

**For them, opposition was a moral obligation. Creation and activities of the Kreisau Circle.**

In the 1920s, the Weimar Republic was a free, democratic state in which an extraordinary artistic and cultural life flourished. However, in the final days of January 1933, certain events took place which determined the further fate of Germany. The democratically elected National Socialist party, led by Adolf Hitler, took the helm of the government. Thus, within a very short time they managed to gain control over the entire administrative and police apparatus of Germany, gradually eliminating more and more civil liberties and removing opposition MPs from the parliament. Looking back, one would like to say that Hitler's party was an extreme group that managed, using brutal terror, to turn a democratic state into a prison. However, it is difficult to deny the National Socialists political agility and an excellent sense of the public sentiment. Instead of encountering numerous protests, they managed to win almost full public support for their actions, which not long afterwards – only six years later, in 1939 – led to the bloodiest conflict in the history of humankind, World War II.

Only certain small milieus and some individuals retained independence of thought in the Third Reich. The most important opposition group in the Third Reich turned out to be the circle of people associated with Helmuth James von Moltke. Its most important leaders were linked in various ways to Silesia. Some had ancestors there, others were connected with the region professionally. They considered themselves to be the nation's elite and, also for this reason, believed that it was their responsibility to save Germany from a National Socialist dictatorship. They were brought together by their indignation at the reality of the fascist state as well as at the suppression of the most elementary civil rights and of any manifestations of independent political life. They objected to the persecution of Jews and to an aggressive international policy. The Silesian aristocrat's fellow conspirators were convinced that the Nazi dictatorship, due to its immoral character, would not last. The group crystallised in the late 1930s. Already after its exposure, the Gestapo gave it the name of Kreisauer Kreis – the Kreisau Circle.

One of the main tasks the group of oppositionists set themselves involved creating a vision of a new Germany as a state free from fascism. The worldview concepts they developed,

however, were deeply rooted in the political and intellectual atmosphere of the 1920s. They represented a creative conglomerate of views which the Kreisauer Kreis intellectuals also revised and developed as a result of the experiences which had led to the rise of National Socialism in Germany. In order to understand the worldview concepts subscribed to by the Kreisauer Kreis, it is worth looking at their origins.

The Kreisauer Kreis was an informal grouping and had no specific organisational structure. It is also difficult to determine when exactly it started to exist. What is known is that at the end of 1938, Helmut von Moltke renewed many of his old acquaintances, mainly from his university days. In England, Moltke met the lawyer Adam von Trott. It is assumed that the origins of the Kreisauer Kreis can be traced back to a dinner which Helmut von Moltke and Peter Yorck von Wartenburg had together on 16 January 1940. That was the day when Moltke wrote to his wife: "We talked a lot. Peter lives near the botanical garden in Berlin, in a tiny house, furnished very neatly and nicely. I think we understood each other very well, and we will start meeting more often from now on." Count Peter Yorck von Wartenburg came from one of the most distinguished aristocratic families of Silesia. His sister Davy was the wife of the pre-war German ambassador to Poland, Adolf von Moltke. Adolf von Moltke, in turn, was the uncle of Helmut von Moltke. The aristocrats were therefore related to each other.

The two decided to work together to develop visions for a post-war Germany and, at the same time, to take actions to overthrow the Nazi regime. They believed that defeat in the war would cause great remorse among the German people and provide a good moment for profound social and economic reforms in Germany. In fact, it required extraordinary faith in the future and in the determination of historical processes to discuss the agony of Hitler's system at the height of his success.

Another major task they set themselves involved mitigation of the consequences of the Nazi terror both in Germany and in the occupied countries. They decided to provide support on many levels to those persecuted by the regime and to save as many people as possible who were threatened with being killed. They wanted to create "islands of humanity" (*Insel der Menschlichkeit*). These tasks were beyond their capabilities, so they decided to gather around them as many opponents of fascism as possible. They were also looking for outstanding individuals who could not only advise them, but also hold key positions in the future post-war Germany.

