The Moral Example of the German Resistance Against the Nazi Regime

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Abstract
Perceptions about the German Resistance against the Nazis (Widerstand) changed over the years since WWII. Whereas the Nazis saw resisters as amoral traitors, German leaders recently presented the individuals of the Widerstand as moral examples of people who resisted intolerance, racism and totalitarianism. Statements and reflections about moral perception by and about people of the Widerstand in a wide variety of sources were considered historically and with moral theory. Because of the vast heterogeneity of the resisters, a basic normative understanding of ethical and moral action was engaged instead of a single theory. The Widerstand represents a struggle for moral dominance between individuals and a morally corrupt state. The Widerstand case confirms the notion that morality is inextricably bound to individual perception of what is right or wrong. As an universal moral example, the Widerstand example moots for the rejection of intolerance, racism and totalitarianism as morally wrong.

Keywords
Individuality, moral theory, normative morality, intolerance, racism, totalitarianism

A Brief Historical Background to the Widerstand

During the course of the 12-year Nazi reign between 1933 and 1945, there were many Germans who ‘were far from passive or paralyzed by fear or propaganda’ (Wolfgram, 2006, p. 202). Tens of thousands of Germans of all walks of life actively opposed the Nazi regime, but what is known today as the German Resistance (Widerstand) was never one group of people who called themselves that—Widerstand is a post-war term which collectively includes the multitude of different acts by Germans which are considered to have been resistance acts against Adolf Hitler and the Nazi regime (Beer, 2018, p. 10; Dulles, 2000/1947, p. xiiif). There had been several attempts on Hitler’s life, but the plot of 20 July 1944 led by Claus Schenk Graf von Stauffenberg and his associates to assassinate Hitler (‘plot of 20 July 1944’) has over the years become symbolic for all of what is now called the Widerstand. Nevertheless,
the collective case of the *Widerstand* is seen as an unique phenomenon which occurred in a time of unprecedented moral and political dilemmas (von Klemperer, 2016, p. 55).

In 1933, most Germans had perhaps been swept up by a national desire for a new dispensation, but many had begun sobering up even before the war started in 1939. The majority of Germans had not noticed nor directly experienced the criminality of the Nazis at first, and many had enthusiastically joined the party because of the palpable changes in the country regarding infrastructure, housing and jobs. Yet, while the achievements heaped up and were praised, the terror steadily increased (Beer, 2018, p. 269; Dönhoff, 1994, p. 48; Scarre, 2009, p. 515). This terror motivated different forms of open and covert resistance by both individuals and nascent resistance groups.

Pastor Eberhard Bethge (1995, p. 19f) wrote that many clergymen in 1934 still believed the efforts and goals of the Nazis to be ‘in the best interests of Germany’. But especially after the nationwide pogrom against German Jews on 9 November 1938, the *Reichskristallnacht*, some Germans began to critique and even actively oppose the Nazi regime because they felt it was shameful to just stand by or look away (Bethge, 1995, p. 59; von Klemperer, 2016, p. 14f). Also deeply shocked by the pogrom, lawyers Helmuth James Graf von Moltke and Peter Graf Yorck von Wartenburg convened the first secret meeting of *Der Kreisauer Kreis* (the Kreisau Circle), so called because a number of likeminded people met on von Moltke’s estate in Kreisau in Silesia (Dönhoff, 1994, p. 128ff; Sears, 2009, p. 39). Other leading resistance figures, who also came together before the war started and shared the idea to bring Hitler and his National Socialists down, were civilians Hans von Dohnanyi, Hans Bernd Gisevius, and military officers Admiral Wilhelm Canaris, General Ludwig Beck and General Hans Oster (Chowaniec, 1991, p. 13; Dönhoff, 1994, p. 128ff; Schaub, 2006, p. 550).

Even though there were small groupings like *Der Kreisauer Kreis*, no resistance group matured to develop a recognizable social structure that could be termed a social movement or a counter culture. Social groups are defined as ‘long-term social systems’, whose members follow a common goal and who over a long period of time with continual communication and interaction ‘develop a feeling of belonging (the “us” feeling)’ (Beer, 2018, p. 199, own translation). This definition can also not apply to Germans who had helped Jews escape Nazi persecution because most of them did not know each other, they did not belong to a common organization, institution or party and they did not see themselves as part of a wider group of helpers or resisters (Beer, 2018, p. 199). Because of the existential importance of secrecy, regular meetings were impossible for resisters. For example, many of those involved in planning the plot of 20 July 1944 only met each other towards the very late stages of setting it up (Dönhoff, 1994, p. 126f). Dönhoff (1994, p. 160) commented that what made the resisters special, many of whom had been close friends of hers, was that they were not exponents of a particular group or a particular class of society, but individual people who felt responsible for what happened in their time—that is what brought together military officers, socialists, aristocrats, clerics and unionists.

