, for instance, recalled that both her neighbor and mailman were spying on her, presumably on behalf of the Gestapo.\textsuperscript{20} Members of the Communist Party, especially, were unable to operate effectively within the resistance. The constant surveillance threatened not just them, but also their associates, with arrest and possible execution or detainment in a concentration camp. The Gestapo, cleverly, would often allow potential Communist resisters just enough freedom to contact sympathizers and grow in strength before they "attacked" and destroyed an entire cell.\textsuperscript{21} The majority of the leadership of the Socialist Party (SPD), meanwhile, had fled the country, staying one step ahead of the Nazi advance by moving to Prague in 1933, Paris in 1938, and London in 1940. But while the exiled leadership was free to operate outside of Germany, their cadres within Germany were subject to the same constraints as the Communists.\textsuperscript{22} By these means, the Gestapo effectively controlled the behavior of both the parties on the left which served as obvious natural enemies to the regime.

Only those with rightist views were able to maintain their positions of influence within the Army and high civil service. These positions of power were still held predominantly by the same aristocrats who had held the positions under the Republic and the Empire.\textsuperscript{23} But these men were not the ideal people to carry out resistance. Fabian von Schlabrendorff, himself an officer and member of the conspiracy, notes that "concentration on military mat-
ters made [the average German officer] incompetent in non-military questions, and particularly in politics.24 Additionally, most of these men had only reluctantly served the Weimar Republic, and had, in fact, rejoiced at the founding of the Nazi regime. Major-General Hans Oster, active in the Abwehr circle of resistance, noted that it was only "with a heavy heart" and after "the most difficult inner struggles" that the officer corps was able to bring itself to serve the Weimar Republic.25

General Beck, meanwhile, greeted the new regime as the "first ray of hope" since the end of the war.26 But there were advantages to using the Army as a tool for resistance. Most obviously, in the words of Schlabrendorff, "only the Army had at its disposal the weapons and the power necessary to overthrow the firmly entrenched régime."37 Also, the military and upper classes had three key tools against the Gestapo. First, due to a certain level of social exclusivity, criticisms of the regime could generally be expressed freely within circles of friends without fear of betrayal to the police.38 Second, the loose affiliations of the conspiracy made it difficult for the Gestapo to distinguish between normal discontent and more serious opposition.39 Third, resisters within the highest echelons of the regime, especially those within the Abwehr, were able to act as counter-intelligence "shields" to disguise the true nature of the conspiracy.40

Just as members of the upper class were able to insulate themselves from the machinations of the Gestapo, the Army as a whole was able to maintain its autonomy apart from the rest of the Nazi State. The process that led to this autonomy within the state is complex, but can be traced broadly to the interplay between two distinct threads of political development within Germany. The first thread was the obvious, but important, fact that the Army, unlike the SS or many other organizations, was created not by the Nazis, but had its own separate centuries-old roots and traditions.41 Among these traditions, drawn originally from Prussia, was the separation of the Army from the political sphere. Schlabrendorff alludes to this in the quote above—German officers had little political competence because they deliberately avoided political matters. As part of this trade-off, then, officers expected politicians to avoid military matters, and bristled when they did not. Stauffenberg, for instance, was moved to act partly because of "meddling" in the Army's affairs by Hitler.42 But it should be noted that this tradition was limited exclusively to the Army; the Navy and Air Force, much more recent creations, did not have the same traditions.43

