



## *Disobeying Hitler: German Resistance after Valkyrie* by Randall Hansen.

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The subject of resistance to Adolf Hitler and the Third Reich has long preoccupied historians of Germany and World War II. Recently, the film *Valkyrie*<sup>1</sup> has stimulated renewed interest in the failed plot to assassinate Hitler on 20 July 1944. In *Disobeying Hitler*, political scientist Randall Hansen<sup>2</sup> (Univ. of Toronto) has added something new to the literature on resistance by concentrating on the period *after* the 20 July plot. The book chiefly concerns the response of Germans, both civilians and soldiers, to Hitler's adoption of a scorched-earth strategy in the face of Allied advances in 1944-45. The author taps an impressive array of local, regional, and national archives, as well as the relevant secondary literature, to show that Germans frequently disobeyed Hitler's commands as it became clear they would cause needless destruction without changing the outcome of the war. Though the book is a work of serious scholarship intended for academic audiences, Hansen's engaging, often anecdotal narrative style will appeal to a general readership as well.

The book's twenty-six chapters<sup>3</sup> begin with the immediate aftermath of the Valkyrie plot and recount resistance efforts in Paris, southern France, the Rhineland, and southern Germany. Historians of resistance in Germany typically close their discussions with the Valkyrie plot. Hansen instead argues that the plot profoundly shaped German attitudes to resistance throughout the remaining months of the war. To deter any other potential resisters, Hitler had the coup leaders executed in a particularly painful and public manner. "The public prosecutions greatly stiffened the army's resolve to fight on as they demonstrated that opposition meant death" (71-72). More broadly, Hansen writes, "for Hitler the only way to answer the treachery of the coup, and to silence the 'babble' of foreign propaganda following the coup was through the pursuit of total war" (72).

Hitler first tried to implement his new strategy in Paris in August 1944. But the French capital never experienced total war, thanks to the efforts of German general Dietrich von Choltitz, the military governor of the city whom Hitler had ordered to carry out its destruction.<sup>4</sup> By that August, insufficient military resources and the city's "restless inhabitants" made it obvious that the Paris could not be held against the Allies much longer (79). Choltitz knew that open defiance of his orders would have dire repercussions for both himself and his family. As the city rose in open revolt, Hansen argues, Choltitz's communications with his superiors deliberately exaggerated his efforts to defend Paris (105). At the

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1. Dir. Bryan Singer, 2008.

2. He is also the author of *Fire and Fury: The Allied Bombing of Germany, 1942-1945* (NY: New Amer. Library, 2008) and several studies of citizenship and immigration in modern Europe.

3. They are followed by a conclusion, a "Note on Approach, Sources, and Acknowledgements," some ninety pages of endnotes, an extensive chart specifying "The Defense and Surrender of German Cities in 1945," a glossary, a list of "works cited," and a full index.

4. Hansen notes that journalists Dominique Lapierre and Larry Collins wildly romanticized the story of Paris's liberation in their bestseller *Is Paris Burning?* (NY: Simon and Schuster, 1965), which was the basis of a successful film of the same title (dir. René Clément, 1966), with an ensemble cast including Kirk Douglas, Glenn Ford, Yves Montand, and Simone Signoret, among other well known actors.

same time, the general also indicated to the western Allies that, while he was willing to surrender the city, he had to make a token resistance to comply with Hitler's diktat. Thus, "Choltitz was exaggerating both his ability and willingness to destroy the city, but he hoped that doing so would bring the Allies in more quickly" (109). In the end, Hansen argues, Choltitz succeeded in defying Hitler and saving Paris without directly endangering his own (and his family's) lives.

Following the Normandy landings, the Allies carried out a similar invasion of southern France at Toulon and Marseille. Hansen contends that Hitler's orders were meant "to transform these cities into fortresses" (133) and not give them up to Allied armies. While a decision to surrender Toulon spared it significant destruction, Marseilles was not as fortunate: its harbor was devastated during the last days of German occupation. "Like so much else in the last year of the war, the harbor was in part the victim of the failure of July 20. The admiral responsible for the French southern coast had been open to French appeals to spare the port, but he killed himself in Aix-en-Provence after it emerged that Hitler had survived" (150). Although individual commanders chose to surrender, the men charged with defending southern France were committed to carrying out Hitler's orders to destroy the ports.

