

Opposing Hitler: remembering Adam von Trott (1931)

Paul Flather (1973)

Four years ago, I found myself in the July sunshine on a grassy hilltop, on the outskirts of a small hamlet in the state of Hesse in central Germany, celebrating the inspiring life of a Balliol Rhodes scholar – who opted to become a Nazi party member, no less. I had joined a gathering of 200, including the German Foreign Minister, as an Oxford representative, to remember Adam zu von Trott (Balliol 1931), who had risked all by taking part in Operation Valkyrie, the 1944 plot to kill Hitler.

The plot failed. The briefcase containing a hidden bomb, placed under the table near the Führer's seat, inside the concrete bunkers of the notorious Wolf's Lair military headquarters in East Prussia, was moved shortly before Hitler arrived, unusually late for a meeting. Three officers and a stenographer were killed, the bunker was devastated. Hitler suffered minor injuries.

Many Germans now commemorate 20 July annually as a significant anniversary, reminding them of the dangers of extremism, populism, and threats to democratic order. In the words of Foreign Minister, Heiko Maas, that day, 'the courage of all those involved must not be forgotten'. This was also the message from then German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, simultaneously to a large rally in Berlin: 'This day is a reminder to us, not only of those who acted on July 20, but also of everyone who stood up against Nazi rule.' It mattered more that year given rising support for the right-wing AfD party, and headline stories of political murders linked to rightist extremists in the region.

So it was that shared support from Oxford friends was warmly welcomed. It was an honour for me, as chair of the Adam von Trott Memorial Committee (originally the Adam von Trott Appeal), to join the crowd at Imshausen, by a large, rough wooden commemorative cross that rises above a clump of trees, not far from the family home. 'We should aim high,' I would find myself saying following von Trott's example, 'even if others aim low.'

The committee was founded by a group of alumni of Mansfield College, where von Trott first studied in Oxford, to remember him as a symbol of resistance.

Born in 1909 in Potsdam to an aristocrat Prussian family, he arrived in

Oxford in 1929, after training as a lawyer and developing a zest for travel and for making international friends. He enjoyed nothing more than discussing ideas, in his own way seeking a better future for his beloved Germany after the disaster of the First World War. He was at a conference in Manchester when he responded to an invitation to study theology and politics at Mansfield, which had been established through the United Reform Church in 1886, and he was undoubtedly attracted by its Nonconformist and ecumenical pedigree.

Oxford made an immediate impact on him, and he would write later that his experiences there taught him ‘to understand what democracy really means’. He would soon return, this time as a Rhodes Scholar, to study PPE at Balliol in 1931. The many friends he would make during these two years included Stafford Cripps (John his son was a contemporary friend), Richard Crossman, David Astor (1931), Isaiah Berlin, Lord Lindsay, and Maurice Bowra.

While he was in Oxford, Hitler was appointed German Chancellor. Like so many, von Trott envisaged Hitler’s rise as a transient phase that was bound to be corrected. He opted to travel extensively during the 1930s, including to the US and spending the best part of a year in China, making friends and giving himself time to reflect on global challenges and embryonic thoughts of a new peaceful Europe.

The Anschluss caught him by surprise, and he soon found himself associating with like-minded Germans opposed to the Nazi dictatorship while remaining an avowed patriot, and making plans for a renewed Europe. ‘The vision of Adam von Trott was of a Europe that would be at peace with itself and set a good example to the wider world,’ to quote Lord (David) Hannay, a former EU and UN Ambassador.

He travelled to the US and China searching for a suitable role for himself. He had discovered embryonic opposition within the army and foreign ministry. In 1939, with war imminent, he went on a much-analysed ‘official business’ trip to England for a week, as a national envoy, maintaining links with the German Embassy. Thanks to the good offices of David Astor, he was granted secret meetings with Foreign Minister Lord Halifax and Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, where he sought support for the opposition. However, there were frankly expressed suspicions over his possible ‘real motives’ and the likely nationalist stance of any emergent new government, notably from Bowra, who worried about his ‘patriotism’ and about the future of Hitler’s already seized lands. Von Trott’s pleas for a show of force from Britain to back an internal rebellion against Hitler therefore fell on deaf ears. Bowra would later

repent, and the intricacies are superbly explained by Astor himself in a piece in the *Record* (1973).

Von Trott declined, though, to go into exile, and in April 1940, he accepted a position in the Foreign Office. He joined the Nazi party, wearing the hated party insignia in the office, reasoning this was the price for mounting any opposition inside Germany. Anti-regime opponents, such as Sophie and Peter Scholl from the White Rose circle in Munich, were executed for high treason merely for dropping anti-war leaflets from a balcony inside their university.

The bomb plot, when it came, was part of a carefully planned *coup d'état* that aimed to assassinate Hitler, seize power in Berlin, establish a new pro-Western government, and somehow stabilise the country and save it from devastation. When it failed, the Gestapo speedily rounded up all the plotters, even those suspected of remote involvement. Von Trott was given away by the car logs of his official chauffeur, which revealed that he was often at an apparently ruined building in Berlin that was also visited by General Staffenberg's chauffeured car.

The plot was used as an excuse to round up critics and opponents of the regime. In all some 7,000 were arrested; almost 5,000 – including von Trott – would be executed. There is film of his show trial, where he is forced to admit his guilt before his smirking prosecutors. He is forced to admit that the plot would involve the killing of Hitler. 'Surely', he says. It is a painful watch.