The second thread, which at least partially contradicted the separation of the Army from politics, was the submission and meekness of the Army in the face of Hitler's bullying in the early years of the Nazi regime. This was exemplified by two events in 1934: the Röhm Putsch and the institution of the loyalty oath. Hitler understood, according to André François-Poncet, the French Ambassador to Germany, "that the general staff was an enemy camp [and] ... that this clique of Junkers and conservative army officers represented a permanent threat to his authority."44 The Putsch, on the night of June 30, 1934, resulted in the summary execution of Ernst Röhm, a leader of the paramilitary Sturmabteilung (SA) who was thought by
many Army officers to be a dangerous radical, and who had advocated the merging of the SA with the regular Army, a move to which the officers strongly objected. Hitler’s move against the radical wing of his own party delighted the officers, as it seemed to affirm the Army’s unique position in the state. Following the Putsch, the regime’s popularity shot to 95 percent, according to an unnamed official in the War Ministry.\footnote{35} But this came at a high price. Effectively, the Army had to assent to the murder of two of its generals: Kurt von Schleicher, the former Chancellor, and Kurt von Bredow, whose murder had occurred as part of the Putsch. This was followed on the second of August by the institution of a new loyalty oath for all officers and men in the \textit{Reichswehr}. The changed wording of the oath meant that the soldiers were no longer sworn just to defend Germany, but now owed personal allegiance to Adolf Hitler. Through these two events, Hitler effectively co-opted the loyalty of the Army, which made its complete Nazification unnecessary, but also left open a small window of opportunity for those with the will to resist.

Motivations for Resistance

The autonomy of the Army serves to explain how it was possible for some officers to resist, but it does not explain why they chose to do so. Here, it is important to note that the resistance was not, according to Schlabrendorff, “an organized political movement but...the reaction of individuals.”\footnote{36} As such, there can be no clear connection between belonging to a particular social group and participation in the resistance.\footnote{37} It must be remembered that the number of conspirators in the Army numbered no more than a few hundred, and therefore being an Army officer did not, \textit{ipso facto}, make one a resister. Instead, as Countess Margarethe von Hardenberg, secretary to the conspirator Major-General Henning von Tresckow, stated, joining the resistance “depended on something inside oneself.”\footnote{38} Emmi Bonhoeffer clarified that joining the resistance was not a conscious act of free will, but was based on “inner necessity.”\footnote{39} Active resistance required not just the opportunity to resist, but also the conviction that resistance was correct. It was a great risk, not just legally and physically—due to the threat of arrest, torture, and execution—but also socially. Resistance “entailed for each of [the resisters] an existential leap... into self-sufficiency and loneliness.”\footnote{40} Resistance was, after all, an antisocial act, although members of the resistance who had like-minded friends were at least partially shielded from this.\footnote{41}

One of the impediments to resistance among the Army officers was, however, the oath of loyalty they had sworn to Adolf Hitler. Many officers, even if they did not support Hitler and the Nazis, claimed that they could not bring themselves to resist because they felt themselves honor-bound to serve Hitler, and honor was not something to be trifled with among traditional-minded officers. At the same time, Hans Rothfels claims that the officers had been “tricked” into swearing an oath to Hitler. It seems unlikely that officers would feel
that issues the support, autonomy, patriotism, in the Sudeten Crisis was the fall of 1938.

In the history of the Widerstand, the Sudeten Crisis in the fall of 1938 was a decisive moment that brought together the issues of popular support, autonomy, patriotism, and...
politics. This crisis offered perhaps the best opportunity for a coup. Hitler, though popular, was threatening war, and the German people were not yet wholeheartedly in favor of such an aggressive policy. Additionally, the autonomy of the Army and civil service had provided plenty of conspirators willing to take the necessary steps to prevent war. General Beck, for instance, wrote that “all upright and serious-minded German men ... [are] obliged to use all conceivable ways and means, including the ultimate recourse, in order to avert war against Czechoslovakia.” Beck was motivated by the fact that, in his mind, a war would bring about the “finis Germaniae.” It is with this in mind that the members of the nascent Widerstand made several attempts at negotiating with the Allies, especially the British, which included overseas trips by Carl Goerdeler and Adam von Trott zu Solz. The basic strategy of the resistance, dubbed the Setback Theory by Klemens von Klemperer, was devised by Colonel-General Franz Halder, the senior Army officer in the conspiracy, and was based on the idea that only a major policy failure would leave Hitler vulnerable to a coup. The only failure large enough for this purpose in the fall of 1938 was for the Allies to call Hitler’s bluff on Czechoslovakia by threatening war. The problem inherent to this strategy was that it could work only in conjunction with the Allies, whose support was not forthcoming at this time.