Moltke sought people competent in various fields. The Kreisauer Kreis mostly relied on personal and family contacts. As a rule, Moltke did not settle for the opinion of a single expert, but spoke with more specialists about each matter. This was linked to the very tight precautions taken, as exposure could mean death sentences for everyone involved in the plot. The memos of conversations were burnt on the same day, only the most important ones were stored in a possibly safe place. One of the few members of the Kreisauer Kreis who were not murdered by the Nazi regime was Theodor Steltzer. Here is what he wrote about his work in the conspiracy after the war: “There was no charter and no voting in our circle’s work. We always sought compromise. In the relaxed atmosphere that accompanied their work, naturally differing views would appear. Generational differences and personal experiences obviously played an important role here”.

The members of the Kreisauer Kreis represented diverse backgrounds and political orientations. Some of them were aristocrats attached to Prussian patriotic traditions: they included Moltke, Yorck and Fritz-Dietlof, Count von Schulenburg, former Oberpräsident of the Province of Silesia with its capital in Breslau. The second group in the conspiracy comprised socialists such as Adolf Reichwein and Theodor Haubach. The Kreisauer Kreis included Social Democratic members of the Reichstag, such as Julius Leber and Carlo Mierendorff. Trade union leader Wilhelm Leuschner was also a member. Some representatives of the group spent many years in Nazi concentration camps. The third element in the Kreisauer Kreis were the theologians Harald Poelchau, Eugen Gerstenmaier, Augustin Rösch, Alfred Delp, and Lothar König. Some oppositionists were also associated with the Kreisau Circle whom it would be difficult to assign to any specific category. These included officers such as Theodor Steltzer and Hans Peters, diplomats such as Adam von Trott and Werner von Haeften, and political scientist Otto von der Gablenz. The Kreisauer Kreis consciously described itself as a “resistance movement” already back in 1942.

It included competent lawyers, state theorists, economists, and philosophers. Despite the differences dividing them, they were able to find common ground for collaboration. They managed to reach an agreement mainly because they respected one another as partners. However, not all members of the Kreisauer Kreis fully identified with the group. Eugen Gerstenmaier wrote after the war: “(...) it cannot be said that Count Schulenburg identified without reservations with the other members of the Kreisauer Kreis. When Adam von Trott, myself or Yorck fully shared Count von Moltke’s views, Count von Schulenburg was often of a completely different opinion.” Back in November 1942, Moltke wrote in his personal notes

that serious differences separated him from Schulenburg. The nature of the divergences was political, and they mainly concerned the way of accelerating the fall of the Nazi regime. Other matters of contention were intellectual in their nature and concerned the way of functioning of the state.

Depending on the number of attendees, the meetings were held either secretly, unnoticed by neighbours or casual acquaintances, or officially, disguised as large private social gatherings. Since it was part of the lifestyle of the grand aristocratic houses to receive many guests, the Kreisauer Kreis meetings did not surprise anyone or arouse any suspicions.

The largest programmatic meetings of the conspiracy were held in what is now Krzyżowa near Świdnica. The first one took place on 22–25 May 1942. It was attended by Yorck, Moltke, Peters, Poelchau, Rösch, Steltzer, Lukaszek, and Reichwein. It was a meeting of “friends of the Count from Berlin”. The main topics of the meeting were the role of Christianity in the process of rebuilding the post-war society and the form of state and local government structures. Other aspects that were addressed included the reform of primary and higher education. The prospects for the resistance movement in Germany were discussed. Moltke and Yorck represented the view that the aristocracy were the nation’s elite and had a special responsibility for eliminating the disgraceful fascist system. They also talked about how to behave in the event of exposure and arrest by the Gestapo.

The second Kreisauer Kreis meeting took place a few months later, on 16–18 October 1942. It was attended by Yorck, Moltke, Steltzer, Gerstenmaier, Delp, Reichwein, Horst von Einsiedel, and Hermann Maass.

Discussions continued there on the future constitution. The main topics included Germany’s future political system, economic matters, and the form of trade unions.