Hansen devotes the second half of his study to the opposition to Hitler inside Germany during the last year of the war. His discussion centers on Albert Speer, Hitler's former architect and later armaments minister. With the Allies poised to invade Germany in September 1944, Hitler made it clear he meant to pursue a scorched-earth policy. In his memoirs, Speer claims he was the only person who actively disobeyed Hitler in the final months of the war. While Hansen wisely stresses the need to examine Speer's claims with a critical eye, he writes that Hitler's minister in fact "displayed a willingness to disobey" (163) his orders. Specifically, he shrewdly "turned Hitler's professed belief in ultimate victory against him," arguing that any allied occupation would only be temporary. "As Germany would soon recover those positions, it made little sense to turn them into industrial wastelands" (163-64). Speer wrote letters to the *Gauleiter* (district governors), instructing them to avoid permanent destruction if possible. According to Hansen, Speer used arguments based on military strategy because "neither Hitler nor [Martin] Bormann possessed great reservoirs of sympathy for the German people" (165), but took military matters very seriously.

Hansen also maintains that Speer exploited the cumbersome bureaucracy of the Third Reich, because it "slowed the decision-making process, introduced multiple veto points, and in so doing bought time. This, in turn, made it highly likely that the advancing allied forces would capture the electricity grid intact." Speer also tried to shift the authority to issue destruction orders away from the Nazi party into "the hands of his ministry, the factory owners and the Wehrmacht" (167). Hansen concludes that, although he embellished his humanitarian concerns, Speer he "was one of very few people in the Reich—perhaps the only one—with such power to influence actors' willingness/unwillingness to destroy" (169).

Albert Speer's strategy for violating Hitler's orders to destroy German cities closely parallels the one adopted by the well known Protestant pastor Friedrich von Bodelschwingh in trying to end Operation T-4, the systematic murder of the physically or mentally disabled. Both men disagreed with Hitler's mandates and both took advantage of the bloated National Socialist bureaucracy. Both also made arguments that seemed to jibe with Hitler's larger military goals. That is, Speer and Bodelschwingh are better seen as disobeying specific orders they disagreed with rather than resisting wholesale the authority and legitimacy of Hitler's Reich. Unfortunately, Hansen never quite makes that distinction explicit.

In his concluding summary of his methodology and sources, Hansen states that *Disobeying Hitler* "focuses on disobedience as a category distinct from two more generally known forms of resistance: resistance as regime change and daily resistance." He locates his book "between positions articulated

by, respectively, Martin Broszat<sup>5</sup> and Klaus-Jürgen Müller<sup>6</sup> in its proposition that “disobedience ... captures actions intended to have a measurable impact on the course of the war” (333).

*Disobeying Hitler* clarifies the development of military resistance between the 20 July plot and the war’s end, a period less studied by students of the subject than the events immediately surrounding Valkyrie. Though some specialists will fault the author for omitting to engage with the pertinent historiography, they will appreciate that Randall Hansen’s concept of disobedience opens a path to further research. Histories of resistance in the Third Reich abound, but *Disobeying Hitler* demonstrates that the conversation is far from finished.

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5. “Resistenz und Widerstand: Eine Zwischenbilanz des Forschungsprojekts,” in *Bayern in der NS-Zeit: Herrschaft und Gesellschaft im Konflikt*, vol. 4.C, ed. Martin Broszat, Elke Fröhlich, Anton Grossmann (Munich: Oldenbourg Verlag, 1981) 691–709.

6. E.g., “Die Befreiung von Paris und die deutsche Führung an der Westfront,” in *Kriegsjahr 1944: Im Großen und Kleinen*, ed. M. Salewski and G. Schulze-Wegener (Stuttgart: F. Steiner, 1995) 43–60.