The inability to win Allied support for the coup can be attributed to three main reasons: Allied reluctance to go to war, Allied distrust of the conspirators, and the conspirators’ unwillingness to moderate their political views. This first point is key because it was what separated the conspirators’ understanding of the Sudeten Crisis from that of Hitler. Hitler understood that the Allies were loath to go to war over Czechoslovakia in 1938 and would be willing to accept almost any plan that appeared to preserve the peace; this was, in fact, the basis of his strategy. The conspirators, meanwhile, failed to grasp this concept. Schlabrendorff argues that the Allies should have threatened war because even if the coup had failed, a civil war would have followed and the resulting events would have been damaging only to Germany. But this argument is specious; Schlabrendorff fails to acknowledge that by declaring war, and thereby likely involving their nations in battles where their soldiers would die, the British and French would certainly suffer. Though he does not say as much, the implication is that these losses would be minor and bearable. But here Schlabrendorff fails to take into account that at this point in time, any losses would have been unbearable to the Western Powers. This theory is borne out by the events of the so-called Phoney War of 1939–40, when the Allies strictly maintained a defensive posture despite Hitler’s total concentration with Poland.

Second, it is clear that, even when emissaries for the opposition did venture abroad, they were not necessarily well-received. The dilemma they faced was that they were virtually unknown people emerging from a totalitarian country claiming to be willing to commit treason and offering plans for peace. For the Allies, it was quite unclear what faction these groups represented and how seriously their ideas should be entertained. Goerdeler, for instance, visited the United States for several months in late 1937, including a lengthy stay
with John Wheeler-Bennett, then living in Virginia. Despite Goerdeler's avowed opposition to the Nazi regime, many were unconvinced and assumed that he must be a Nazi agent of one form or another. Sir Robert Vansittart, a member of Prime Minister Chamberlain's government, at first befriended and admired Goerdeler. But shortly after the Munich agreement, even he concluded that Goerdeler “was merely a stalking-horse for German military expansion,” which was different in name only from Nazi expansionism. Additionally, the emissaries arrived in the middle of the debates over appeasement and whether there existed good Germans with which to deal. Those, like Vansittart, who argued against appeasement, which the resistance also opposed, tended to not want to make a distinction between good and bad Germans. They were thus less likely to welcome the ideas of the emissaries. Besides, even had British anti-appeasers wanted to make this distinction, it is not clear that the conservative members of the resistance would have qualified as good Germans in the eyes of the British, since many of them had only recently come to reject Nazism.

Third, what made the British so wary of the emissaries from the opposition was precisely the fact that their political ideas and plans very much resembled those of the Nazis. For Goerdeler, especially, Hitler's plans for Czechoslovakia were dangerous and offensive not because Goerdeler did not want the Sudetenland absorbed into Germany, but because he did. Hitler's aggressive expansionism, which threatened a world war which Germany might lose, was a danger to Goerdeler's more conservative irredentism—to his mind, the British were “negotiating with the wrong partner.” Ewald Kleist-Schmenzin, a conservative Junker and long-time opponent of the Nazis, was sent to London in August 1938 by Oster and Canaris, with Beck's approval. He was to make contact with Vansittart and Churchill, who was then a minor member of Parliament. But Kleist failed to win British support when he made it clear that he and his associates wanted the Polish Corridor returned to Germany—a territorial demand that the Nazis had not even made yet. This followed a brief episode where a German journalist named Victor von Koerber, working on his own, approached the British Military Attaché advocating a revolution to restore the Hohenzollern monarchy. The British, of course, were absolutely opposed to the restoration of the monarchy that had started a war against them a mere twenty-four years earlier. It is clear that the frankness of these various opposition members regarding their plans to build a more powerful Germany was disturbing to the British, who, after all, were not concerned with helping to serve the interests of conservative Germans, but rather with serving the interests of their own country. It is therefore not surprising that the British found it unacceptable to offer aid to these resisters at the time of the Sudeten Crisis, and preferred to attempt appeasement of the Nazis.
The Major Conspirators

