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Why Germans Supported Hitler, Part 2

by Jacob G. Hornberger

The most remarkable part of the movie *Sophie Scholl: The Final Days* is the courtroom scene, which is based on recently discovered German archives. Sophie and her brother Hans, along with their friend Christoph Probst, stand before the infamous Roland Freisler, presiding judge of the People's Court, whom Hitler had immediately sent to Munich after the Gestapo's arrest of the Scholls and Probst.

The People's Court had been established by Hitler as part of the government's war on terrorism after the terrorist firebombing of the German parliament building. Displeased with the independence of the judiciary in the trials of the suspected Reichstag terrorists, Hitler had set up the People's Court to ensure that terrorists and traitors would receive the "proper" verdict and punishment. Judicial proceedings were conducted in secret for reasons of national security, which is why Freisler threw Hans's and Sophie's parents out of the courtroom when they tried to enter.

At the trial, Freisler railed at the three young people before him, accusing them of being ungrateful traitors for having opposed their government in the midst of the war. His rant went to the core of why many Germans supported Hitler during World War II.

From the first grade in public (i.e., government) schools, it was ingrained in German children that, during times of war, it was the duty of every German to come to the support of his country, which, in the minds of the German officials, was synonymous with the German government. Once a war was under way, the time for discussion and debate was over, at least until the war was over. Opposition to the war would demoralize the troops, it was said, and, therefore, hurt the war effort. Opposing the government (and the troops) in wartime, therefore, was considered treasonous.

Keep in mind that at the time the Scholls were caught distributing their anti-war and anti-government leaflets — 1943 — Germany was fighting a war for its survival on two fronts: the Eastern front against the Soviet Union and the Western front against Britain and the United States. Thousands of German soldiers were dying on the battlefield, especially in the Soviet Union.

Whether they agreed with the war effort or not, the German people were expected to support the troops, which meant supporting the war effort.

Lies and wars of aggression

One might object that, since Germany was the aggressor in the conflict, the German people should have refused to support the war. That objection, however, ignores an important point: that in the minds of many Germans, Germany was not the aggressor in World War II but rather the defending nation. After all, that's what they had been told by their government officials.

An aggressor nation will inevitably try to manipulate events so as to appear to be the victimized nation — that is, the nation that is defending itself against aggression. In that way, government officials can tell the citizenry, “We are innocent! We were just minding our own business when our nation was attacked.” Naturally, the citizenry can then assume that there was nothing that could have been done to prevent the war and will be more willing to defend their nation against the attackers.

That is exactly what happened in Germany's invasion of Poland, which precipitated World War II. After several weeks in which tensions between the two nations were heightened, German soldiers on the Polish-German border were attacked by Polish troops. Hitler followed the time-honored script by dramatically announcing that Germany had been attacked by Poland, requiring Germany to defend herself with a counterattack and an invasion of Poland.

There was one big problem, however — one that the German people were unaware of: the Polish troops who had done the attacking were actually German troops dressed up in Polish uniforms. In other words, German officials had lied about the cause of the war.

Now, some might argue that Germans should not have automatically believed Hitler, especially knowing that throughout history rulers had lied about matters relating to war. But Germans took the position that they had the right and the duty to place their trust in their government officials. After all, Germans felt, their government officials had access to information that the people did not have. Many Germans felt that their government would never lie to them about a matter as important as war.

Also, keep in mind that under the Nazi system Hitler had the sole prerogative of deciding whether to send the nation into war. While he might consult with the Reichstag or advise it of his plans, he did not need its consent to declare and wage war against another nation. He — and he alone — had the power to decide whether to go to war. Therefore, given that Hitler was not required to secure a declaration of war from the Reichstag before going to war against Poland, there was no real way to test whether his claims of a Polish attack were in fact true.

