Schlüss jetzt!

Arbeiten! Nicht schwätzen!
Defiance of the Lambs

As Nazi propaganda proved increasingly hollow, scores of Germans anonymously vented their frustrations to the Reich’s top radio personality

By Brad Bauer

In a modest apartment in a working-class district of Berlin, a metalworker at the Siemens cable factory sat at his kitchen table one night in 1940, scratching out messages on postcards that he would later leave surreptitiously in stairwells of other apartment buildings, in waiting rooms of doctors’ offices, and in other public places where they would be found and read. “Hitler’s war is the workers death,” read one card. “Come what may, no peace with the diabolical Hitler-regime!” On another, “Why fight and die for Hitler’s plutocrats? All reasonable Germans help destroy Hitler’s war machine!”

Motivated by the death of his brother-in-law, killed during the invasion of France, Otto Hampel shook off his characteristic apathy toward all things political and sought to jar his fellow citizens into a greater awareness of how destructive Nazi rule would prove for them, their families, and their country. Such subversive actions were very risky in the Third Reich, though, and in Hampel’s case they ultimately proved fatal: after two years of spreading hundreds of postcards through the northern and eastern districts of Berlin, Hampel and his wife were betrayed to the Gestapo by an informant. After a pro forma trial in the notorious People’s Court, they were beheaded in March 1943.

If Hampel’s story sounds familiar, it may be due to the recent popularity of Hans Fallada’s novel Every Man Dies Alone, based on the story of the Hampels and translated from German to English for the first time in 2009, over 60 years after its initial publication. What fascinates many readers—besides the fact that it’s a compelling read (see review on page 70)—is the notion that there were Germans who took such actions against the regime, at great personal risk. Such an idea flies in the face of the recent characterization of ordinary Germans as ‘Hitler’s willing executioners,’ a phrase made popular by historian Daniel Jonah Goldhagen’s 1996 book of the same name.

Some stories of civilian resistance are well known, such as the
Programs that urged sacrifice for the war effort, like the clothing drive promoted in this 1942 poster, rankled Germans who knew the Nazi leadership still lived in luxury. The letter on the opposite page, sent from Hamburg in April 1941, rails against the wealth amassed by the “top Nazi clique” before ending: “Happy Easter, enjoy eating Russian caviar to the detriment of the people.”

University of Munich students Hans and Sophie Scholl, members of a network known as The White Rose, who distributed anti-Hitler manifestos across Germany until they, too, were caught and executed in early 1943. But less widely known are the countless Germans like the Hampels, whose stories have remained for the most part in the case files of the Gestapo. Thorough bureaucrats, the Nazis inadvertently preserved accounts of the bravery of their opponents with a documentary record now scattered in archives, museums, and libraries throughout the world.

One such collection resides in the stacks of the Hoover Institution Archives at Stanford University, in a collection titled “Germany. Reichsministerium für Volksaufklärung und Propaganda, Miscellaneous records.” It contains, among other things, more than 600 letters from the audience of one of the regime’s chief propagandists, Hans Fritzsche, who hosted a 15-minute radio program called Politische Zeitungs- und Rundfunkschau (“Political Newspaper and Radio Review”) three times a week. Fritzsche went on the air in 1932, and eventually broadcasted nearly 1,000 such programs, becoming “the most prominent spokesperson of Nazi radio broadcasting, and after Hitler, Göring, and Goebbels, certainly the best known voice of the Third Reich,” in the words of his recent biographer, Martin Bonacker.

The letters at the Hoover Institution date from several months in early 1941, and represent only a small fraction of the thousands of letters Fritzsche received from his listeners. The papers were likely scooped up in Germany immediately after the war by one of the institution’s curators with the goal of preserving as many such documents as possible against loss or destruction. Nonetheless, this sampling of correspondence reflects a spectrum of responses to Fritzsche’s broadcasts that includes a surprising amount of outright disagreement with his message and the government he represented.

Hans Fritzsche was already a seasoned journalist and head of Germany’s Wireless News Service when the Nazi Party consolidated its power in 1933. He thrived as a party mouthpiece: his humor and ironic tone made him popular with working-class listeners while his deft manipulation of the news earned him top positions in Joseph Goebbels’s Propaganda Ministry. It’s unsurprising then that most of the correspondence Fritzsche received was fan mail that expressed whole-hearted approval of his broadcasts.