After the aborted coup of 1938, the conspiracy went into hibernation. Dependent upon the Setback Theory, the resistance was unable to act in the key period of 1939–42, when Hitler’s mistakes were few and his popularity was massive.61 After the defeat at Stalingrad, the resistance gained adherents, and was able to attempt several assassination attempts. Of those operating within the conspiracy at this time, three men stand out as particularly important to the coup. The first was Claus von Stauffenberg, the man who planted the bomb on July 20, 1944 and was the driving force behind both the political and military preparation for the coup. The second was Carl Goerdeler, the main right-wing politician in the coup, and one of the senior members of the conspiracy. The third was Helmuth von Moltke, who, as the head of the Kreisau Circle, was involved with much of the planning for post-coup German society.

Claus Schenk von Stauffenberg

Colonel Claus Schenk Graf von Stauffenberg was, first and foremost, a soldier, and possessed, therefore, a keenly attuned sense of honor, loyalty, and discipline.64 As a young man, his political and social ideas were shaped mainly by his involvement, along with his brothers Alexander and Berthold, in the circle of followers around the poet Stefan George. George, in his later years, was especially fascinated by nobility, and so those in the circle took to these three young counts eagerly. Claus himself wrote in a poem that he and his brothers were “the blond heirs of the Staufens and Ottonians”—a reference to old German royal lines. It is noteworthy that, according to the brothers’ biographer, Peter Hoffmann, “significant ideas” from this and other poems of Claus’s would remain with him until his death.65 The sense of noble privilege, especially, was evident in the oath Stauffenberg wrote for members of the conspiracy, which included the now infamous line, “we despise the lie that all men are equal, and accept the natural ranks.”66 George was also wedded to the vaguely fascist ideology of a “Secret Germany” composed of the “dormant forces out of which . . . the Nation was to rise,” so it is not surprising that many of his followers became adherents to Nazism, especially given that “National Socialists often talked in exactly the same way as the Poet [George].”67 Claus, though he was never a member of the Party, did, by his widow’s admission, welcome the changes the Nazis brought.68 And his brother Berthold, speaking for himself and Claus after the failed coup, told the police that they had approved of most of the Nazi’s domestic policies.69

Though Claus von Stauffenberg is, in the popular imagination of the coup, the central figure, the fact is that he only began to actively oppose Hitler in mid-1942, when he sent the first of many letters to high-ranking officers urging them to resist the regime.70 He had been aware of the coup as early as 1938, at the time of the Sudeten Crisis.71 Once that coup attempt failed to materialize and the war began a year later, Stauffenberg maintained, like many other
officers, that the war effort should be the primary duty of every soldier. Any move against the regime would have to wait until after victory was achieved. It was only once victory came to seem impossible that Stauffenberg and his brother Berthold decided to join the resistance. Morality also played a part in Claus von Stauffenberg's decision, as he was quite disturbed by the war crimes committed against Russians, Poles, and Jews. But again, it seems that he did not allow this to affect his thinking until 1942. However, once Stauffenberg joined the conspiracy, he was the impetus behind the coup and never ceased insisting on the necessity for tyrannicide.

Carl Goerdeler

Before devoting his life to opposing the Nazi Party, Dr. Carl Friedrich Goerdeler was a member of Alfred Hugenberg's German National People's Party (DNVP), and he served as Burgomaster of Leipzig and then as Reich Prices Commissioner under the Brüning Chancellorship. The latter position forced him to resign from the DNVP, since Hugenberg did not support Brüning. With the rise of the Hitler chancellorship, Goerdeler came into conflict with the Nazis over various issues, including the mistreatment of Jewish businessmen in Leipzig. This did not keep him from returning to the Prices Commissioner position in 1934-5. He remained as mayor of Leipzig until 1937 when he resigned to protest the dismantling of a statue of Mendelssohn, the famous German-Jewish composer from Leipzig. After his resignation, he became a tireless opponent of Nazism, working as an overseas emissary of the resistance, as stated above. But this opposition to the Third Reich did not mean that Goerdeler wanted a return to the pre-Nazi status quo. He was a staunch opponent of the Treaty of Versailles, which had handed his native West Prussia and Posen to Poland, and thus never came to accept Germany's defeat in World War I. He also never fully accepted the Weimar Republic, and in fact never supported parliamentary democracy, preferring rule by oligarchy. However, although he was anti-democratic, he did favor the rule of law as well as basic freedoms of thought, speech, and the press.

