

### Teaching notes

This resource is one of a sequence of eight resources, originally planned for OCR's Unit 2 Option: Democracy and Dictatorships in Germany 1919-1963 (Y221). The sequence focuses on the key topic 'The impact of war and defeat on Germany 1939-49'. Although the content of the resources is drawn from this particular specification, there is no reason why they couldn't be used to support the teaching of other similar courses, perhaps with some adaptation of the suggested activities.

The eight resources in the sequence are:

1. The war economy and Total War (search '25206' to find it on [Teachit History](#))
2. The impact of bombing (search '25207')
3. Racial policies and the Final Solution (search '25208')
4. Morale (search '25209')
5. **Opposition and resistance (this resource)**
6. Consequences of the Second World War (search '25211')
7. The Cold War and Potsdam (search '25212')
8. Bizonia and the Berlin Blockade (search '25213')

Each resource contains a section of reading followed by some suggested tasks. These could be completed in class or as independent homework tasks.

### Background

Over the past few decades, research into attitudes towards the Nazi regime has shown that there was a range of reactions to Nazism and the figure of Hitler himself. This has eroded older notions that the German people simply conformed pliantly out of pure terror. The picture of opposition and resistance to the regime is varied and complex. Many ordinary Germans made a distinction between support for Hitler and support for the party; often they would give Hitler the benefit of the doubt and blame errors or setbacks on the party and the army.

### Military opposition before the war

In 1934 the officer corps of the German Army swore an oath of personal allegiance to Hitler. The oath was taken very seriously by the German Army, previously they had sworn loyalty to the Weimar Republic, they had never pledged their support to one individual. The oath did not prevent some senior officers from having deep misgivings about Hitler's preparations for war in the later 1930s, or from having plans to stop him. The Chief of the General Staff, Ludwig Beck believed that Hitler's desire for a European war over the issue of the Sudetenland would have disastrous consequences for Germany. He was not opposed to the idea of war completely and might have supported Hitler if he had believed Germany was sufficiently prepared. Beck was contemptuous of Hitler (who had been a corporal in the First World War) and did not believe he understood military matters sufficiently well to be directing foreign and military policy. He believed that if Germany were to go to war, she would not be ready before 1940. A majority of generals agreed with Beck but none were willing to express their misgivings openly, knowing their careers depended on Hitler's patronage.

Hitler had assumed that the British would not want to become entangled in a war over Eastern Europe, but Beck believed otherwise and thought Germany risked a coalition of British and French forces if Hitler's conflict over the Sudetenland occurred. Beck and Hitler clashed on this issue; initially Beck hoped he could win Hitler over by isolating him from more warlike generals. When he realised that Hitler himself was the driving force for war, he began to plan the Nazi leader's overthrow. He sent a memo to like-minded officers who were opposed to an immediate war on 29<sup>th</sup> July 1938, stating that if war broke out, certain political changes would have to be brought about by the army. Hitler, however, was able to control the rest of the general staff and isolated Beck, who was forced to resign in August 1938.



**Ludwig Beck**

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He continued to plot against Hitler in retirement (it seems likely that Hitler knew about Beck's activities), and he approached the British to inform them of his plans for a possible coup against the Nazis in the future, if war broke out. Beck realised that it would not be possible to simply remove the unpopular Nazi Party and retain the more popular figure of Hitler. Instead Beck and his co-conspirators Carl Goerdeler, the Mayor of Leipzig, Admiral Wilhelm Canaris, Hitler's intelligence chief and his deputy, Hans Oster planned to run Germany together. However, by the eve of the war, Hitler was in power and had faced no threat from the conspirators and had even managed to purge the army and the defence ministry of moderate anti-war voices.

### Assassination attempts

Between 1934 and 1944, there were nearly thirty separate attempts to assassinate Hitler. Some were planned by lone plotters, others by complex groups of conspirators but remarkably none succeeded.

### Georg Elser

The first major wartime attempt on Hitler's life came from a lone would-be assassin Georg Elser, a cabinet maker and former member of the Communist party. He had a profound hatred of the Nazis and secretly planted a bomb in one of the pillars of the Munich Burgerbraukeller (the site of the 1923 Munich Putsch), where Hitler was due to make an anniversary speech on 8<sup>th</sup> November 1939. Hitler left the beer hall early and the bomb detonated after he had gone, killing eight staff. Hitler blamed the British, claiming secret agents were trying to assassinate him. However, when Elser was caught, the astonished Gestapo men discovered that he was acting alone. The regime claimed that British agents had tried to kill the Führer, and they used this to generate public support for Hitler and the Nazi Party. Primary evidence suggests that this early attempt on Hitler's life provoked widespread outrage. This is possibly due to the anxieties that German people had about being at war and needing to unite behind a strong leader.