During this period, Fritzsche’s broadcasts primarily took aim at the British—accusing them of atrocities, ridiculing Prime Minister Winston Churchill, and characterizing British society as being ruled by the wealthy. One listener from the northern city of Cuxhaven congratulated Fritzsche for his “unrelenting fight against the British-Jewish band of criminals,” writing that “almost daily, you flagellate the English lies, in a hard and convincing manner. As you are able to.”

Many sought to poke their own fun at the British, and contributed jokes or verse that they hoped Fritzsche could use on the air—such as a woman in Stettin who sent a poem, hoping it would show that “the German sense of humor has just as few boundaries as that of the British island kingdom, the proud home of Mister Winston Churchill.” Others commended Fritzsche for the anti-Semitism in his various broadcasts. One listener in Salzburg urged Fritzsche to continue his attacks on Jews, fearing that if they were cleared out of Germany “through the front door,” they would still find ways to return “through the back door”—something that Fritzsche, in his reply, assured the listener would never happen under the leadership of the new Germany. Still others sought to enlist Fritzsche’s help, ranging from several would-be listeners who needed radio receivers to a number of women hoping to locate their husbands or sons missing in action.
at the front. In some of these cases, Fritzsche forwarded the letters to various officials and agencies in an effort to assist his fans.

Yet a quarter of the collection, around 160 letters, contains criticism. These were sent anonymously, as the authors likely feared a knock on their door from the authorities for voicing this mild form of dissent. Some take issue only with specific aspects of the government, or critique Fritzsche’s pronunciation and speaking style. But a number of the letters go much further, expressing antigovernment sentiments that would have earned their writers at least a prison term if their identities were discovered, and in some cases even a death sentence.

While the Nazi Party never welcomed dissent, the start of the war had raised the stakes considerably. In 1939 the military’s Special Wartime Penal Code was extended to include civilians, giving judges greater latitude to order capital punishment for any action that undermined the war effort.

By the spring and summer months of 1941, when many of these anonymous letters were sent, a number of specific grievances had been raised repeatedly. Chief among them was that despite Fritzsche’s repeated ridicule of the British and predictions of their demise, the British appeared to be gaining the upper hand in the war—especially to Germans huddled in air-raid shelters as waves of RAF bombers swept over their cities.

One particularly trenchant letter, from a woman in Düsseldorf in January 1941, noted that she was writing from an air-raid shelter, and vividly described the hours spent in cold cellars, unable to do anything but worry about one’s family. “It doesn’t serve us well at all when London is continually bombed, since those bombs will come back to us and our children,” and when countless lives are lost in Britain, “we will bear the consequences here.” Asserting that if men were incapable of stopping the air war then women would step up and do so, she wrote that “this should not be seen as a threat,” but that “we will find a way to do so, and the Propaganda Ministry can count on that.”

Another letter from nearby Essen, postmarked July 25, 1941, noted that in bombing raids, it was peculiar that working-class districts were hardest hit while those of wealthier Germans were spared. Furthermore, wealthy districts had the best shelters while this writer’s neighborhood had none, leading the writer to comment that “anybody who thinks about the matter realizes that what [the authorities] want to do is to create a mass grave, in order to save the survivors the expense of a funeral.”

Many listeners noted that although Fritzsche often made much of Britain’s food shortages, German civilians were in fact worse off. One Berliner, writing on January 15, 1941, began by thanking Fritzsche for his “boring blather about what the English eat, drink, and so on,” and referred to a broadcast in which Fritzsche apparently said that there were only 10 cases of oranges in all of London for Christmas. In contrast, “we Berliners didn’t have a single orange at Christmas, and only now we receive some that are either completely frozen or spoiled.” A listener in Essen, in a letter postmarked June 3, 1941, noted Fritzsche’s remark that the British were trying to determine their future “from coffee grounds,” the German colloquial expression for reading tea leaves. “Through your comments you actually praised the British, since you confirmed that at least they have coffee over there, which isn’t the case here.”