He is commemorated outside the Balliol Chapel in the list of the Second World War dead. According to Martin Conway (Professor of Contemporary European History, MacLellan-Warburg Fellow and Tutor in History), he is understood to be among the very first Germans to be remembered in an UK inscription, and, almost certainly, the first Nazi party member. The head of the German Embassy recently visited the College to inspect the inscription.

Fifty years after Hitler seized power, Hedley Bull (Montague Burton Professor of International Relations and Professorial Fellow 1977–1985) instigated a series of memorable Adam von Trott memorial lectures at Balliol, later published as *The Challenge of the Third Reich: The Adam von Trott Memorial Lectures* (Clarendon Press, 1986).

At Mansfield, 70 years on, von Trott's bravery inspired the Revd Geoffrey Beck, Dr Elaine Kay and the Revd Tony Tucker, leading members of the College Alumni Society, to found a memorial appeal. Von Trott is now commemorated with an inscription in the Mansfield Chapel 'for resistance to the Nazi regime'.

Since 2004, Mansfield has also hosted a distinguished memorial lecture

series to full houses. Contributors have included historian Professor Margaret Macmillan, Foreign Secretary Lord (David) Owen, theologian Professor Diarmid MacCulloch, Vice President of the German Bundestag, Thomas Oppermann, former Principal, David Marquand, and museum director Neil Macgregor, on themes related to Europe, peace, resistance and Anglo-German relations.

Sufficient funding for a memorial Mansfield scholarship was finally achieved in time for Diana Koester to become Oxford's first Adam von Trott Scholar in 2010. Young Germans apply for a two-year MPhil degree within the Department of Politics and International Relations, again on theme relating to von Trott's interest. There have been 10 further scholars, now selected annually thanks to additional support from the German Federal Government, a generous fee-waiver from the department, and college support via funds raised by the committee. Brexit has thrown a spanner into the works, and a new source is sought to replace the German federal support.

It can be said that these Oxford initiatives through the committee – ably chaired by another Balliol graduate, Graham Avery (1961), for four years before me – encouraged our German friends, colleagues and supporters, to revive their own interest in the life and memory of Adam von Trott.

The University of Göttingen, where von Trott also studied, now has its own memorial lecture series, while German state funds also boosted the Adam von Trott Stiftung foundation, allowing it to refurbish the Imshausen family house as a meeting place and conference centre, now also with a new high-tech museum about his life.

Thanks to the Mansfield committee, there have also been joint initiatives including successful annual international workshops for groups of 25 graduates from leading European universities, including Oxford and Göttingen, over three days of debates, working groups and talks by academics, NGOs, politicians and policy makers – on themes that also challenged von Trott.

Thus students originating from across the world explored 'Populism, Prejudice and Post-Truth: Europe's democratic values in crisis'; 'Civil Resistance: how ideas, people and movements can change politics'; and, last autumn, 'How Ukraine changed our world: In Search of a New Global Order'. Sessions often crackled with the inclusion of personal testimonies and experiences of participants' own civil resistance, dissidence, and opposition in beleaguered states. Von Trott's daughter, Verena, has regularly added to this, with her own moving personal memories.

Finally, an additional study bursary scheme has enabled exchanges involving Oxford and Göttingen doctoral students pursuing research goals and discussions on ‘relevant’ themes ranging from the 1930 history to climate protest.

Why this new interest in the life and work of Adam von Trott? In part, it may be a reaction to global democratic backsliding that has characterised the past 20 years. In part, it may be a reaction to starker divisions between authoritarian and democratic governance. In part, it may be a historical reminder of the dangers of populism, of so-called strong-man rule and right-wing extremist, today even in Europe. History does not end, as Fukuyama himself readily acknowledges.

And what of von Trott himself? *A Good German* is the title of one of several books on his life, and it probably captures it. One is reminded not to sanctify, overpraise, or even tip into hagiography. Historians point out rightly that von Trott had his own ambitions and his own patriotic views of Germany and its standing in a new Europe, a vision of its time, not the EU of today. Though as Heiko Maas says, ‘For him and his colleagues it was clear: peace in Europe could only be achieved by overcoming borders.’ For sure Brexit would have pained him.

Yet, without doubt, he was an activist, a resister a defender of democracy, lessons learnt during his Oxford days, as he said. He made difficult choices, opting to go back to Nazi Germany to practice his dissidence. His fellow Balliol Rhodes Scholar and close friend Fritz Schumacher (who would write *Small is Beautiful*) chose exile. Von Trott would write about joining the Nazi party: ‘I am not as you might think going over to some other side.’

After the hopes of 1945 and 1989, and today, after the global recession, Covid, climate change, and now Ukraine, courage and resistance are in demand. In Germany, those brave enough to resist need to be properly remembered as part of its historical reconciliation project – there were, indeed, Good Germans, and principled internationalists, too.

Twice the von Trott memorial cross at Imshausen has fallen in high winds. Twice it has been re-erected, still in rough wood, but stronger. Perhaps that is a symbol, reminding us, too, to stand firm in defending democracy despite clear and present dangers.

Paul Charles Ram Flather was Chair of the Oxford Adam von Trott Memorial Committee 2018–2022 and a Fellow of Mansfield College 2001–2020. He received the Jan Masaryk Silver Medal for his work in the Czech Republic, including with dissidents in the 1980s. If you would like to support the committee’s work please contact him via development.office@balliol.ox.ac.uk.