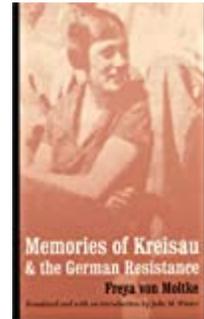


# H-Net Reviews

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**Freya von Moltke.** *Memories of Kreisau and the German Resistance.* Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2003. xiv + 87 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8032-4669-0.



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In recent years, the study of resistance in the Third Reich has broadened to include not just political history but also the history of everyday life. A topic that once revolved around intentional and overt acts or organized resistance now also includes the study of fluid, everyday behavioral patterns of conformity, conflict, and criticism.[1] Freya von Moltke's memoir, with its dual focus on the political activities of the elite Kreisau Circle and on the Moltke family's daily life, speaks to both approaches. This memoir is also of equal interest to scholars of gender studies, in particular historians focusing on the reconfigurations of gender identities at the close of World War II.

In *Memories of Kreisau and the German Resistance*, Freya von Moltke provides a personal and self-reflective recollection of the Nazi resistance activities of the Kreisau Circle, co-founded by her husband, Helmuth James Count von Moltke. This group of anti-Nazi East-Elbian aristocrats, socialists, clergy, and diplomats began to hold discussions in 1940 to plan for the postwar reconstruction of Germany and had connections to the July 20, 1944 plot to assassinate Hitler. Freya von Moltke offers a detailed and at times sentimental account of her daily life on her husband's Silesian estate in Kreisau, where the group met three times in May 1942, October 1942, and June 1943.

Freya begins the memoir with a sketch of daily life on the Kreisau estate before the outbreak of war in a chapter called "Life in Kreisau." Originally from Cologne, she first came to Kreisau with her brother in 1930 to visit Helmuth, distant relative of the renowned Prussian field marshal Helmuth von Moltke. In the summer of 1931, Freya interrupted her legal studies at the universities of Cologne and Bonn to marry Helmuth and move to Kreisau. In the fall of 1932, she and Helmuth returned to live in Berlin so that he could complete his legal training, yet they maintained close contact with Kreisau and visited the estate regularly. As she describes it, "Kreisau remained the ever-present, constant background in our life, always a place of yearning" (p. 11). She remembers pre-war Kreisau in sentimental terms as a beautiful, peaceful, and cosmopolitan country estate.

While Freya emphasizes Helmuth's committed opposition to National Socialism, her discussion of the couple's everyday life also illuminates the daily compromises and negotiations the family undertook to navigate life under the Nazi dictatorship. Adolf Zeumer, the caretaker of the Moltke family estate, was a committed Nazi. As she recalls, "It became important for us that Herr Zeumer immediately and enthusiastically joined the Nazi Party, became head of the department, and thus controlled the police force in the village. He was a powerful man in

Kreisau" (p. 13). Zeumer protected the Moltke family from denunciations. A more critical discussion of Zeumer's complicity with National Socialism would have been warranted, yet Freya seems hesitant to condemn the family's long-time employee. The picture she paints is of a loyal, trustworthy, hard-working employee who was misguided by Nazi ideology. Zeumer was, of course, not the only source of protection the Moltke family enjoyed. Nazi respect for the famous Field Marshall von Moltke afforded Freya and Helmuth a certain respect as well.

The author writes with self-criticism about the protection Kreisau provided her and about her isolation from Nazi wartime atrocities. She notes that, "The farm was so far out of the way and so small that by the time news made its way there, it was in a milder form; in short, Kreisau made us more independent than were many others opposed to the Nazi regime, and Helmuth was always aware of this" (p. 14). Certainly, the Kreisau Circle would not have been able to meet and organize its activities without the protection Kreisau provided. Still, as Freya points out, "it required a certain amount of sticking my head in the sand, which I did, for it was unbearable to imagine what was going on. And I protected myself. 'Don't look around and just do your work,' was basically Helmuth's advice to me.... But that doesn't excuse us" (p. 28).

In her section on "Our Work for the Future," Freya describes the war's impact on Kreisau and details the three meetings the Kreisau Circle held there. She hid copies of the group's planning documents in the attic of the manor and brought them with her when she left Kreisau after it fell to Russian occupation. She portrays the first Kreisau Circle gathering, held May 22-25, 1942, as a relaxed and cheerful weekend. This meeting focused on the post-war reconstruction of the German educational system and the relationship between church and state. The second meeting, held the weekend of October 16-18 of the same year, was more tense than the first, with the main topics of discussion centering on the reconstruction of the state and the economy. The terrible wartime atmosphere even further influenced the third weekend meeting, which lasted from June 12-14, 1943. During this final gathering at Kreisau, the group focused its energies on foreign relations and Nazi war crimes. Freya's memoir remains vague about her knowledge of Nazi atrocities against Jews. Of this final meeting she recalls, "This time there was more pressure from the outside because of the continuing war and the terrible news about the acts of the Germans. All of that prevented what should have been a Pentecost weekend mood. However, I no longer remem-

ber whether we spoke much on this weekend about the horrible crimes that were in full swing against Jews above all but also against Russians and Poles" (p. 33).