The resisters involved with the plot of 20 July 1944 transcended class, party and religion, drawing their mandate to act from their conscience or belief in God (von Klemperer, 2016, p. 53f). Nevertheless, within certain *Widerstand* groupings, there were commonalities between the individual members, like religion. Political affiliation or other common interests played a role in the formation of resistance groups like *Die Rote Kapelle* (Communist Party connections) or *Die Weiße Rose* (a student movement), but there were also many independent individuals performing a myriad of un-orchestrated resistance acts (Gedenkstätte Deutscher Widerstand, 2016a).

Sociological and psychological studies based on post-war interviews with individuals who had helped Jews concluded that motivations for doing so could not be based on age, gender, religion nor socio-economic background (Beer, 2018, pp. 22, 35). Although about two-thirds of the helpers were women, it is not conclusive as to motive because of the fact that more women were at home during the war than
men (Beer, 2018, p. 59). The quantity of information about the various helpers also differs considerably, often depending on how well-known they were and about whom there were written memoirs and other documents; about most helpers there is simply no information.

Regardless of motive, having been identified as an opponent of the Nazi state or ideology had serious consequences. Every German in the Nazi state knew that helping Jews was seen as treason (Beer, 2018, p. 74). Even based on suspicion of anything considered to be an act of opposition, the Gestapo could arrest anyone and place them in so-called protective imprisonment. Without legal recourse, this led to imprisonment or internment in a concentration or labour camp; the duration and conditions thereof were entirely dependent on arbitrary decisions made by Gestapo leaders (Beer, 2018, p. 76; Dams & Stolle, 2008, pp. 70f, 169). Conditions in the Gestapo prisons were notorious for their inhumane treatments of prisoners including torture, malnutrition and unhygienic and insufficient facilities—more often than not ending terminally (Tuchel, 2014, p. 89ff). Family members of the resisters had to reckon with *Sippenhaft* (family arrest; Dönhoff, 1994, p. 148ff). Siblings and wives were imprisoned and children placed in a home far away where they were given new identities and ‘re-educated’ to become faithful Nazis (Behrendt, 2017; von Keyserlingk-Rehbein, 2018, pp. 119, 142). All these measures had turned the resisters into criminals in the eyes of the German public, and they became branded as amoral traitors (Bethge, 1995, p. 34; Sears, 2009, p. xii), and this public rejection persisted for a long time after the war.

**Perceptions About the Widerstand**

The German population did not change overnight at the end of the war, and far from being honoured for their moral courage and integrity, for almost half a century after the war perceptions of the *Widerstand* were dominated by shame and guilt as many had been imprisoned and/or executed for treason and oath-breaking (Beer, 2018, p. 304f; Chowaniec, 1991, p. 158; Langenbacher, 2010, p. 31; Mayer, 2011; Sears, 2009, p. xiii; Tuchel, 2019; von Keyserlingk-Rehbein, 2018, p. 23f). The failure of the plot of 20 July 1944 further contributed to the confusion where shame and guilt need to be placed, while for Jewish people the plot of 20 July 1944 meant nothing (Bethge, 1995, p. 107). Another post-war complication was the difference in approach to the commemoration of the *Widerstand* between former East- and West Germany. In East Germany, the *Widerstand* (especially the plot of 20 July 1944) was criticised for having been elitist, selfish, opportunistic, over-hasty, or too late, and without capable military leadership to end the war (Tuchel, 2019).

Especially after German unification, thus from the 1990s onwards, narratives of people who had acted against the Nazi regime gained more serious public and academic interest, and the German Resistance Memorial Centre in Berlin became the locus for the commemoration of the *Widerstand* (Beer, 2018, pp. 31, 120; Gedenkstätte Deutscher Widerstand, 2016a; Tuchel, 2014, p. 10f). The early part of the new millennium saw increased popular interest in the *Widerstand*, with the plot of 20 July 1944 and von Stauffenberg still the leading symbols (Laurien, 2009, p. 105; von Keyserlingk-Rehbein, 2018, p. 23f). Although the (West) German government had officially acknowledged the *Widerstand* already soon after the war, it was only since the early 2000s that the German government has been actively involved with honouring the *Widerstand*, as exemplified with the official commemoration in 2019 of the 75th anniversary of the plot of 20 July 1944 (von Lengeling, 2019, p. 46).