After the German “counterattack” against Poland, England and France declared war on Germany. (Oddly, neither country declared war on the Soviet Union, which also invaded Poland soon after Germany did.) Thus, in the minds of the German people, England and France were

coming to the aid of the aggressor — Poland — necessitating Germany's defending itself against all three nations.

Loyalty and obeying orders

German soldiers, of course, were also expected to do their duty and follow the orders of their commander in chief. Under Germany's system, it was not up to the individual soldier to reach his own independent judgment about whether Germany was the aggressor in the conflict or whether Hitler had lied about the reasons for going to war. Thus, German soldiers, both Protestant and Catholic, understood that they could kill Polish soldiers with a clear conscience because, again, it was not up to the individual soldier to decide on the justice of the war. He could entrust that decision to his superior officers and political leaders and simply assume that the order to invade was morally and legally justified.

Once troops were committed to battle, most German civilians understood their duty — support the troops who were now fighting and dying on the battlefield for their country, for the fatherland. The time for debating and discussing the causes of the war would have to wait until the war's end. What mattered, once the war was under way, was winning.

Hermann Goering, founder of the Gestapo, explained the strategy:

Why, of course, the *people* don't want war.... Why would some poor slob on a farm want to risk his life in a war when the best that he can get out of it is to come back to his farm in one piece? Naturally, the common people don't want war; neither in Russia nor in England nor in America, nor for that matter in Germany. That is understood. But, after all, it is the *leaders* of the country who determine the policy and it is always a simple matter to drag the people along, whether it is a democracy or a fascist dictatorship or a Parliament or a Communist dictatorship....

Voice or no voice, the people can always be brought to the bidding of the leaders. That is easy. All you have to do is tell them they are being attacked, and denounce the pacifists for lack of patriotism and exposing the country to danger. It works the same in any country.

Recognizing and opposing evil

Some might argue that Germans, unlike people in other nations, should not have trusted and supported their government officials during the war because it was obvious that Hitler and his henchmen were evil. The problem with that argument, however, is that throughout the 1930s many Germans and many foreigners did not automatically come to the conclusion that Hitler was evil. On the contrary, as we saw in part one of this article, many of them saw Hitler as exercising the same kind of strong leadership that Franklin Roosevelt was exercising to bring the United

States out of the Great Depression and, in fact, as implementing many of the same kinds of programs that Roosevelt was implementing in the United States. (For more on this point, see the excellent book published last year *Three New Deals: Reflections on Roosevelt's America, Mussolini's Italy, and Hitler's Germany, 1933–1939*, by Wolfgang Schivelbusch.)

Moreover, while it's true that throughout the 1930s Hitler was harassing, abusing, and mistreating German Jews, many people all over the world didn't care, because anti-Semitism was not limited to Germany but instead extended to many parts of the globe.

Don't forget, for example, about how the Roosevelt administration used immigration controls to prevent German Jews from immigrating to the United States.

Even as late as 1938 U.S. officials refused to let German Jews disembark at Miami Harbor from the SS *St. Louis*, knowing that they would have to be returned to Hitler's Germany.

Even after the outbreak of the war, when the severity of the Nazi threat to Jews skyrocketed, the constantly shifting maze of U.S. immigration rules and regulations prevented Anne Frank and her family, along with lots of other Jewish families, from immigrating to the United States.

Some might say that the German people should have ceased supporting their government once the Holocaust began. There are two big problems with that argument, however. First, the German people didn't know what was going on in the death camps and, second, they didn't want to know. After all, the death camps and the Holocaust didn't get established until after the war was well under way and when Hitler's power over the German people was absolute — and brutal.

How was the average German supposed to know about what was going on inside the death camps? Suppose a German walked up to a concentration camp, knocked on the gates, and said, "I have heard that you are doing bad things to people inside this camp. I would like to come in and inspect the premises." What do you think would have been the answer? Most likely, he would have been invited inside the compound, as a permanent guest with a very shortened life span.

After all, what government is going to permit its citizens to know its most secret operations, especially during times of war? Not even the U.S. government does that.