The third and final Kreisau meeting took place around Pentecost day, on 12–14 June 1943. It was attended by Paulus von Husen, Adam von Trott, Gerstenmaier, Reichwein, Einsiedel, Maass, Delp, Yorck, and Moltke. The main issues discussed there were related to foreign policy towards the Allies and to the punishment of the fascist criminals.

Naturally, not all working meetings took place in Kreisau. Moltke often invited the conspirators to his flat in Berlin. Yorck von Wartenburg also made his estates available for the conspiracy meetings. They would therefore take place in Mała Oleśnica, but above all in the

Yorck family's house in Berlin, at 50 Hortensienstrasse. In March 1943, Helmut von Moltke also moved there, fearing air raids. According to some, that house was where the conspiracy had its centre, even more than Kreisau/Krzyżowa itself. However, Krzyżowa was and continues to be the symbol of the Kreisauer Kreis.

The agricultural policy of the future German state was discussed during separate meetings attended by a slightly different group of attendees. They were usually held on the estate of Baron Ernst von Borsig – Gross Behnitz, some 40 km from the centre of Berlin. The first of them took place on 13–16 March 1942. Apart from Peter von Yorck and Helmut von Moltke, it was attended also by Fritz Christiansen-Weniger, Margarete von zur Mühlen, and Friederich von Zitzewitz-Muttrin. A second meeting took place in Gross Behnitz on 25–27 July 1942. The other attendees there were Professors Constantin von Dietze, Hans Krueger, August von Jest, and presumably Horst von Einsiedel. The third meeting on Baron Boersig's estate took place in February 1943. Only Yorck, Moltke, Christiansen-Weniger and the host attended.

Agricultural policy and other matters were also discussed in smaller groups formed to deal with specific themes, which also prepared plenary meetings. The Kreisauer Kreis created a system of expert opinions, professionalising their work to a significant extent. The solutions proposed in relation to the individual matters were subsequently discussed during meetings in a wider group.

However, the same strict rules of conspiracy were always observed. No lists with names were kept, while random notes were immediately burnt. Only the most important documents that were drafted were kept and duly hidden. In fact, they were concealed so well that after exposure of the Kreisauer Kreis, the Gestapo never found them.

Conflicts would sometimes arise during the discussions. Serious differences of opinion appeared above all with regard to the suggestion that an assassination attempt be made against Hitler. Moltke hoped for a long time that the Wehrmacht generals would stage a coup d'état. After the Stalingrad defeat, however, he came to believe that only the Allies were capable of overthrowing the fascist regime. This scenario also seemed to him the best from the point of view of the social and political reforms, which Moltke considered absolutely necessary,

There were also moral arguments against the assassination of Hitler. In a conversation with the brother of the would-be assassin, Freiherr Hans Christoph von Stauffenberg, Moltke argued: "Why are we against the Third Reich? Why are we against fascism? Well, because it's

a system of criminal lawlessness. One must not start social renewal with a crime. Murder in itself is lawlessness.” In a conversation with another member of the Kreisauer Kreis, the Jesuit Augustin Rösch, he reportedly said: “We could not complain about people being murdered in concentration camps and God knows where else, if we were to do the same thing.”

Helmut von Moltke’s main opponent in this dispute was Count Fritz-Dietlof von Schulenburg. From spring 1943, he made determined efforts to remove Hitler. Moltke was opposed to Hitler’s assassination until the very end. After his arrest by the Gestapo in January 1944, however, most members of the Kreisau groups decided to take part in the assassination attempt against Hitler and actively participated in its preparations. Schulenburg sometimes referred to the Kreisauer Kreis as a circle of literati and artsy dreamers. However, this did not prevent him from working closely with them.