At the official commemoration occasion on 20 July 2019 in Berlin, both German Chancellor Angela Merkel and German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier portrayed the individuals of the *Widerstand* as moral examples for Germans, and even for people all over the world, specifically to be actively
democratically engaged and to defend democracy to avoid authoritarian or totalitarian rule from happening again (Merkel, 2019, p. 2; Steinmeier, 2019, p. 2). The women and men of the Widerstand are today seen as honourable people who acted with moral courage and according to their conscience to resist intolerance, racism and totalitarianism (Merkel, 2019, p. 2; Steinmeier, 2019, p. 2). As the concepts of intolerance, racism and totalitarianism only gained popular application after the war, these concepts are understood here in terms of their common contemporary meaning. Furthermore, Merkel elaborated that to follow one’s conscience for the resisters meant ‘they acted when others kept quiet. They […] took responsibility for their and our land when others looked away […] they had put humanity above their own human life’ (Merkel, 2019, p. 1, own translation). The people of the Widerstand ‘believed in, worked for and risked everything for a better future for their people, for Germany, and for Europe’ (Merkel, 2019, p. 3, own translation). Merkel (2019, p. 2) further emphasized that although von Stauffenberg and 20 July 1944 have become the symbols for all of the Widerstand, there had been a great variety of resistance acts, from groups such as the Der Kreisauer Kreis, Die Weiße Rose, Die Rote Kapelle, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Jews, Sinti and Roma, to individuals who had helped Jews or otherwise opposed the Nazis. Merkel (2019, p. 2) also pointed to the significance of the actual building, the Bendler Block in the renamed Stauffenberg Straße, which had been the headquarters for the planning of the plot of 20 July 1944. Significantly, annually young soldiers take their oath (on the German constitution) and are inducted into the Bundeswehr (army) on 20 July in honour of the Widerstand (Merkel, 2019, p. 2).

Merkel’s reflections of the resisters readily correlate with what is perceived of as the ‘honourable man’:

The honourable man is an example to all humanity and he must not only live with his actions, but with the knowledge of an authentic being who is aware of his ontology and must choose between his own judgment and that of the authority of the group(s) to which he chooses to affiliate. The honourable man is distinct from a man who follows rules because they exist; his agency is always his own and his character is exemplified in the totality of his actions. (Oprisko, 2012, p. 152)

Today, it is appreciated that the people of the Widerstand, thoroughly perceiving of themselves as patriotic Germans, had acted ‘in the best tradition of a civilized code of honour’ (Schaub, 2006, p. 555). They had refused to go along with or watch the gross injustices of the Nazi regime and their mass murders (Chowaniec, 1991, p. 148). The resisters were motivated to restore and defend what they perceived as German honour, and at least some of them wanted to show the world that there were other Germans who opposed Nazi barbarism (Sears, 2009, p. xii; von Klemperer, 2016, pp. 9, 25), while others remained silent heroes (Beer, 2018, p. 45). Ultimately, the Widerstand represents a struggle for moral dominance between the Nazi state and the individual Germans who had a different idea of right and wrong.

