Heroes of the moral resistance against Adolf Hitler

We forget in the retelling of history that Germans opposed to the Nazis were motivated by a powerful religious impulse.

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The anti-Nazi resistance within Germany took different forms: some fought against Hitler, and some thought against Hitler; some defied the horror physically, and others intellectually.

Chief among the latter group was Helmuth James Graf von Moltke, the Christian thinker and jurist, who used the power of his mind and the strength of his beliefs to oppose fascism, and was executed by Hitler in January 1945.

Von Moltke’s widow, Freya, died last week after a lifetime spent chronicling her husband’s wartime activities: the von Moltkes offer a powerful reminder that heroism in war is not always a matter of bombs and bullets.

For many years after the war, discussion of anti-Nazi resistance was all but taboo, as if focusing on the small majority who opposed Hitler might excuse the German majority who supported him. In this Manichean struggle there was little room for sympathetic Germans or, for that matter, unsympathetic Allies.

Gradually, a more nuanced history has emerged. The Reader (Der Vorleser) by Bernhard Schlink dared to depict a young man’s love affair with a former concentration camp guard. The film Downfall (Der Untergang) portrayed Hitler as a believable human being, rather than some inhuman maniac. And finally the stories of the resisters, the anti-Nazi plotters, the handful of good men prepared to stand against the tide of evil, have emerged from the shadows of history.

Last year saw the release of Valkyrie, starring Tom Cruise as Colonel Claus von Stauffenberg, author of the failed plot to assassinate Hitler in July 1944. The film did not trouble to go into great psychological depth. As in all Tom Cruise films, the hero simply set off down the straight path of righteousness: this was Mission Impossible in jackboots.

But behind men of action such as von Stauffenberg was another sort of resister, who relied not on violence but the power of belief, intellect and morality to oppose the horrors of Hitler’s regime. One such — perhaps the greatest — was Helmuth von Moltke.

Scion of a powerful military family, von Moltke challenged Nazism on the grounds that it was illegal, undemocratic and above all un-Christian. In our secular age, religious conviction is deeply unfashionable, but von Moltke was by no means the only resister to see opposition to Hitler not as a political necessity, but as a moral duty. The revolt against Hitler was, in part, a religiously motivated rebellion.

In 1942 von Moltke smuggled out a letter to the British writer and official Lionel Curtis: “An active part of the German people are...
beginning to realise, not that they have been led astray, not that bad times await them, not that the war may end in defeat, but that what is happening is sin and that they are personally responsible for each terrible deed that has been committed — naturally, not in the earthly sense, but as Christians”.

As an officer in the Abwehr, the German military intelligence service (whose ranks included a number of committed anti-Nazi conspirators), von Moltke worked to spread word of the appalling atrocities carried out by the Nazis. He loudly and publicly insisted that Germany abide by the Geneva Convention, and reported on the psychological damage experienced by German soldiers taking part in mass murder. “How can anyone know these things and still walk around free?” he asked.

Von Moltke told friends from his days as a student at Oxford that he would “go to any length” to assist the Allies. Those lengths did not include supporting the plot to kill Hitler, since he believed that this would turn the Führer into a martyr and, if it failed, ensure the deaths of the conspirators — thus depriving Germany of the very men who might lead her to a democratic future.

The so-called Kreisau Circle surrounding von Moltke was made up of intellectuals and theologians, Jesuits, Protestants and others. They discussed the failure of German religious institutions to resist Nazism, how Germany might be re-formed after defeat and the poisonous moral legacy of war crimes. Their focus was on ideas, not actions: how to exorcise the sin of Nazism.

Other opponents of Nazism were equally devout. One of Hitler’s most trusted intelligence officers, Colonel Alexis Baron von Roenne, his Christian conscience outraged by Nazi brutality, falsified the battle order on the Western Front on the eve of D-Day. He went to his execution declaring: “I shall be going home to our Lord in complete calm and in the certainty of salvation.”

Von Stauffenberg himself was motivated by a profound Catholic piety, finally opting to attempt the assassination of Hitler in the belief that failure to do so would represent the greater sin.

Both von Roenne and von Stauffenberg translated religious belief into direct action. Von Moltke, by contrast, knew that the greatest threat to Hitler’s regime was not necessarily violence or deception, but a revolt of the conscience, a personal rejection of evil.

Arrested by the Gestapo in January 1944, he languished for a year in Tegel prison, spending much of the time in philosophical contemplation. Since he had committed no specific act of treason, he was put on trial, in effect, for thought crime: “Not plans, not preparations, but the spirit as such shall be persecuted,” he said.

Shortly before he was hanged in Plötzensee prison, von Moltke put his finger on why his strictly moral and intellectual rebellion represented such a threat to Hitler. “What the Third Reich is so terrified of,” he wrote, “is ultimately a private individual [who has] discussed the practical, ethical demands of Christianity: for that alone we are condemned.”

Hitler might survive any number of physical threats, but his regime would never have been able to withstand the sort of revolution represented by von Moltke’s single, simple idea. But Hitler’s Germany was deaf to such wisdom, and that was its tragedy.