In the numerous discussions held within the Kreisauer Kreis, however, there was no doubt when it came to judging the Holocaust. The German oppositionists were probably not fully aware of the extent of the fascist dictatorship’s crimes against the Jews. Nevertheless, they spoke out uncompromisingly from the very outset against any form of their discrimination. As early as in November 1941, Augustin Rösch drew the attention of other members of the Kreisauer Kreis to the tragic fate of the Jews, thousands of whom had been locked up in ghettos, where the criminal activity against them would continue to be perpetrated. He spoke out forcefully against their deportation and murder. Another leading Kreisauer Kreis intellectual, Alfred Delp, sought to actively help the Jews who were in danger. He considered the German policy pursued towards them at the time as a disgrace and as a crime against humanity, which should be condemned most firmly.

Moltke represented the view that the Allies should be helped using any means possible in the war against Nazi Germany. This is why the Kreisauer Kreis tried to establish contacts with the anti-Nazi coalition governments from the very beginning. These attempts involved an enormous risk, as even the slightest indiscretion on the part of the Allies would immediately lead all members of the Kreisauer Kreis to the scaffold. Despite repeated attempts, the Allies consistently refused to cooperate with the German opposition.

The Kreisauer Kreis oppositionists did manage, however, to establish contacts with the resistance in other countries. On the one hand, these links were perceived as an opportunity to

establish cooperation with the Allies. On the other hand, the attempts stemmed from the need to help people threatened by the Nazi regime. The contacts were established thanks to the high positions held by members of the Kreisauer Kreis within the system of authorities. These activities obviously involved a serious risk to life. The opposition activity of the Kreisauer Kreis was therefore not limited to worldview discussions.

In late September 1943, Moltke warned the Danish resistance movement that deportations of Jews were being prepared. The Gestapo was preparing a major action for the night of 1 October 1943. The Danish Jews had already heard about this plan, but thanks to Helmut von Moltke they could be sure that the information was true. In this way, he helped to save around 6,000 people from certain death. The Silesian aristocrat was in close and frequent contact with the resistance movement in the Netherlands. There, he also issued warnings about police actions and made efforts to have imprisoned people released. He helped to counter attempted economic plunder. In the Netherlands, Moltke even took part in debates concerning the future of Europe.

Moltke intended to set up a system to warn the Polish resistance against Nazi repressions. It can be assumed that he met with Primate Sapiieha to talk about it in early May 1943. No information has been preserved about how the conversation went and whether it had any effect. It is only known that Moltke was completely satisfied with his visit.

In a clandestine letter to his British friend Lionel Curtis, dated 25 March 1943, Moltke wrote: “The opposition is saving people’s lives. We are unable to prevent criminal orders from being given, but we are in a position to save individual people, even if they already have a death sentence. We often warn people when we know that they are at risk of arrest or deportation. We do so mainly in occupied countries. It is difficult to deny the mass murders committed by the Germans. A more thorough analysis would probably reveal that many thousands of people have been saved as a result of the actions of various German generals, officers, officials of various ranks, and even simple workers. We are also absolutely certain that dozens of thousands of Germans are being murdered as part of repressions for opposition activities or even for a critical attitude towards the regime. We suppose that several hundred of them perish every day. Unlike oppositionists in other occupied territories, these people do not die a hero’s death. Those who lay down their lives in other countries are at least aware that their fellow countrymen regard them as heroes. German oppositionists, however, die in shame,

knowing that in the eyes of those around them they are reduced to the level of hoodlums and murderers.”

Apart from the police apparatus of the Third Reich, which carried out surveillance of the opposition circles, the most serious problem was the total lack of interest on the part of the Western Allies in cooperation with the German opposition. This was also the most serious weakness of the Kreisauer Kreis. It resulted to a significant extent from the fact that there were also other opposition groups in Germany that openly declared their imperialist inclinations and their yearning towards Germany as a superpower. Texts written within these circles reached the West and caused far-reaching suspicion. On 21 July 1942, in one of his memoranda on the international situation, Prime Minister Churchill wrote: “If the fascist government in Germany were to fall, power would almost certainly pass into the hands of the highest-ranking officers of the German army. The Wehrmacht generals will not be willing under any circumstances to accept the peace terms that would be necessary from the point of view of the British and American security policy.” Churchill clearly did not expect any change in the political and military situation after the potential takeover of power by opposition officers.