Worth mentioning is that with regard to both popular and academic publications in German about the Widerstand since 1945, many have morality or moral values as prominent themes, or even as title, like Dönhoff’s 1994 book Um der Ehre willen [For honour’s sake]. Klemens von Klemperer was a leading authority on the Widerstand from the post-war time until his death in 2012. A 2016 collection, Der einsame Zeuge; Von der existentiellen Dimension des Widerstands gegen den Nationalsozialismus [The lone witness; on the existential dimension of the resistance against National Socialism], carries more than 20 essays by von Klemperer, mostly about the inner turmoil of resisters’ struggle to reconcile their consciences (von Klemperer, 2016). In Die Banalität des Guten [The Banality of Good] Susanne Beer (2018) examined the motives of Germans who had helped trapped Jews in Berlin. Defamed as criminal traitors by the Nazi state, over the years, the perception of the Germans who had helped Jews changed to them being honoured as ‘silent heroes’ today for having followed their conscience (Beer, 2018, p. 45).
However, while English literature on the *Widerstand* in general is limited (Schaub, 2006, p. 539), there is almost nothing about morality in combination with the *Widerstand* in English academic discourse. This neglect could stem from the fact that the *Widerstand* received neither understanding nor support for their plight from the English at the time (Dulles, 2000/1947, pp. xxi–xxii; Sears, 2009, pp. 34–38). Dönhoff (1994, p. 28) noted that the resisters imagined the English had no comprehension for their case, and hence, the English had no insight nor sympathy for them. Well-known resister Adam von Trott zu Solz, who had many English friends, personally experienced this incomprehension when he visited England in 1939 (Sears, 2009, p. 34f). Even long after the war, von Trott was still seen as a controversial figure in Britain as exemplified by Christopher Sykes’ 1968 biography of von Trott titled ‘Troubled Loyalty’ (von Trott zu Solz, 2016/2009, p. 11). Regardless of von Trott’s expressed convictions against the Nazis and having paid for his resistance with his life, many English people still considered him to have had been a morally corrupt Nazi (von Trott zu Solz, 2016/2009, pp. 20f, 38).

The *Widerstand* could easily count as a cross-section sample of German society at the time, cutting across class, religious and political affiliation, including individuals such as labourers, housewives, soldiers and military officers, socialites, businessmen, clerics, politicians, lawyers, academics and aristocrats. The one thing all these people had in common was a decision to break with National Socialist rule in some way.

The aim of this article was to consider the moral example of the *Widerstand* as presented by Merkel and Steinmeier. Toward the outside, the *Widerstand* exemplifies a moral rejection of intolerance, racism and totalitarianism, and toward the inside (the resisters’ own perceptions morality), the example confirms the strong individuality of morality. The first consideration was to evaluate the example against a variety of historical sources. As already seen with the historical survey above, the moral example as recently posed by the German leaders resonates well with what the resisters stood for. The second consideration was to evaluate resisters’ perceptions of morality, in other words, what motivated some Germans to resist the Nazis and how they dealt with their own conscience, with moral theory. The approach was to collect, compare and analyse reflections and statements on moral perceptions by and about people of the *Widerstand*. As this proved more challenging, the concept of morality and relevant moral theory need attention first.

**Morality and Moral Theory**

At its broadest morality is understood to consist of what individuals perceive as right or wrong (Krause, 2002, p. 147; Oprisko, 2012, p. 151; Palomera & Vetta, 2016, p. 429; Ratnapala, 2003, p. 216). Another basic distinction with morality lies with being expressed positively by ‘exhortations to engage in virtuous acts, and on the negative side […] the observance of rules forbidding certain types of action’, or simply put ‘the do’s and don’ts’ (Ratnapala, 2003, p. 216; see also Oprisko, 2012, p. 151).

Nevertheless, a simple definition of morality seems to be problematic because there are a number of ways to approach a description of what morals are. At a basic level, definitions of morality can be distinguished to be descriptive or normative (Gert & Gert, 2020). A descriptive definition of morality refers to specific codes of conduct individuals or a specific group or society perceive as morals, while a normative definition is concerned with an universal understanding of morality, one which will always find application in a certain set of similar circumstances (Gert & Gert, 2020). Morality in the normative sense, ‘refers to a code of conduct that would be accepted by anyone who meets certain intellectual
and volitional conditions, almost always including the condition of being rational’ (Gert & Gert, 2020). Individuals are seen as moral agents who would conduct themselves similarly in certain circumstances. Thus, should similar circumstances arise, people’s moral decisions could be similar, and this in turn confirms the value of historical examples.

On the normative side of the definition of morality, there are three main theoretical approaches: consequentialism, deontology and virtue ethics (Hursthouse & Pettigrove, 2018). Consequentialist theory, and with it, utilitarianism, are both concerned with the consequences or use of actions performed in order to maximize the good and minimize suffering. The main focus with these theories is on the action and not so much on the agent or person (Sinnott-Armstrong, 2019). Deontological theory, originating with the work of Kant, also focusses on the act; yet, it is lesser concerned with consequences as people are believed to operate out of a sense of duty or obligation to follow rules (Alexander & Moore, 2016). Virtue ethics, with its origins in the work of Aristotle, solidly grounds morality in the virtuousness of the character of the agent and is not primarily about the act, nor about the consequences (Hursthouse & Pettigrove, 2018). While each of the theories have their own special angle and the theories do overlap, as will be seen below, no one theory could sufficiently cover all the examples of individual moral decisions selected here.

