

Count Helmuth James von Moltke's Memo to Hans Wilbrandt and Alexander Rüstow on Conditions in Germany and the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising (July 9, 1943)

Abstract

Count Helmuth James von Moltke was born in 1907 into one of Prussia's most distinguished noble families—he was the great-grandnephew of Helmuth von Moltke (1800–1891), Chief of the Prussian General Staff under Bismarck. In 1935, Moltke began working as a self-employed lawyer in Berlin, where, among other professional activities, he used his expertise in international law and international private law to help victims of Nazi persecution emigrate. At the same time, he also took advantage of any opportunity to make contacts for the German resistance, especially in England. As founder of the resistance group known by the Gestapo as the Kreisau Circle (*Kreisauer Kreis*, after the name of his family's Silesian estate, where group meetings were held), Moltke was actively involved in planning Germany's new political and social order after the hoped-for downfall of the Hitler regime. On account of his Christian convictions, however, he initially rejected the idea of assassinating Hitler. In his work in the Office of Military Intelligence (*Amt Ausland/Abwehr*) within the High Command of the Wehrmacht (OKW), Moltke tried to prevent the German military from engaging in activities that were against international law. At the same time, he also used his access to secret information to strengthen the opposition.

In July 1943, Moltke travelled to Turkey, where he met with two émigrés, Hans Wilbrandt and Alexander Rüstow, and gave the following report on conditions in Germany and the status of the resistance movement. Both Wilbrandt and Rüstow had contact with the U.S. Office of Strategic Services (OSS) and were members of the German Alliance for Freedom (*Deutscher Freiheitsbund*), an association of German exiles who opposed the Hitler government.

Some of the information that Moltke gave Wilbrandt and Rüstow was of potential military use to the Allies, and he asked them to pass it on. He also supplied an account of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising of April–May 1943. The information that he provided, however, included a false (i.e., exaggerated) description of how much assistance the Jewish fighters had received from others and how many weapons they possessed. Apparently, this information came from SS officials, who needed to make excuses when asked to explain their difficulty in crushing the uprising to the German military. Moltke did, however, accurately report that transports of Jews from the Warsaw ghetto had been sent to “annihilating institutes” in Poland.

In January 1944, Moltke was arrested for warning a friend of the latter's impending arrest. At first, he was not charged with anything. A year later, Roland Freisler's (1893–1945) People's Court sentenced him to death for high treason in connection with the July 20, 1944, assassination attempt on Hitler. It was a kangaroo trial, with the government ultimately failing to prove his participation in preparations for the act. He was executed on January 23, 1945.

A note on the source: this memo was found, in English, in the U.S. National Archives. Being the son of a British South-African mother and having passed the British bar exam, Moltke would have certainly been capable of writing in English. But as Moltke, Wilbrandt, and Rüstow were native speakers of German, it is more likely that the original memo was written in German and translated into English for the benefit of the OSS. Unfortunately, no information on the presumed German original could be found in either the U.S. National Archives or the German Bundesarchiv.

Source

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Air Bombardments of Western Germany

The statements made in Allied broadcasts to the effect that German war production has dropped by 25–30% up to now as a result of bombardments of Germany's armament centres are entirely erroneous. The decline of production is relatively light. It appears that the aerial photographs brought back by Allied reconnaissance aircraft are used far more extensively as bases for the judgment of damage inflicted than first-hand reports. Such photographs may well show the destruction of entire workshops, but they give no indication as to the actual extent of [the] destruction of machine equipment. It has been established that even when workshops are completely smashed, the machine-tool equipment generally suffers only minor damage unless destroyed by direct hits. The intact machines are then put back into operation three to four weeks after the bombardment, when the debris has been cleared away; while the shop-buildings themselves are reconstructed only so far as is necessary for the routine of production, in order to conserve the appearance to the aerial observer of heavy damage and stoppage of work. Exceptions to this rule are naturally those plants which, from their character, are paralyzed entirely by direct hits in any vital part, such as boiler houses, power stations, chemical factories, refineries, etc.