### Communist opposition and the Red Orchestra

In Berlin, the German city with the most significant left wing and socialist traditions among the population, there were several communist and socialist resistance groups. Initially communists were thrown into immense crisis at the start of the war after Hitler made his pact with Stalin in August 1939. The Nazi Soviet Pact left communist opponents of the regime uncertain about how best to oppose Nazism, other than criticising the regime's crimes in Poland and other occupied countries. After the invasion of the USSR in 1941, underground communist cells passed round newsletters critical of the regime, encouraging sabotage and strikes among the workers. The Gestapo named one network of communists the Red Orchestra; its members managed to effectively spy for the USSR but by 1944 most had been caught and executed.

### The Confessing Church and the Catholic Church

When Hitler attempted to amalgamate Germany's Calvinist and Lutheran churches together into a Reich church with a revised bible, he faced religious opposition and the development of the Confessing Church. The most famous figure of the Confessing Church was Pastor Martin Niemöller, originally a supporter of Hitler. Niemöller, a former First World War U-boat captain, had once believed that a figure like Hitler was essential to save Germany from Communism. By 1937 however, he was an outspoken critic of Nazi racial policy and interference in the Church. He was arrested in 1937 and spent the war in a series of concentration camps. In the Catholic Church there were also preachers who spoke up:

1. The provost of Berlin's St Hedwig's Cathedral, Bernhard Lichtenberg, died in police custody in 1941 after being arrested for encouraging his congregation to pray for the Jews.
2. Bishop Clemens Von Galen of Munster spoke out against the T4 Aktion (the murder of disabled and mentally ill people), but was silent over the issue of the Jews.

### The Beck Goerdeler Group and the July Bomb Plot

On 20<sup>th</sup> July 1944, at Hitler's forward command base at Rastenberg, a bomb exploded in a wooden hut where Hitler and many of his senior generals were discussing strategy. Hitler survived the blast with minor injuries and put his salvation down to an act of providence. The bomb had been left in a suitcase by an aristocratic officer, Claus Shenk von Stauffenberg. He had originally been a supporter of Hitler, but as the war dragged on he had become increasingly disgusted by the regime's racial policies. He also disliked Hitler because he was not an aristocrat. When the D-Day landings happened on 6<sup>th</sup> June 1944, many German officers believed that the war was lost and Hitler had to be removed. Stauffenberg's plan involved the assassination of Hitler, alongside a separate operation to launch a military coup against the regime. The co-conspirators included Ludwig Beck and Carl Goerdeler (who the group were eventually named after), and from the start, poor planning and bad luck hampered their activities. Quickly rumours of a plot against Hitler became common knowledge among Berlin's elites, and when the plot unraveled and it became known Hitler was still alive, the conspirators were quickly arrested and executed. One of the unfortunate side effects of the bomb plot was to increase Hitler's popularity with ordinary Germans. It also presented the regime with an opportunity to execute any remaining opponents that had survived up to 1944. The majority of the Prussian aristocracy was arrested and executed, even those who had no connection with the plot.

### The Kreisau Circle

Not all opponents of the regime believed that they must assassinate Hitler. At the Kriesau estate of the aristocrat Hulmuth von Moltke a network of intellectuals, theologians and politicians from the outlawed SPD party met to discuss the future of post war Germany. They ruled out the violent elimination of Hitler on moral grounds and proposed a new model of a decentralised Germany that would replace Nazism. Moltke had some contacts with the Beck Goerdeler group but did not participate in the bomb plot. Even though they were not participants, many members of the group were arrested and sent to concentration camps or executed after the failure of the bomb plot.

### The White Rose

One of the most famous non-violent protest groups was the White Rose. The organisation was a loose network of students and academics at several of Germany's universities. Twins Hans and Sophie Scholl were arrested in 1943 for distributing fliers at Munich University that criticised Hitler and detailed disasters on the Eastern Front and the Holocaust. They hoped that by informing ordinary Germans about the crimes being perpetrated in their names, that they might rise up and overthrow Hitler. The Scholls and their friends unfortunately over-estimated the extent to which ordinary Germans were able or willing to engage with radical ideas or challenges to the regime and they were quickly arrested. They were brutally interrogated and executed, along with other members of the White Rose Group.



**Sophie Scholl**

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### Youth groups

In Germany during the 1930s and the war years, various youth subcultures existed (much as they did in Britain and America). Popular American big band and swing music had been forbidden by the regime but was listened to in secret by many thousands of young people, who also danced to imported music. The extent to which this can be seen as serious political protest is doubtful, the decision to defy the regime's rules was at times combined with other dissenting beliefs about Nazism, but at no time could any youth movement such as the swing kids or the Edelweiss Pirates be thought of as a real source of political opposition.

### Tasks

1. Essay: 'Hitler was consistently helped by weak opponents, rather than his own skill as a politician.' How valid is this statement?
2. Opposition to the Nazis ranged from non-violent protest and disorganised dissent, to planned conspiracies and lone plotters. On an axis like the one below, place the different types of opposition from moderate to extreme, and add notes (an example has been completed for you).



Kreisau Circle:

- Believed in non-violent opposition.
- Were motivated by Christian beliefs.
- Consisted of aristocracy and intellectuals.