The vast heterogeneity of individuals in the Widerstand, which implies a similar range of moral perceptions, already indicates that a normative definition—a more universal understanding of morality—better applies to the Widerstand example than a descriptive definition of the moral conduct of an individual or group. Furthermore, in the promotion of democratic values the Widerstand example poses an argument to extend normative moral understanding to include the moral rejection of oppressive governance forms that engage intolerance, racism and totalitarianism. In short, intolerance, racism and totalitarianism are morally wrong.

Nevertheless, morality is subjective.

Nobody inhabits the same emotional realm. Many people live in a world so singular that what they see when they open their eyes in the morning may be unfathomable to the rest of humanity […] Because people trust their senses, each believes in her own virtuality with a sectarian’s fervour. (Lewis et al., 2000, p. 120)

Thus, even within the same state, the same community and the same family, people have different ideas of right and wrong and different motivations for their moral or ethical choices.

For instance, in ‘the corrupt state there often seems to be no conscious feeling of moral guilt among some individual characters who actually believe that they were doing the right thing’ (Dams & Stolle, 2008, p. 198, own translation). The Nazis truly believed what they were doing was the right thing, but latest from 1939 onwards the Third Reich had decayed into a morally dissonant state in which nobody knew what was right or wrong anymore. The Nazi state became a ‘moral vacuum’ in which all ‘civilized standards of behaviour and judgement, from the Ten Commandments to the Prussian penal code, having been suspended, only the raw imperative of survival prevailed’ (Malkin, 2006, p. 71; see also Krüger, 2015, p. 162).

To survive in such a ‘moral vacuum’, the individual resister’s motives had to align with Sharon Krause’s confirmation that for the individual rebel ‘the honorable act of resistance vindicates his “manhood”, or what he calls his “essential dignity” as a human being, not his status as a member of some particular social class or the inhabitant of a specific social role’ (Krause, 2002, p. 146). Given the circumstance or experience of something that affects personal morality, for the resister, ‘it was not sufficient for him simply to be; he also had to act […] individual action was the key’ (Krause, 2002, p. 147). Thus, resistance springs forth from the conscience of the individual (von Klemperer,
This confirms the notion that ‘moral capital refers to individual conduct’ (Ratnapala, 2003, p. 216), and hence, the Widerstand has rightly been called a ‘rebellion of the conscience’ (von Klemperer, 2016, p. 22).

When the laws of the regime fail individuals rely on ‘higher laws’ or moral laws which often find expression in religion (von Klemperer, 2016, p. 36). To justify their actions in a more general way, the resisters relied on an übergesetzliches Widerstandsrecht (a law overriding right to resistance; Chowaniec, 1991, p. 148). This notion of a moral right to civil disobedience is derived from ‘a sacred duty not to participate in evil’ (Haksar, 2003, p. 411) and it manifests ‘only when the cause is just and conscience or self-respect are involved’ (Haksar, 2003, p. 415). In the struggle for survival as an opponent of the morally corrupt Nazi state, only the individual moral compass was left for guidance.

This finding matches with Mahatma Gandhi’s sentiment that ‘civil disobedience was related to non-cooperation with injustice when it reached evil proportions’ (Haksar, 2003, p. 409). Furthermore, in his reading of Gandhi, Akeel Bilgrami saw the alternative possibility of moral judgement sans moral principle (Bilgrami, 2002, p. 79f). Thus, instead of invoking moral theory, one could well argue that the moral judgments of the people involved in the Widerstand emanated not from adherence to any moral ‘principles’, but from a commitment to be a ‘moral exemplar’ in the Gandhian sense.