The National Socialists arrested Helmuth in January 1944 for alerting a friend that he was to be taken into custody, a matter unrelated to the Kreisau Circle. Freya recalls monthly visits and the letters the couple exchanged while Helmuth was in prison. With Claus Stauffenberg's failed assassination and coup attempt against Hitler on July 20, 1944, Helmuth's status was even more precarious. Stauffenberg had become connected to the Kreisau Circle through Peter Yorck, a cousin of Stauffenberg. After a tense series of months in which Helmuth sent coded messages by letter to Freya about his status in prison, he was executed on January 23, 1945.

While the first two chapters of the memoir offer thoughtful if sentimental recollections of daily life on the estate and of the political activities of the Kreisau Circle, one of the most valuable contributions of the work emerges in its final chapter, "The Last Months of Kreisau." [2] In this chapter, Freya describes her own efforts to survive during the collapse of the Third Reich after her husband's execution. Here the memoir confirms the conclusions of recent studies of the new roles, opportunities, and challenges single women encountered at the close of the war. [3] The author's narrative voice in this chapter becomes more active as we learn about how this resourceful woman, mourning her recently executed husband, traveled eastward from Berlin back toward Kreisau against the flood of refugees fleeing west in the final months of the war. With Russian soldiers quickly approaching, she and a small group of Kreisau residents, including six children, found brief refuge in a Czech village. Freya lucidly details her brave, solitary, ten-hour bicycle journey through mountainous terrain from Czechoslovakia to Kreisau to check on the family estate. As she writes, "So I continued to ride, and rode and rode; I saw Eule Mountain from behind, then came into its shadow, rode along the long Wuestewaltersdorf valley, turned at Kynau into the Weistrizt Dam, and rode along the magnificent Talsperre Road down to Oberweistrizt. The day was now slowly beginning to wane, but my joy at seeing Muehlberg and the chapel hill on the horizon and my growing anticipation at arriving home again gave me wings.... On this evening I had the feeling that all the happiness and richness of our Kreisau life had come together in me once more during this journey home" (p. 51). Here Freya steps onto center stage, providing an eloquent and personal account of a woman's remarkable survival strategies in the final

months of the war and in the aftermath of the collapse of the Third Reich.

Taken as a whole, historians of resistance in the Third Reich will find that this memoir adds to the available English-language sources on the Kreisau Circle by combining a discussion of the political activities of the group with glimpses into the compromises, conflicts, and negotiations of everyday life in Kreisau.[4] This combination, in addition to its engaging style, also makes the memoir useful for undergraduate classroom use. On the other hand, the memoir does not comment on past debates among resistance historians regarding the extent of the Kreisau Circle's involvement in the July 20 conspiracy. Instead, the author's discussion of the political activities of the Kreisau Circle focuses on the period before her husband's arrest in January 1944.[5] Scholars focusing on the reconfigurations of gender identities at the close of World War II will find the final chapter of particular interest, as it provides a powerful account of how a recently widowed woman navigated the dangerous terrain of the collapse of the Third Reich.

#### Notes

[1]. Over the last couple of decades, historians have debated how to best define "resistance." Martin Broszat's "Bavaria Project" significantly broadened the focus beyond the study of *Widerstand*, intentional, high risk challenges to the regime as a whole, to look at *Resistenz*, an approach that opened up the examination of everyday patterns of conformity, opposition, and consensus within Nazi society. Martin Broszat et al., eds., *Bayern in der NS-Zeit*, 6 vols. (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1977-83).

[2]. This chapter was written in 1961 and first appeared in Freya von Moltke, Michael Balfour, Julian Frisby, *Helmuth James Graf von Moltke: 1907-1945* (Zurich: Diogenes Verlag, 1984).

[3]. Elizabeth Heineman, *What Difference Does a Husband Make: Women, Marital Status in Nazi and Postwar Germany* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1999).

[4]. Some secondary sources in English include Peter Hoffmann, *The History of the German Resistance: 1933-1945*, trans. Richard Barry (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1977); Peter Hoffmann, *German Resistance to Hitler* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1988); David Clay Large, ed., *Contending with Hitler: Varieties of German Resistance in the Third Reich* (Washington DC: German Historical Institute and Cambridge University Press, 1991); and Ger van Roon, *German Resistance to Hitler: Count von Moltke and the Kreisau Circle*, trans. Peter Ludlow (London and New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1971). Useful primary sources in English include Helmuth James von Moltke, *Letters to Freya: 1939-1945*, ed. and trans. Beate Ruhm von Oppen (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990); and Marion Yorck von Wartenburg, *The Power of Solitude: My Life in the German Resistance*, ed. and trans. Julie M. Winter (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2000).

[5]. Karl Dietrich Bracher, *The German Dictatorship: The Origins, Structure, and Effects of National Socialism* (New York: Praeger, 1970); Thomas Childers, "The Kreisau Circle and July 20," in *Contending with Hitler: Varieties of German Resistance in the Third Reich*, ed. David Clay Large (Washington DC: German Historical Institute and Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 99-117; Peter Hoffmann, *Widerstand, Staatsreich, Attentat. Der Kampf der Opposition gegen Hitler* (Munich: R. Piper, 1969); and Ger van Roon, *German Resistance to Hitler*. Childers and Hoffmann departed from Roon and Bracher by concluding that the Kreisau Circle remained active after Moltke's arrest in January 1944 and did play an important role in the July 20 assassination plot.

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