For example, what do you think would happen if an American citizen today discovered the location of one of the CIA's secret overseas detention facilities and then knocked on the front door, saying, "I've heard rumors that you are torturing people here. I would like to come in and inspect the premises to see whether those rumors are true."

Does anyone honestly think that the CIA would let the person inside those supersecret facilities? Now, imagine a situation in which the United States is fighting a major war for its survival against, say, China on one side, and an alliance of Middle East countries on the other. Suppose also that the United States is almost certain to lose the war and that foreign troops are slowly but surely closing in on the U.S. president and his cabinet. What are the chances that the CIA would permit an American citizen to inspect the insides of its prisoner facilities under those

circumstances? Indeed, what are the chances that any American is going to make such a demand under those circumstances?

Most Germans did not want to know what was going on inside the concentration camps. If they knew that bad things were occurring, their consciences might start bothering them, which might motivate them to take action to bring the wrongdoing to a stop, which could be dangerous. It was easier — and safer — to look the other way and simply entrust such important matters to their government officials. In that way, it was believed, the government, rather than the individual citizen, would bear the legal and moral consequences for wrongful acts that the government was committing secretly.

Of course, government officials encouraged that mindset of conscious indifference. Don't concern yourselves with such things, they suggested; just leave them to us — after all, we are at war and these are things that are best left to your government officials.

No doubt that by the time World War II was well under way some Germans were thinking that the time for protesting had been during the 1930s, when Germans were reaching out for a “strong leader” to get them out of “crises” and “emergencies,” and when protests against the government were much less dangerous.

Patriotism and courage

All this, obviously, places Hans and Sophie Scholl and the other members of the White Rose in a remarkable light, one that even many Americans might find discomfiting. After all, it's easy for an American to look at Nazi Germany from the perspective of an outsider and one who has the benefit of historical knowledge, especially about the Holocaust. The interesting question, however, is, What would Americans have done if they had been German citizens during World War II? Would they have opposed their government, as the members of the White Rose did, or would they have supported their government, especially knowing that the troops were fighting and dying on the battlefield?

In one of their leaflets, the members of the White Rose wrote, “We are your bad conscience.” They were asking Germans to rise above the old, degenerate concept of patriotism that entailed blindly supporting one's government in time of war. They were asking German soldiers to rise above the old, degenerate concept of blind obedience to orders. They were asking Germans to confront openly the rumors of what German officials were doing to the Jews in the concentration camps. They were asking German citizens, both civilian and military, to make an independent judgment on both the Hitler regime and the war, to judge both the government and the war as immoral and illegitimate, and to take the necessary steps to put a stop to both.

They were asking Germans to embrace a different and higher concept of patriotism — one that involves a devotion to a set of moral principles and values rather than blind allegiance to one's government in time of war. It was a type of patriotism that involved opposition to one's own

government, especially in time of war, when government is engaged in conduct that violates moral principles and values.

The story of the White Rose is one of the most remarkable stories of courage in history. At the trial, Christoph Probst asked Freisler to spare his life, an understandable request given that his wife had recently given birth to their third child. Neither Sophie nor her brother Hans flinched. Sophie bluntly told Friesler that the war was lost and that German soldiers were being sacrificed for nothing, a statement that, from the looks on the faces of the military brass attending the trial in the film, momentarily hit home. She said that one day Freisler and his ilk would be sitting in the dock being judged by others for their crimes. She bluntly told him, “Somebody, after all, had to make a start. What we wrote and said is also believed by many others. They just don’t dare express themselves as we did.”

Freisler quickly issued the preordained verdict — Guilty — and sentenced the defendants to death, a sentence that was carried out at the guillotine three days after they had been arrested. After all, as Freisler declared, Hans and Sophie Scholl and their friend Christoph Probst had opposed their government during time of war. In Freisler’s mind — indeed, in the minds of many Germans — what better evidence of treason than that?

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