Interestingly, Gandhi was read among German intellectuals at the time, including some leading resisters (Dönhoff, 1994, p. 83). Bonhoeffer had even tried on several occasions to meet with Gandhi, and in 1934 Gandhi had invited him to visit, but that never materialized (DeJonge, 2016, p. 370). On his own accord, Gandhi had written a letter to Hitler in 1939 to urge him not to go to war, and another letter in 1940 to urge discontinuance of the war (Jacobs, 2015). In the 1940 letter, Gandhi wrote:

> It is based on the knowledge that no spoliator can compass his end without a certain degree of co-operation, willing or compulsory, of the victim. Our rulers may have our land and bodies but not our souls. They can have the former only by complete destruction of every Indian—man, woman and child. That all may not rise to that degree of heroism and that a fair amount of frightfulness can bend the back of revolt is true but the argument would be beside the point. For, if a fair number of men and women be found in India who would be prepared without any ill will against the spoliators to lay down their lives rather than bend the knee to them, they would have shown the way to freedom from the tyranny of violence. (Jacobs, 2015)

While in 1940, the Nazi state was already on the course of ‘complete destruction’ of (not only) resisters, Gandhi reflected the absolute freedom of the individual soul. Gandhi confirmed that no one can take the soul from the individual and the individual is courageously willing to die for it. The individual’s morality is supreme and governments need to respect that.

Nevertheless, as the mission here involved the application of moral theory, in the following section, a selection resisters’ individual moral decisions are closer evaluated with the corresponding moral theories of consequentialism, utilitarianism, deontology and virtue ethics.

### A Selection of Individual Resister’s Moral Decisions

The decision to resist the Nazis was an individual, very personal and solitary decision as every German knew the risks of opposing both the system and the vast majority of the population (von Keyserlingk-Rehbein, 2018, p. 9f). People could not reveal their thoughts openly, even in the closest circles, and because of the constant danger of denunciation or betrayal, one mistake could prove fatal. On the other side, if two people could trust each other, the trust grew stronger in the face of the dangers. In turn, this confirms the individuality of the initial decision to push back (von Keyserlingk-Rehbein, 2018, p. 10).
Decisions to resist were particularly difficult for military officers who felt bound by their oath. After the death of German President von Hindenburg in 1934, the military oath was not sworn to the country Germany anymore, but to the person of the Führer (von Klemperer, 2016, p. 47). In anticipation of the plot of 20 July 1944 von Stauffenberg, oathbound as a general in the army, said

It is time that something be done. However, whoever dares to do something has to be aware that he will enter German history as traitor. But if he does not act, then he will be a traitor of his own conscience. (Pröse, 2019, own translation)

Fritz-Dietlof von der Schulenburg said at his trial that the resisters had taken action to prevent unthinkable damage to Germany and he knew he would be hanged for his part in it, but he had no regrets for his deeds (Dönhoff, 1994, p. 98). With a focus on action and consequences, these examples fit consequentialist thought. While von der Schulenburg perhaps expressed a lesser concern for personal consequences as von Stauffenberg did, both were motivated to maximize good and minimise suffering—wanting to get rid of Hitler for a better Germany, and even a better Europe. Similarly, Adam von Trott zu Solz resisted National Socialism because he saw it his duty to avert a European catastrophe (von Trott zu Solz, 2016/2009, pp. 41–42).

A note in preparation of the plot of 20 July 1944 written by General Beck and Carl Goerdeler reflects that each had come to terms with his own conscience (Gedenkstätte Deutscher Widerstand, 2016c). Their Regierungserklärung (governance declaration) of 1944 called for the reinstatement of the rule of law, the independence of justice and the immediate cessation of the terror state, the shameful persecution of Jews, and the war (Gedenkstätte Deutscher Widerstand, 2016d). Beck’s and Goerdeler’s motives to resist the Nazis reflect a personal utilitarian approach, considering that both had been tipped as political leaders for a post-Hitler Germany.

A moral trade-off, less about the consequences and more about virtue ethics, is reflected by resister Erwin von Witzleben. In notes written in preparation for an address to the army, von Witzleben argued that because Hitler had broken his oath to uphold the values of the Vaterland, soldiers were no longer bound by their oath to him (Gedenkstätte Deutscher Widerstand, 2016b); General Beck shared the same argument (von Klemperer, 2016, p. 47f). Axel von dem Bussche, an enthusiastic and highly decorated Nazi officer, witnessed a mass execution of civilians in 1942 in Poland and then questioned his oath to the Führer as his supreme commander. He decided that in his eyes, Hitler had broken his oath to the German people, and hence he would not risk his life for Germany on the battlefield anymore, but instead he would fight Hitler (Dönhoff, 1994, p. 73f). Some military officers were extremely distraught, and although they sympathized with the spirit of the resisters, they could not convince themselves to break their oaths (Dönhoff, 1994, p. 94; von Klemperer, 2016, p. 47). For these resisters, the inner struggle to do the right thing reflects the balancing of individual morality in deontological fashion as the decision centred on a strong sense of duty (action) and less on the position of the agent.

