

Commemoration and liberation ceremonies 2022

“Political resistance”

The Nazis prosecuted all those who did not fit into their racist criteria or who showed resistance to their dictatorship. In the concentration camps of Mauthausen and Gusen as well as in their satellite camps, the category of “political prisoners” included different groups of persons; people who were actively part of the resistance, but also individuals who dared to negatively comment about the NS regime, as well as communists, monarchists, partisans, and people who were abducted and brought into the camps because their actions were considered resistant. They were all marked with the “red triangle”.

“I hadn’t expected such a simpleton, such a half-educated screamer - I was honestly willing to admit if it were to impress me, to capture my attention if you will. It was astounding that the opposite - honest contempt - would come so easily to me.”

Constanze Hallgarten about Hitler¹

During National Socialism, acting out of moral courage if that crossed the very narrow lines of the systems, was often considered political resistance. This could be anything from passive rejection to non-conformist behaviour in everyday life, to active resistance to the regime, aid for prosecuted persons, sabotage, and finally armed struggle. All these acts of resistance were either conducted autonomously or were organised. People who were considered active opponents by the regime had to expect the worst; they had to face arrest, torture, and execution. Especially in the ghettos of Poland and the Soviet Union, there was also a political resistance amongst those who were prosecuted by the NS regime for racist reasons.

“When I became part of the underground, I knew it was a matter of life or death.”

Eva Lukash²

Sociologically, political resistance cannot be clearly defined. Among those who were deported into the Mauthausen concentration camp system as “political prisoners”, there were members of all walks of life and of all political directions; communists, social democrats, and unionists outnumbered most of the others, but there were also conservative resistance fighters, especially officers, civil servants, and members of the clergy. In many places in Nazi-reigned Europe, women played an essential role in the resistance and were active in various different ways. The environment for their resistance was especially harsh due to the role that women were assigned during the Nazi era.

“In 1944, we protested because we wanted better pay, more food, it was a political protest. Everyone protested.”

Vittoria Gargantini³

¹Constanze Hallgarten was involved in peace work during the Nazi regime.

²Eva Lukash is part of a Jewish family from Prague and was arrested at the age of 15 for participating in the communist resistance.

³ Vittoria Gargantini was arrested for participation in a national strike on 2 April 1944 and deported to Mauthausen concentration camp on 9 April 1944; shortly after, she was transferred to Auschwitz-Birkenau, Ravensbrück, and Wittenberg.

Most acts of resistance, be those courageous independent actions against the authorities and officials, or the deliberate inhibition of production in factories, the dissemination of leaflets, or the daubing of oppositional slogans on the walls of building, were only known to a small circle of people under the NS regime. The regime tried its hardest to suppress news of these actions in order to consciously make people feel that resistance was neither possible nor even supported by a considerable part of the population. Most people didn't find out until after the collapse of the regime that there had been numerous different forms of resistance. Even then, the public recognition of this moral courage, if at all, did not occur until many years or even decades later. This resistance against the Nazi terror stands for our common humanity, for empathy, bravery, and moral courage - values that survived even in these grim and inhumane conditions.

“One must go and do something in order to be free of blame. For that, one must have a tough mind and a soft heart. We all carry our standards within ourselves, but we do not apply them enough.”
Sophie Scholl⁴

For years now, we have seen a rise in the number of right-wing extremist incidents and crimes. Human beings are being discriminated against, even attacked, in public spaces because of their origin, the colour of their skin, their religion, or their sexual orientation. The hate propaganda rising on the internet is especially worrisome. This makes it all the more essential that we take a public stand against such developments. History has taught us that standing up for ideals like shared humanity, democracy, and human rights with moral courage is only promising and fruitful as long as those who represent and spread racist and xenophobic ideas are in the minority. One of the most renowned sayings on moral courage gets to the heart of the issue:

“The more citizens with civil courage a country has, the fewer heroes it will once need.”
Franka Magnani⁵

⁴ Sophie Scholl was a member of the resistance group “White Rose”, which was mainly based on Christian and humanist values. Her group created leaflets that pointed out the crimes of the NS regime and called for resistance.

⁵ Italian Journalist (1925-1996)