

Long Live Freedom!

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11-12th Grade Category, Third Place

Crisp winter air filled the lungs of Hans Scholl, a 23-year-old medical student at the University of Munich, on February 22, 1943, as he trudged toward the small building centered in the Stadelheim Prison courtyard. He forced down a sob, which slowly fought its way back into his throat. Knowing these were his last steps, his last breaths, he, just as before, could not remain silent. As the guard before him stepped into the building, Hans turned and cried, “Es lebe die Freiheit! (Long live freedom!)” (Jens 81). A few minutes later, the Nazi regime had exacted its retribution, and Hans lay forever silent, eternally screaming those same words-- forever serving as a prime example for those who, like him, dare to express their beliefs in a system that would silence them. Hans Scholl led the White Rose, a student resistance organization that renounced Nazi ideals and called for the restitution of individual freedom and morality to the German populace. Their passionate resistance to the unmoral National Socialist government cost five additional group members their lives and landed eleven others substantial fines or prison sentences. The inspiring literary resistance of these heroes offers a powerful legacy of moral courage.

It is difficult for one living in today’s democracies to fathom the totalitarian nature of the Nazi regime. Hitler’s word *was* law; certain social and political lines *could not* be crossed. The incredible moral courage of the White Rose comes from their blatant disregard of these totalitarian taboos. They recognized the enormity of the Nazi state, formed strong, deep-rooted beliefs against the corrupt philosophy, and organized their fight to destroy the party and to “set up a new Europe of the Spirit” (The Sixth Leaflet). Stepping beyond the party line in any respect required a certain amount of courage, but to completely defy party philosophy and denounce Hitler as the “offspring of Hell” called for a completely new level of *moral* courage (The Third Leaflet). They acted according to what they knew was right, even in a society telling them they would be wrong for a millennium.

Perhaps the group’s shared moral convictions were tied to their shared major. Each of the core members-- except Sophie, and philosophy professor Kurt Huber-- was enrolled in the medical program. Their heightened compassion for life made Hans Scholl, Alex Schmorell, Willi

Graf, and Christoph Probst more attuned to Nazi atrocities, particularly those dealing with abuse of human life.

Appalled by this abuse and the forced conformity of individuals to the Nazi way of life, the group wrote and distributed four subversive leaflets between June 27 and July 12, 1942. After this, the group fell silent while the male students were on duty as part of the medical student company on the Russian Front.

When activity resumed in November, they were on fire and graduated from passive to active resistance. They implored the German people to "...dissociate [themselves] from National Socialist gangsterism" (The Fifth Leaflet). Speaking of the post-war period, they warned that "...a terrible but just judgment will be meted out to those who stayed in hiding, who were cowardly and hesitant." Resistance was not an option anymore: it was each man's moral duty.

The same moral sentiments that drove the group's literary activity fueled another, more physically courageous act of resistance. On the night of February 3, Scholl and Schmorell graffitied "Down with Hitler" in twenty-nine different locations throughout Munich (Moll 179).

The fall of Stalingrad to allied forces in early February 1943 further inflamed their passion. "Fight against the Party!" they cried. "No threat can terrorize us....This is the struggle of each and every one of us for our future, our freedom, and our honor under a regime conscious of its moral responsibility" (The Sixth Leaflet).

On February 18, 1943, however, the covert operations of the group came to a crashing halt. The Scholl siblings were arrested at the University of Munich while distributing copies of the sixth leaflet. The Gestapo found the draft of a seventh leaflet on Hans, and was able to trace it back to Christoph Probst, who was consequently arrested February 20.

The foreordained People's Court trial began February 21, under the judgeship of the infamous Roland Freisler. The charge was attempted high treason, the punishment-- death. The three were transported to Stadelheim Prison where Sophie was the first to meet the prescribed blade of Nazi retribution, followed closely by her brother and Christoph. After the first three executions, Gestapo investigation led to the arrests of Kurt Huber, Alex Schmorell, and Wilhelm Graf, all of whom were executed later the same year.

The actions of the White Rose inspire me to stand up for my beliefs. In this day of cell phones and preoccupied teachers, I will never cheat on a test, regardless of how straight-laced this seems to my friends, because I believe in integrity, and I want my grade to reflect my honest

abilities. More importantly, I have learned never to be afraid or ashamed of my beliefs. I will not be intimidated into a cowardly silence when situations that require morally-inspired actions arise.

The legacy of the White Rose is their actions in defense of what they believed to be morally just in the darkest of human nights. Timelessly, the passion and innocence of their tale crowns the message of moral courage with a halo of reverberating interest to fellow youth. This everlasting quality makes the group stand out above other German resistance cells. Their tale can never grow stale, and will, therefore, function as a lifelong guide to each generation who grows under its influence.

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