In late April 1942, diplomat Adam von Trott, closely associated with the Kreisauer Kreis, handed over a memorandum about his group’s plans to the general secretary of the ecumenical movement in Geneva, Visser 'tHooft. It represented a political declaration of sorts by the Kreisauer Kreis. The memorandum expressed outrage at the fascist policies in Europe and sought support in the common fight against the Nazi regime. It also warned of the danger of communism developing in Europe. It ended up in the hands of Sir Stafford Cripps, who was at that time not only a member of Churchill’s cabinet, but one of Britain’s most influential politicians. Despite his efforts, the British government was not even willing to respond. Instead, the memorandum was probably forwarded to the US Government.

This was by no means the only attempt to establish contacts with London. A declared advocate of cooperation between the Kreisauer Kreis and the Western Allies was George Bell, Bishop of Chichester. He repeatedly tried to persuade the government circles in Britain to cooperate with the oppositionists from Kreisau. He intervened with regard to the matter with the then Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden, who wrote to him, in a letter dated 4 August 1942: “If indeed part of the German people genuinely want to return to a state that respects law and individual freedom, then the politicians representing them must understand that nobody will



believe them until they take active steps to overthrow the present regime.... I understand the dangers faced by the German opposition, but it has so far given little evidence of its activity. Other oppressed nations of Europe are actively fighting against the German occupying forces, risking great losses. The German opposition must follow suit and must take certain risks that are related to overthrowing the regime. Until that happens, I see no reason to change the British government's position with regard to the German opposition.”

The US government behaved slightly differently towards the resistance movement. Although, just the British, they refused to cooperate with the German opposition in any way until the very end, they did decide, however, to monitor its activities.

The further activity of the Kreisauer Kreis was affected by Helmut von Moltke's arrest in January 1944, which obviously put an end to his opposition activity. Moltke was arrested in connection with a completely different matter, completely unrelated to his actual opposition activities.

The imprisonment of Helmut von Moltke was crucial for the further activities of the KK. The evolution of the group's character was so profound that some German scholars believe that the Kreisauer Kreis ceased to exist on 17 January 1944. It is hard to agree with this. Although Moltke had been the group's leader from the very beginning, he was far from being its only member. The Kreisauer Kreis was not a code-name for the Silesian aristocrat, but the name given to a group of people that had its own dynamic. It never actually had a specific starting point, nor did it have a fixed list of members. It was dominated by different people in different periods. After Moltke's imprisonment, some of them decided to continue their consistent fight against the Nazi regime.

The changes in the Kreisauer Kreis after Moltke's imprisonment involved several important aspects. Previously, one of the group's main areas of activity had involved intellectual and conceptual work, as part of which the oppositionists reflected on the form Germany should take in the future, after the war. After Helmut von Moltke's imprisonment, this area of activity was pushed into the background. The Kreisauer Kreis shifted its focus on preparations for the assassination of Hitler and for a coup d'état. This represented another major transformation. Moltke had always been a firm opponent of assassinating the dictator. Now, his fellow conspirators decided to become actively involved in this act.

One of Helmuth von Moltke's main concerns before carrying out an assassination attempt on Hitler was linked to the awareness that the aristocrats and intellectuals associated with the Kreisauer Kreis obviously had no experience with regard to terrorist attacks. He was afraid that an attempt to assassinate the dictator would end in a disaster. In this case, he unfortunately turned out to be right. The attempt failed because Stauffenberg planted an unsuitable explosive at the conference with Hitler. The consequences of this mistake were terrible, also for life in the post-war Federal Republic. For the Nazi elites, the failed assassination attempt against the dictator became a pretext for murdering a large number of prominent figures, whom Germany lacked after 1945. The judicial murder of Helmuth von Moltke, whom the People's Court was unable to prove guilty of any form of treason, is the best example of this policy of exterminating potential political opponents in the post-war reality.