The more religiously orientated resisters expressed a Kantian belief in God as the source of all morals. Thus, before Henning von Treskow shot himself, after he had realized that the plot of 20 July 1944 had failed, he explained to his adjutant that he would meet God with a clear conscience for what he had done in the fight against Hitler (Dönhoff, 1994, p. 72). Heinrich Graf Lehndorff’s last letter before he was executed on 4 September 1944 reflected maturity, deep Christian convictions and the confirmation that after extensive examination of his conscience, he did not regret anything he had done (Dönhoff, 1994, p. 152f).

Further examples that would reflect deontological theory are found in the flyers of Die Weiße Rose which consistently refer to freedom, honour and dignity (Gedenkstätte Deutscher Widerstand, 2016e).
In the third flyer, the authors argued that it was not only their right but also their moral duty to oppose the fascist system, and with rather limited possibilities at their disposal, their best option would be to unite in passive resistance (Scholl, 2006, p. 85).

Germans who had helped Jews in Berlin expressed their individual moral calculations reflecting virtue ethics. Ernst Golgowski said in an interview after the war: ‘I had carried out my resistance with full conviction’ (Wolfgram, 2006, p. 212f). Another surviving resister, Helene Jacobs, also said in an interview that her motivation for resisting Nazis was ‘[o]ut of the conviction, that this all had to fail’ (Wolfgram, 2006, p. 215).

However, Germans who had helped Jews were not people with some ‘special sense’ as help often happened in unplanned and serendipitous ways. The decision was more a question of being confronted with a situation and consciously deciding to help (Beer, 2018, p. 56). The helpers’ type of resistance was private, individual and spontaneous, and sprang from a deep disconnect with Nazi ideology (Beer, 2018, p. 264). These examples represent both virtue ethics and deontological theory. But then political and military resistance obviously had the motive to damage or destroy the Nazi regime, and some of these actions had been collective and organized. These motives clearly reflect consequentialist or utilitarian intentions.

The civilian resisters of the *Kreisauer Kreis*, in line with pacifist sentiments, avoided violence as a form of resistance, and they seriously debated religious and philosophical principles of humanity, especially their moral concerns that murdering a tyrant was still murder (Dönhoff, 1994, p. 35; von Klemperer, 2016, p. 71f). Hence violent acts, like the plot of 20 July 1944, only became possible after some military resisters, notably von Stauffenberg, had joined civil resistance groups (Dönhoff, 1994, p. 18). These reflections seem to be on the borders of utilitarianism and deontological theory, but they also show how moral perceptions can shift with changing circumstances.

The individual’s autonomy over their own morality may cause the individual to suffer when forced to compromise moral values, consequently the individual

may reach a breaking-point after which he can no longer be himself if he follows the actions prescribed or mandated by laws, norms, and honour-codes that require him to act against his conscience. Reaching the breaking-point will result in either the breaking of the individual and the shattering of the self, the breaking of the self’s relation with the group(s) that cause suffering, or rebellion. (Oprisko, 2012, p. 184)

Rejecting the legality of the national-socialist laws in the totalitarian state meant that resisters could replace these morally and ethically objectionable laws with their own moral reasoning and guidance. In particular, those helpers with a legal background relied on this argument (Beer, 2018, p. 147). Berlin jurist Irene Block who had helped Jews explained that with the fact that the Nazi state had become unjust, she could justify doing things she would usually, as a decent person, not do, like steal or lie (Beer, 2018, p. 148). Most helpers came to a point where they had to break the law in order to help Jews: they hid them, stole food, produced fake identity documents or bribed Gestapo officials, things they would not normally have done.

Of course, it caused deep concern for these people that this continuous breaking of the law could result in their own lowering of moral standards, which could, in the long-term, influence what they would perceive as right or wrong (Beer, 2018, pp. 146, 281f, 296). At a discussion among priests of the *Bekennende Kirche* (Confessional Church), some argued that it was not possible to reconcile lies, theft and fraud with their Christian conscience, while others pointed out that for them it was far worse to just look on as thousands of Jews were being murdered, which seriously outweighed ‘lesser’ crimes (Beer, 2018, p. 146f).
Germans who had helped Jews did so out of their own conviction and not because they had followed the moral example of someone else (Beer, 2018, p. 63). Neither did the political (civilian) nor military resisters follow any example; in their case, many of them were already people with rank and status: aristocrats, top-level bureaucrats and leading military officers (Dönhoff, 1994, p. 36f). The resisters did not act or risk their lives because they were after positions, benefits, belonging in a group, nor any honour. Quite the contrary, they knew they would receive harsh punishment for their actions.