Helmut James von Moltke and the Kreisau Circle

Unlike most of the other major conspirators, Helmut James Graf von Moltke was neither a politician, civil servant, nor soldier. Rather he was a lawyer and aristocrat with family ties to both Germany and the British Empire. Moltke's opposition to Hitler rested firmly on the basis of his Christian beliefs; it was these beliefs that he hoped would create a new society after the end of the war. For him, the key was to use Christianity and a focus on individuals to create a new national community, distinct from traditional nationalism. While Moltke clearly had no wish to create a Christian state, and made references to "humanist" ethics, this seems to mask the fact that the state and national community he envisioned bore more similarities to a theocracy than a democracy. Discussion was to be encouraged, but at the same time, unanimity was expected. He did not understand that even
within the national community, different interests would come into conflict. These same Christian beliefs, however, led Moltke to refuse to participate in the proposed coup and to strenuously object to the assassination of Hitler. Noting that “murder is always a crime,” Moltke felt that to begin a new era with a murder was to reduce the opposition to the level of the Nazis. Rather, Moltke felt that it was the duty of the civilian opposition to make plans for a post-Hitler Germany, whether it came about by means of a coup or through an accident. It is not surprising then, that Moltke considered it something of a blessing that he was arrested in January 1944, before circumstances forced him to actively join the conspiracy.

Moltke’s major contribution to the resistance was his founding of the Kreisau Circle, named after the town in which the Moltke family estate was located. The composition of the members of the Circle was quite varied; Moltke was able to bring these people together and facilitate discussions among them. Members of the Circle spanned the political spectrum, ranging from Socialists to National Socialists. On the left, Carlo Mierendorff and Adolf Reichwein were both former SPD members, while Friedrich-Dietlof Graf von der Schulenberg, who remained committed to the National Socialist ideal to the end, represented the most extreme right wing of the conspiracy. The ideal of Kreisau was to fuse socialist and conservative ideas. But Moltke tended to overestimate the extent to which diverse people could be made to agree on political issues, which was perhaps symptomatic of his belief in unanimity within the national community. Despite Moltke’s attempts to unite disparate political ideas, the Kreisau Circle eventually decided on a program that was fundamentally conservative in character and opposed to liberal democracy.

Political Plans for Post-Hitler Germany

While the personal political ideas of the major conspirators certainly were conservative and tended toward opposition to democracy, the central issue of the debate regarding their use by politicians to legitimate the Federal Republic must center on their specific political plans. To do this, it is necessary to look at both the social and political plans of the conspirators, as well as their plans for ending the war. From these programs, a picture of the post-war society envisioned by the conspirators begins to emerge. It is clear that this society did not, fundamentally, aspire to democratic ideals.

Peace Settlement

Since the plans for the coup were taking place during wartime, the issue of how to end the war and what the terms of peace would be were of paramount concern. During the early stages of the war, when German victory seemed assured, conservatives such as Beck and Ulrich von Hassell, the former Ambassador to Italy, desired a peace that would legitimate
Germany's territorial acquisitions in Austria, the Sudetenland, and the Polish Corridor, with the remains of Poland and Czechoslovakia becoming client states of Germany. Goerdeler, meanwhile, envisioned German hegemony in Central Europe with the blessing of the Western Powers. For the conspirators, this negotiated peace was consistent with their belief that war should not be used to achieve political ends. Furthermore, they thought such a peace would be acceptable to the Allies because the price would be paid only by the weak states of Eastern Europe. But without being able to overthrow Hitler, which, due to the Setback Theory, was impossible in this early stage of the war when Germany was winning victory after victory, the peace plans of the conspirators were all for nothing. After the debacle of the Munich Pact, Great Britain was clearly not willing to negotiate a peace at this stage.