A circumstance that very seriously interferes with industrial production, and one that has not been fully appreciated as yet by the Allies, is the destruction of residences. As a result of the extensive destruction of workers' settlements and residential quarters in the Ruhr, housing accommodation for workers has become so scarce that a more appreciable direct effect in lowering rates of production is traceable to this circumstance than to any direct damage to centres of production. The acute shortage of building materials and construction workers makes it impossible to cope effectively with this situation. The remedy of evacuating from areas subject to air attack all inhabitants whose presence is not essential to armament production cannot be applied because it would involve other serious dislocations, especially of the transport system.

No Decentralization in Germany's Administrative System

Contrary to the belief current among the Allies that German administration has been partially decentralized, it must be emphasized that the entire administrative mechanism of the Reich and the Nazi Party continues to be centred in Berlin and the other traditional administrative centres, and that, moreover, no preparations are being made for any future decentralization. The recurring remonstrances made by the High Command of the Wehrmacht are met by Party Headquarters with the argument that it would injure the prestige of the Party if the centres of administration were to be moved elsewhere, and that the potential influence of such preparatory measures upon the morale of the home front made it imperative to avoid them. Consequently, a concentrated bombardment and possible destruction of the central administrative authorities, which are all still housed in the traditional public buildings, would very effectively paralyze Germany's administrative system.

U-Boat Warfare

As regards the abortive Doenitz Offensive, it is true that it represents a major German defeat; but although the U-Boats were indeed recalled late in June this must not be regarded as a purely defensive measure, but must be interpreted in connection with the evolution of new offensive tactics as a rejoinder to the improved Allied defence. The OKW (High Command of the Wehrmacht) confidently anticipates new great U-boat successes in August as a result of a novel offensive strategy.

Foreign Workers

The foreign workers in Germany represent the most serious problem of internal security. In most

factories the percentage of foreign workers is already greater than that of the German personnel. This foreign labour is a hostile element, dissatisfied to a degree, and almost without exception communist by conviction and, it appears, guided by communist organizations. (German labour, on the other hand, seems hardly to show any communist tendencies.) The OKW realizes that in the case of a revolution the foreign workers will also have arms at their disposal, and that an armed [up]rising of this numerically powerful element might have serious, even decisive consequences.

The General Situation

The Gestapo and SS are complete masters of the situation. Despite all symptoms of strong opposition there is nothing to indicate that in the near future internal difficulties might arise which would precipitate or give a chance for an [up]rising. The Wehrmacht is passing more and more into the service of the Party, which has shown great skill and psychological insight in winning over for its purposes the most influential generals by bestowing upon them huge estates and manors as tokens of “the nation’s” admiration and gratitude for their military exploits. This procedure is designed to involve the Wehrmacht irretrievably in the Party’s responsibilities, and make any change of front on the former’s part impossible. The majority of the marshals, generals, and high officers thus honoured see things only as they want them to be for the sake of conserving their new wealth and influence. This makes them blind to certain self-evident facts; contrary to Allied suppositions, the major part of the officer corps of the OKW and the Wehrmacht generally, who are in a position to listen in on Allied broadcasts in safety, do not avail themselves of this possibility. They have acquired—and this applies to lower ranks also—a fullness of wealth, affluence, and personal power unheard of in the history of military castes, and opportunities for action of every kind such as professional soldiers dream of all their lives. This accounts for the fact that the Wehrmacht, with insignificant exceptions, backs up the Party and supports its strategy and policies. The number of clear-thinking men in the OKW and in the armed forces is small. This section is positive in its opinion that a total and unmitigated military defeat is necessary to destroy once and for all German Militarism and the myth of Germany’s invincibility in the field, and to make Germany as a nation fit for a lasting peace.

Allied Broadcasts

It must be pointed out that only reports of bare and unadorned facts have any effect upon German listeners, [with] every exaggeration or “talking down” jeopardizing the success of the entire propaganda effort. Even commentaries to the bare news bulletins should be abstained from, because in this way it is left to the people themselves to form their own judgment—a thing that has been consistently denied them by their own propaganda.