Those who were ‘somebody’ already wanted to help and serve others in need (Dönhoff, 1994, p. 93), they felt a conservative-aristocratic duty, a *noblesse oblige*, to act (von Klemperer, 2016, p. 23). These resisters accepted their positions and hence their responsibility, whereas for other resisters social status played no role; they took risks and responsibility simply because of their conscience. The various resisters risked their lives to protect their own moral values, and while all the resisters had made a personal decision to disengage with the Nazi state, each was motivated by that which was of paramount importance to the individual self.

There are of course many more examples of resisters’ moral decisions but the selection above has shown how normative moral theories apply to the *Widerstand* example and how they overlap. Whether driven by consequence, use, a sense of duty, or virtue, or some mix of these, the *Widerstand* example confirms the core individuality of moral choices and actions. Clearly, this finding would also be reached through Bilgrami’s interpretation of Gandhi, as the examples of resister’s moral decisions could equally be expressions of the Gandhian moral exemplar.

Geoffrey Scarre (2009, p. 499) argued that in situations of general moral decay and out of a necessity to survive, the individuality of morality comes stronger to the fore. Scarre elaborated that while

we may all need to trust in others’ moral guidance from time to time, we cannot shrug off our own moral responsibilities by claiming that we were only doing what we were told. Though the guidance comes from others, ultimately the decisions are ours. (Scarre, 2009, p. 516)

In states of general moral dissonance, others’ moral guidance could be so diluted that individuals have only themselves left for guidance to survive. Because individuals cannot rely on a collective sense of right and wrong to guide them, they turn to their own moral compass.

Conclusions

To oppose the system and the majority of Germans was obviously extremely risky; nevertheless, the resisters did what they felt was right. The huge variety of resisters had one thing in common: moral dissonance with the Nazi regime. The *Widerstand* represents a case of strong individual morality that had been outlawed and reviled at the time by a morally corrupt state and would only be seen as an heroic legacy many years later. The moral example of the *Widerstand* constitutes a sound example of individual moral agency that could simultaneously be seen as an universal model for resistance of oppressive governance which espouses intolerance, racism and totalitarianism. The *Widerstand* example promotes the extension of the normative understanding of morality to include intolerance, racism and totalitarianism as morally wrong.

A democratic state, through its constitution which seeks to determine what is morally right, aims at harmonizing the multitude of individual moral perceptions. While staying within the ambit of its constitution, the state has to practice temperance in its guidance, especially when individual freedoms
are curtailed—for whatever reason—as the moral buy-in of citizens is required to achieve harmonious coordination of society. However, Ratnapala (2003, p. 229) has lamented that ‘the modern state has a record of attempting to compel temperance by law’. This record has only increased in recent years.

To harmonize a multitude of individual moral perceptions could be a daunting task for governments, but von Moltke (of the Kreisau Circle) warned that failing to harness public moral buy-in causes citizens to become excluded from governance. Citizens then feel that they have no part in any achievements of the state and hence also no responsibility for what happens, while those who exclusively govern feel that they as the ruling class are not responsible towards anyone and can do as they please (Dönhoff, 1994, p. 183), and a morally corrupt state developed.

The year 2020 has been marked not only by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and consequential authoritarian lockdown regulations in many countries, but also by intensified outbreaks all over the globe of intolerance, racism and totalitarianism in countries that are deemed to be democracies. Racism and intolerance have become burning issues in the United States, there is growing right-wing extremism in Europe and the United Kingdom, and totalitarian regimes are sprouting in the Eurasian zone. People resisting these phenomena may well echo the way individuals of the Widerstand pushed back against Nazi oppression and the moral example of the Widerstand could find resonance with resisters today. Perhaps, now more than ever since WWII, we need strong, clear moral guidance and encouragement to rely on a shared normative sense of what is fair and right that draws on what unites us in our common humanity rather than on what divides us, such as race, ethnicity, gender, status, religion, language, culture or nationality.

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