The changing tide of the war, however, also changed the nature of the calls for peace. Stauffenberg, for instance, saw that Hitler was threatening to drag the entire nation down with him into a defeat of fantastic proportions. And yet, even in the face of imminent defeat, members of the conspiracy continued to insist on terms of peace that were favorable to Germany. Though by 1943 Moltke was convinced that Germany would be destroyed, Goerdeler still pressed for the restoration of the 1914 borders along with the incorporation of Austria (including South Tyrol) and the Sudetenland, as well as the primacy of Germany on the continent. Stauffenberg, meanwhile, likewise insisted that Germany should maintain its great power status after defeat. The military solution, meanwhile, as devised in May 1944 by Field-Marshal Erwin Rommel, Commander-in-Chief of Army Group B in France and nominal member of the conspiracy, was to evacuate all troops in Western Europe behind the Siegfried Line in Germany, while continuing to fight on a shortened front in the East. The conspirators clung to the belief that the war in the East was justified and that the Western Allies would support its continuance once Hitler was removed.

The assumptions of the conspirators in regards to the likelihood of a negotiated peace were mistaken in two ways. First, the alliance between Great Britain and the United States, on one hand, and the Soviet Union, on the other, was not nearly as weak as they supposed, however unnatural it may have been. In 1944 the Western Powers were not interested in turning against their Soviet ally. Second, the conspirators severely underestimated the determination of the Allies to stand by their stated policies, specifically the Atlantic Charter, Churchill's policy of absolute silence, and the doctrine of unconditional surrender. The Atlantic Charter, the statement of Allied war aims, specifically forbade the changing of national borders without the consent of the people of that nation, which meant that the territorial aspirations of the conspirators were not plausible. In addition, the Allies were committed to a military end to the war. In Great Britain, this meant that the distinction between good Germans and Nazis evaporated, and Churchill imposed a policy of absolute silence toward the opposition that effectively prevented it from having a voice abroad. Finally, unconditional surrender was the goal of the Allies after the Casablanca Conference in Janu-
ary 1943. After several years of hard-fought battles, the Allies were unwilling to make any concessions to the resisters that would potentially undermine their own interests.°4

Society

One commonality among the conspirators was a desire to transform German society at its basic level.°5 As these men saw matters, the failures of the Weimar Republic and the crimes of the Third Reich were proof positive that major change was needed. In fact, many even saw the Third Reich as the logical outcome of the over-democratization of Weimar.°6 A necessary part of this new society was an established elite, which all the conspirators assumed would lead the nation. For the conservative politicians in the resistance, such as Hassell and Dr. Johannes Popitz, the Prussian Minister of Finance, this elite was assumed to consist of the traditional aristocratic classes.°7 One of Hassell’s greatest fears was that the Nazis were destroying the intellectual and aristocratic classes in order to supplant them with an egalitarian class order.°8 Schulenberg, likewise, feared a class-based revolution from below and hoped that a successful coup would be able to ward off this threat.°9 But this endorsement of the aristocratic elite was not unopposed, as consensus opinion in the Kreisau Circle favored religious matters over class concerns. The leading members of the Circle, especially Moltke and Peter Yorck von Wartenburg, rejected the traditional elite and called instead for an “open elite” based upon Christian spirituality. Characteristically, Moltke hoped that the unifying ideals of Christianity would wipe away all divisions among humanity and bring mankind together into “one party.”°10 Yet, as different from the aristocratic conspirators as the Kreisau members may have thought themselves to be, both embraced social views that were decidedly anti-pluralist and therefore anti-democratic.