The Munich Student Riots

Reports concerning the recent student riots at Munich University indicate that they were on a far larger scale than the first accounts that reached the outside world had suggested. The ruthless measures taken by the Gestapo are due to the dangerous extent of the disorders. Prof. Huber of Munich University has not been shot or beheaded as reported in British broadcasts; he is still alive, and is slowly tortured to death by the Gestapo.

The Catholic Movement in Germany

The Catholic revival in Germany is spreading in an astonishing manner. Attendance of Divine Service is the only way of registering a silent protest, and the churches can hardly contain the huge congregations. The German bishops enjoy a tremendous popularity, especially Count Preysing, who is given similar ovations as Count Galen.

It is highly significant that, according to recent reports, an average of 30% of Catholic schoolboys about

to take their school certificates (*Abiturium*), when asked in the customary way what careers they propose to enter, state that they wish to study Theology and become priests. Special attention is drawn to one case which occurred at a Stettin gymnasium (Classical High School for Boys), where except for three young men who had decided to go in for Law, Agriculture, and the Army, respectively, all stated that they wished to read Theology and take orders. As a result, all members of the gymnasium have been arrested and detained by order of the Gestapo. These cases concern boys of ages from 15 to 17. These are not local occurrences, but similar accounts come from all parts of the Reich.

The Battle in the Ghetto of Warsaw

Concerning the fighting that took place in the Ghetto of Warsaw last May, the following details are now available:

Approximately 30,000–35,000 Jews interned in the Warsaw Ghetto had for months been working tenaciously to transform their barracks and stone houses into a defensive system, and had dug subterranean passages connecting the Ghetto with the outer city, in preparation for the expected arrival of SS “annihilation squads” for the partial or total liquidation of the Ghetto. Through underground ducts and dugout connecting passages to the surrounding parts of the city, the Jews had succeeded with the help of Polish partisans and German soldiers in transporting food, building materials, and arms into the Ghetto. The most modern equipment, from light automatic weapons to the heaviest arms, had been secured—in some cases bought—out of army and SS stores and secretly accumulated in the Ghetto. Several hundred German deserters had also taken refuge in the Ghetto and worked on the makeshift fortifications together with the Jews.

Late in April, two platoons of the regular German garrison of Warsaw received orders to conduct a certain transport of Jews from the Ghetto to one of the nearby railway stations, where they were to be taken over by SS guards and consigned to one of the “annihilating institutes” which have been set up in Poland.

These two platoons did not return. Two further platoons which were sent out to find out what had become of them, and to execute the order, did not return either. It has been ascertained that both units met with armed resistance, that a large part of them went over to the defenders with all arms and equipment, while the rest were overcome and taken prisoners. These events, it is important to note, were preceded by a protest by officers of the regular army against their employment for tasks unconnected with the military service of warfare.

Early in May, motorized units were brought up to crush the resistance of the Ghetto. A regular battle began, during which the assault troops had occasion to convince themselves that the Jews were equipped with the most up-to-date weapons, automatic guns, field guns, even anti-tank and anti-aircraft guns, and were entrenched in veritable fortified bunkers. Up to the middle of May, many hundred officers and men from the companies charged with breaking the resistance of the Ghetto deserted or went over with their arms to help the defenders, until on May 16 the regular companies had to be retired to be replaced by mechanized SS [Waffen-SS]. Bitter fighting then went on between the defenders and large detachments of SS troops, during which several thousand German Officers and men were killed or wounded. The resistance of the Ghetto was almost entirely broken down by heavy tanks and dive-bombers, and the Ghetto itself all but razed to the ground. Only a few thousand of the 30,000-odd interned Jews are reported to have survived the battle; they have been transferred to new camps where they have probably been “liquidated” by now. Only a few Jews and a small number of the defending German soldiers are said to have succeeded in escaping to the city by way of the underground passages. The extensive investigations started by the Gestapo, SD (Sicherheitsdienst), and SS (Security Service) have brought to light the fact that in addition to several hundred German deserters about 1200–1500 German officers and men had gone over and helped in the defence of the Ghetto. The defence was

conducted under the command of a German colonel, who is reported to have made this escape during the last days of the fighting.