The disparity between the privileged and the working classes is another recurring theme, and one that led to more direct criticism of the Nazi elite. As Fritzsche’s broadcasts commonly featured the ridicule of English plutocrats, several listeners took aim at this caricature, observing how members of the Nazi elite lived extravagant lifestyles in marked contrast to the wartime privations endured by the common people in Germany. The same Berliner
Like most nations, Germany warned its citizens against enemy spies with posters like the one at right. But Germans had more to fear from their own neighbors and coworkers: the Gestapo received thousands of letters each day from civilians accusing one another. Fritzsche diligently forwarded any letters he thought might help the Gestapo find enemies of the state. The note on the opposite page accompanied one such set of letters; a particularly inflammatory submission, inset, is flagged “Juden!” (“Jews”) where it takes the state to task for stealing from deported persons.

whose letter compared German and British food rations asked, “Don’t you think that we would be much more interested in knowing what Dr. Goebbels and Field Marshal Göring ate on the occasion of the latter’s birthday?” The writer further says that it was ludicrous to imagine that Göring “with his figure” (or “with his front porch,” as it literally reads in German—an allusion to his ample stomach) could get by on only 62.5 grams of butter a week.

Another Berliner, writing on May 17, 1941, singled out additional members of the Nazi leadership for criticism—particularly Robert Ley, head of the German Labor Front, whose reputation for corruption was especially well known. Noting that a married couple was forced to survive on 48 Reichsmarks per month, this writer added that “Ley can spend 148 RM on cocktails with women he has picked up off of the street,” while another prominent Nazi, Wilhelm Kube, “does his job so well that the chambermaids rave about him” because he “gives them 20 RM each time they let him place his hand up their skirts.” Given this extravagant depravity while ordinary Germans were forced to make sacrifices for the war, the writer hoped Fritzsche would “understand why thousands tune out your broadcasts, and why the people are dismayed and depressed.”

Events in spring and summer gave listeners added ammunition against Fritzsche and his propaganda: first the defection of Deputy Führer Rudolf Hess to Britain on a self-proclaimed peace mission in May, then Germany’s invasion of its erstwhile ally, the Soviet Union, in late June. The Hess event triggered numerous letters mocking Fritzsche’s rosy picture of Nazi Germany, which Hess’s flight seemed to belie. The ending of a letter from June 6, 1941, is typical of the many others Fritzsche received on this topic: the writer expresses hope that Hess would “tell the English how the Germans here are worked like slaves” so that “England will finally be able to win the war,” adding that “I would rather live under English servitude than under the constrained circumstances that we—like all subjugated peoples—live in here in Germany.”

Some listeners ridiculed Fritzsche for the Nazi Party’s inconsistent stance on the Soviet Union before the invasion. One listener from Meissen wrote on June 11, 1941—a little over a week before the surprise invasion of the Soviet Union—saying that Nazi propaganda was “like a weather vane, since at first Russia was characterized as being the land of atrocities, and now it is seen as the favorite child, and Stalin is viewed as a statesman.” A February 1942 letter sent from Hamburg asked why Fritzsche never explained the differences between Nazis and Bolsheviks and pointed out their actual similarities, noting that “in Russia, they have People’s Commissars, here we have the Gestapo, in Russia they have Siberia, here we have concentration camps.”

Some of Fritzsche’s reactions to listeners’ dissent are preserved in the collection—including 13 carbon copies of letters that Fritzsche attached to listener mail and forwarded to his contact at the Gestapo headquarters in Berlin, often with suggestions that these listeners be made subjects of police investigation. The most striking letters are the ones that call outright for Hitler’s death and the collapse of the government. These move beyond complaints about scarce foodstuffs or the hypocrisy of officials, calling instead for the wholesale destruction of an irredeemably corrupt and evil political ideology and form of government.

One lengthy letter from Hamburg, dated April 5, 1941, begins, “Fritzsche! Your narcotics are losing their effect,” and predicts that as “the leading pen-pushing member of this band of criminals,” he will eventually join them in “hanging from the gallows.” This writer noted a headline in a local newspaper that cried out about an allegedly “infamous U.S. breach of law,” which the writer then compared to the actual deeds carried out by the Gestapo and “the
3. November 1941.

An die Geheime Staatspolizei,

Berlin SW.11,

Prinz Albrecht-Str. 6.

Ich übersende in der Anlage zwei Gruppen von anonymen Briefen, die regelmäßig wiederkommen und trotz ihrer Primitivität vielleicht Hinweise auf feindliche Agitationsentitäten geben können.

Hein Hitler.

Anl.: 2 Karten u. 3 Briefe.

In dieser Asphaltsblatt, wahrhaft ein Schlagzeile gebraucht. Und so war der Bruch. Und so war die Zeit, in der auf jeden Gestapo der infame Weg an Zeiten begann. Des Eigentums von Haus und auf ihrer Haustüre heißt: Dann bin ich mit den schwülsten Breitgetreten. Vor...