Religion, meanwhile, also played a major role in the most vexing social problem that confronted Germans during the period of the Third Reich, the fate of Jewish Germans. However, in the perverse atmosphere of racism that inundated Germany during the Third Reich, this question of religion was given pseudo-scientific legitimacy by recasting it as an issue of race. After his arrest, Berthold von Stauffenberg admitted that he and the other resisters had found Hitler’s concept of race, and by extension his anti-Semitism, to be “healthy and forward-looking.”°11 Stauffenberg, for instance, had written an article before the beginning of the Holocaust proposing the revocation of citizenship for, among others, Jews and unredeemable criminals.°12 Schulenberg, meanwhile, labeled Jews as “dark forces,” claiming that they were anti-German and had dominated Weimar, necessitating a Nazi takeover.°13 And Goerdeler, even after his arrest, insisted that Jews were at least partly to blame for their fate in the Holocaust because they “had interfered in our public life in ways lacking any proper restraint.”°14

And yet, despite their anti-Semitic beliefs, most of the members of the resistance did draw the line at violence, with the exception of Schulenberg, who was indifferent to the treatment of Jews on the Eastern Front.°15 Claus von Stauffenberg approved of restrictions on
Jews, but condemned persecution. Berthold, despite his article regarding citizenship, felt that those who murdered Jews ought to be prosecuted. The cruelties of Kristallnacht and the Holocaust were likewise condemned in strong terms by most members of the resistance, especially Hassell and Yorek, men of relatively varied backgrounds. But the abhorrence at violence directed at the Jews did not prevent plans for their eventual removal from German society. The Stauffenberg brothers, whatever their sympathy for victims of violence, still saw Jews as foreigners within the Reich who had to be controlled and segregated. Goerdeler concurred that Jews were “alien” to Germany and proposed their resettlement in Canada or South America, without violence, and with exceptions made based on duration of citizenship and military service. The crimes of the Holocaust did not change his views. In fact, it hardened them. He saw mass murder as evidence that there would never be mutual understanding between Germans and Jews. His ideas of deportation were thus vindicated.

Form of Government

The conspirators, in the post-war society they imagined, spurned ideas of plurality and equality. The government they envisaged reflected their rejection of these concepts. Ideas of parliamentary democracy were derided as being obsolete and Western, and thus unfit for the German nation and its unique psyche. To a large extent, the plans were based on the thinking of Freiherr vom Stein and relied on the concept of self-government at the local level. At the national level, meanwhile, the conspirators plans took power from the hands of the people by relying heavily on indirect voting. Goerdeler called for a Reichstag elected half by direct vote and half by indirect vote, while the Kreisau plan called for a Reichstag elected entirely by indirect vote. Despite the fact that the conspirators were interested in creating a new elite, they specifically wanted to avoid creating a class of professional politicians. Within the Kreisau Circle, especially, political parties were considered to be harmful to the system because they threatened to destroy the national unity necessary for the new society. Goerdeler’s plan, meanwhile, further subverted the power of the general population by making the half-directly elected Reichstag subordinate to the Head of State and the Reichsratskabinett, the corporatist upper house of parliament. Likewise, the Kreisau plan called for the Reichstag to be counterbalanced by the Reichsrat, appointed mostly by the Head of State, who was to serve a twelve-year term. In both systems the Head of State, called the Regent, was to hold extensive powers. General Beck was the nearly unanimous choice to serve as in this position. Under both constitutions, the Regent would have effectively governed in a constant state of emergency, akin to the powers granted under Article 48 of the Weimar constitution, with neither Parliament nor the Chancellor able to check his powers. With such a system that concentrated power in the hands of a single man, the danger of a return to dictatorship or monarchy was great, especially given that there were certainly many monarchists among the older, conservative conspirators such as Goerdeler, Beck, and Hassell.
Beyond the office of the Regent, the lists proposing the composition of the post-coup government reveal the extent to which this government was to be dominated by conservatives and military men. Most of the lists show Goerdeler as the Chancellor, with the Socialist Wilhelm Leuschner as Vice-Chancellor. Julius Leber, another Socialist, was proposed for the important post of Minister of the Interior, while either Hassell or Friedrich-Werner von der Schulenberg, both professional diplomats, was likely to become Foreign Minister. But the presence of two Socialists in prominent positions belies the true nature of the cabinet. By the reckoning of historian Terence Prittie, of the eighteen major positions in the government, twelve were reserved for conservatives. The remaining six spots were to be divided between members of the former SPD and the Catholic Center Party, with the Socialists holding a maximum of four positions. And though Leuschner and Leber were to have held high posts, the state secretary to each would have been Yorck and Friedrich-Dietlof von der Schulenberg, respectively, in order to balance both ministries with conservatives. Though the conspirators kept these plans vague to avoid drawing ire from the Allies, as they had done at the time of the Sudeten Crisis, the cabinet they proposed would have provided only a mere façade of left-wing “democratic and reformist respectability,” with true power in the hands of avowed conservatives. Despite the stated desire among many of the conspirators to create a new elite, most of those chosen to participate in the new government were representatives of the old, aristocratic elite.