The proceedings instituted in the matter have been kept a close secret, and the Gestapo has done everything in its power to keep the news from leaking through even to the OKW and the Party. Hundreds of arrests, deportations, and executions are said to have taken place in order to confine the circle of those informed of the occurrences to the most trusted members of the Gestapo, SD, and SS. According to a secret report of the German Sicherheitsdienst, the motive of the German officers and men in taking action against the "liquidation" of the internees of the Ghetto has been their refusal to take any further part in the perpetration of massacres and atrocities, from their conviction that the German soldier's duty was to defend the German people against an external enemy, if the interest of the State demanded it, but not to assist in senseless and inhuman cruelties against innocent and helpless men and women by order of a party which professed to act in the name of the German people.

U.S. War Effort

Party circles still detect some chances for a successful termination of the War for Germany, if it can be drawn out. It is argued in this connection that time is working for Germany; this belief has been strengthened lately by the impression that America is showing signs of moral disintegration and war-weariness which, it is felt, will become more and more pronounced as the War drags on. The argument is based upon the long-drawn and constantly recurring strikes, and upon signs of wavering and symptoms of a revival of isolationism which are given publicity in some American journals.

It is incomprehensible why the American labour troubles are incessantly dwelt upon in British broadcasts. The effect of this can be studied with profit in the German press of the last weeks, which devoted a special campaign to gloating over the strikes and drawing encouraging conclusions from them.

Sentences Passed upon Catholic Priests

Among the many recent cases of prosecution of Catholic priests, a particularly interesting case is that of the Dean of St. Hedwig's Church, Berlin. Because of the solicitude and protection he extended to Jews and other victims of political persecution, the Dean was tried some weeks ago before a law court. In his defence, he stood up vigorously for all he did, and is said to have impressed some of his judges deeply by his dauntless courage. His sentence was deportation to "Litzmannstadt" (Lodz, Poland). After the verdict, the Dean declared solemnly that this sentence made him very happy and that it was particularly suited to him, because it was not only his wish but his supreme vocation to extend comfort, edification, and hope to the terribly afflicted inmates of the Litzmannstadt concentration camps.

The Allied Attitude towards the Austrians

Some considerable astonishment is expressed by informants at the fact that the Austrians are set apart from the Germans when the question of the German people's share in the guilt for what has occurred, and is daily occurring in its name, is under discussion by the Allies. For the sake of truth, it should be admitted that cruelties and inhuman atrocities have been perpetrated in Austria such as could hardly have occurred even in Germany. The population of Austria is reported to have taken part in excesses from which the German people have kept aloof. These facts stand out the more clearly when it is confirmed that Sudeten Germans and Austrians are given preference for the job of concentration camp guard, because they are known as particularly cruel. There has evolved a sort of classification by nationalities of guard personnel in descending order of frightfulness, according to which the Sudeten Germans top the list, the Austrians are second, the Bavarians third, with the rest of Germany following far behind. The classification is reported to be generally confirmed by the inmates of concentration camps and ghettos.

The Situation in the Occupied Territories

The situation in Greece, Yugoslavia, and Croatia is causing particular anxiety. Increasing partisan activity is anticipated as the opening of a second front draws nearer, and new measures for the rigorous suppression of irregulars have accordingly been taken last month. German casualties in Croatia owing to partisan activity from the occupation of the country to the end of June amounted to 27,000 officers and men. In Greece the dislocations of the transport system, particularly those caused by blown-up bridges and railroad sections, are reported to have repeatedly caused grave difficulties.

Respecting the “inner front” in France, it is stated that the intimidation caused by the terrorist measures enforced there so far is keeping the will of the French population to resist from expressing itself in more pronounced action. For the case of an invasion of the European continent and a closing-in of the fronts around the inner defensive ring of Greater Germany, it is planned by some accounts to exterminate ruthlessly, by Gestapo and SS measures, entire sections of the population, which might at such a junction engage in anti-German activity.

Source: Count Helmuth James von Moltke’s Memo to Hans Wilbrandt and Alexander Rüstow on Conditions in Germany and the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, July 9, 1943, U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD, Record Group 226, Entry 137, Box 23, Folder 160, Envelope 3a, part 2.

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