Conclusion

While the historians and politicians of post-war Germany may have wanted to embrace the July 20 conspiracy as a proto-democratic movement which legitimized the establishment of the Federal Republic, this was possible only by viewing history as a repository of heroes, whose untidy flaws and obsolete ideas could simply be brushed away to form an idealized notion of the past. The conspirators, heroes or not, were anti-Semites, monarchists, unrepentant National Socialists, believers in aristocratic privilege, and foes of democracy. This should not come as a surprise, of course. After all, these were the only people who were allowed access to the levers of power in the Third Reich and were therefore the only ones capable of making a real attempt at overthrowing the system. Their failure rested at least partially on those same political beliefs, preventing them from gaining the foreign acceptance necessary for a coup before the outbreak of war. But the greatest failure of the resisters was that they consistently underestimated the capacity of the German people for democracy. As Theodore Hamerow suggests, they would have been bewildered by their status as heroes of the Federal Republic; but likewise they would have been equally bewildered by the very fact of the Republic’s existence. The conspirators were therefore not martyrs in the name of German democracy. Their efforts did not create the Federal Republic; the Federal Republic
came to exist in spite of their efforts. And yet, even if they were not heroes of democracy, perhaps they can still remain as examples of the ability of people to resist even the most tyrannical of governments, with great courage and without regard for their own lives. That is a lesson which transcends politics.

**Notes**

8. Large, S174-S175
11. Ibid., 11.
13. Ibid., 2.3.
14. Large, S174, S177.
15. Ibid., S180.
18. Wheeler Bennett, 690.
20. Meding, 84-85.
26 Ibid., 91.
33 Schlabrendorff, 63.
35 Hamerow, 106.
36 Schlabrendorff, 34.
38 Meding, 64.
39 Ibid., 3.
41 Meding, 64.
42 Rothfels, 67.
43 Schlabrendorff, 224-25.
46 Ibid., 185.
47 Hoffmann, Stauffenberg, 210.
48 Hoffmann, Resistance, 376.
49 Meding, 70.
50 Klemperer, The German Resistance, 106.
51 Ibid.
52 Hamerow, 240, italics added.
53 Ibid.
55 Hamerow, 231.
56 Schlabrendorff, 89-90.
57 Klemperer, The German Resistance, 94-95.
58 Hamerow, 258-59.
62 Ibid., 97.
65 Hamerow, 285.
64 Meding, 190, 201.
65 Hoffmann, Stauffenberg, 30.
66 Hoffmann, Resistance, 321.
67 Hoffmann, Stauffenberg, 33, 37.
66 Meding, 200.
69 Hoffmann, Stauffenberg, 68.
70 Ibid., 284.
71 Meding, 200.
72 Hamerow, 285.
73 Ibid., 312.
74 Hoffmann, Stauffenberg, 132-33.
75 Ibid., 152-55, passim.
76 Galante, 39-40.
77 Hamerow, 41-42.
78 Prittie, 47.
79 Hoffmann, Resistance, 184.
80 Meding, 67-68.
81 Prittie, 225.
84 Ibid., 210.
85 Ibid., 157.
87 Meding, 77-78.
89 Prittie, 226-27.
92 Hamerow, 276-77.
93 Graml, 13.
94 Ibid., 7.
95 Hamerow, 278-79.
96 Klemperer, The German Resistance, 223.
97 Hamerow, 318.
99 Hamerow, 320.
100 Hoffmann, Resistance, 352-53.
101 Hamerow, 322.
103 Ibid., 218-19.
104 Hamerow, 338.
106 Ibid., S118.
20 Juli

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