

*Heroic Or Foolish?
The 1942 Bombing of
a Nazi Anti-Soviet Exhibit*

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I. Two Diarists on the Bombing

In the spring of 1942, those two great German diarists of World War II, Joseph Goebbels and Victor Klemperer, described the same event: the bombing, on May 18, of a satirical anti-Soviet exhibit entitled “The Workers’ Paradise,” by a group of left-wing Jews led by Herbert Baum. Goebbels’s entry, recorded the day following the event, expresses a determination to stop any incipient rebellion before it gets out of hand:

Late in the evening I was told that a fire, probably the result of sabotage, broke out at the anti-Soviet exhibit. It can be extinguished in a timely manner. One notes again that in our big cities a communist opposition, small but still not to be ignored, has established itself. At the moment it obviously poses no danger to us, but one would do well to observe this development very closely. The old saying that an illness can be fought most effectively at its first even if also harmless symptoms, is applicable here. It is much easier to treat a cold when it expresses itself only as a cough than if one waits until it turns into double pneumonia. In any case we shall nip this danger in the bud—when it expresses itself as cough and not wait until it has become pneumonia.¹

Klemperer, writing from the opposite end of the political spectrum while lodged in a *Judenhaus* in Dresden, did not mention the bombing until June 8: the German press, after all, had wholly suppressed the incident, and Klemperer had learned of it by word of mouth:

1. Joseph Goebbels, *Tagebücher*, ed. Elke Fröhlich (Munich: K. G. Saur, 1993–96), II, 4 (1995): 318. Translations, unless otherwise noted, are my own.

Yesterday afternoon at the Neumanns. He reports as *absolutely authentic*, unanimously vouched for by various sources (also from an “official” source): last week an insignificant fire was set at the *Soviet Paradise* exhibition. It was declared to be “Jewish arson,” 500 men were arrested. Of these, 30 were released, 220 were put in concentration camps, 250 were *shot*, and the families of all 470 who had been retained were “evacuated.” He told us as similarly vouched for: In Prague, after the assassination attempt on Heydrich (died a few days ago), house searches of the Czech population took place. Wherever weapons were found, the whole family, man, woman and children were exterminated. The Myth of the 20th Century: blood lust. *D’altra parte* we also heard the same song at the Neumanns: “The Aryans say: ‘Hold out! The end is in sight!’” We were agreed that our existence is now a race with death. I’m always in the habit of saying, this is just like the personal stories during the French Revolution, in which one alternately hears: “He died a day before Robespierre’s fall” and “Robespierre fell a day before the trial that, in just the same way, would have brought him to the guillotine.”²

Each of these diarists approaches the fire at the exhibit from his own limited vantage point. Goebbels writes from a position of power that allows him to take whatever measures he feels he needs to prevent any subsequent actions (note the homely metaphor about colds and pneumonia to denote mass killings). Klemperer, pointing out the reprisals (both for the Berlin fire and the assassination of Heydrich, the latter resulting in the massacre of the town of Lidice), writes from a position of powerlessness in which he is now led to anticipate his own likely death.

Goebbels’s tone, here and elsewhere in his diaries, reveals a self-confidence that allows him to react without self-doubt or hesitations of any kind. Klemperer’s mind moves from the concrete details of the sabotage and its immediate consequences to ultimate issues: “blood lust” as “the myth of the 20th century” and an acknowledgment between himself and his fellow Jews in the *Judenhaus* that they themselves are likely to be sacrificed before long. I might add that Klemperer, being married to what the Nazis classified as an Aryan, occupied a special position—as a result of which he could assume being able to survive longer than the many Jews without such a privilege.

2. Victor Klemperer, *Ich will Zeugnis ablegen bis zum letzten: Tagebücher 1942–1945* (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 1995), pp. 113–14.

Goebbels's diary entry five days later reveals that he has now learned a good bit more about the act of sabotage. Whereas the first entry simply ascribes this act to a "communist opposition," he now knows that a number of Jews were involved:

We have now discovered a club of saboteurs and assassins in Berlin. Among them are also the groups who undertook the bombing of the anti-Soviet exhibit. Significantly, among those arrested are five Jews, three half-Jews and four Aryans. An engineer at Siemens is even among them. The bombs were manufactured partly at the Kaiser-Wilhelm Institute.³

We know today that Herbert Baum's group collaborated on the bombing with another organization, the so-called Steinbrinck-Franke group, composed of non-Jews and a few half-Jews, who, because of the relatively greater freedom they enjoyed, were able to manufacture the bombs and move about the city more easily than Jews. Two of the "Aryans" whom Goebbels mentions were actually members of Baum's otherwise Jewish group.

Directly after the lines quoted above, Goebbels draws some dire conclusions from the facts he has been given:

One sees from all this how correct our policy on Jews is and how necessary it seems to continue our old course in the most radical way and to see to it that the 40,000 Jews still in Berlin, who actually represent major criminals who have been allowed their freedom and who have nothing more to lose, should either be concentrated or evacuated as soon as possible. Obviously the best solution would be liquidation.⁴

But Goebbels lacked the absolute power to implement his resolution on his own. This power after all resided in Adolf Hitler himself, whom Goebbels sought out the same day as this diary entry. After informing him of the arrest of those responsible for the bombing, he finds Hitler so enormously angry that he receives permission from him to arrange a prompt evacuation. But another Nazi official, Albert Speer, whose responsibilities in charge of labor did not allow him to consent to such an evacuation,

3. Goebbels, *Tagebücher*, II, 4:350.

4. *Ibid.* We now know that there were quite a few more Jews in the city than the 40,000 that Goebbels acknowledged.

was also present at this meeting. After all, Speer declared, the Jews were needed for forced labor in the armament industry.⁵

Although Goebbels does not get his wish immediately, Hitler *does* allow him to round up 500 Jewish hostages and to respond to any future assaults with “indiscriminate shootings.”⁶ And Goebbels, at this point having achieved only part of his goal, proceeds to ask the Berlin police to draw up a hostage list and to carry out the arrests in the course of the following week. The number 500, it turns out, was determined by multiplying by one hundred the five Jews actively involved in the sabotage of the exhibit. These arrests took place on May 27 and constituted the event that Klemperer recorded a few weeks later. As Klemperer had noted in his diary, precisely half the 500 were shot immediately (and their families promptly arrested as well), with the rest, as far as is known today, deported elsewhere.

Five days later, on May 30, Goebbels finally succeeded in convincing Hitler that the remaining Jews should be evacuated from Berlin as quickly as possible. In his diary entry the preceding day, he had noted the murder of Heydrich, which, though the work not of Jews but of Czechs (Goebbels at this point suspects what he calls “Secret-Service Leute”), clearly influences the urgency he feels to deal resolutely with the Jewish problem in Berlin.⁷ Thus, the May 30 entry records that Hitler will now order Speer to replace Jews with foreign workers “as soon as possible.” Leaving the Jews in Berlin is, as Goebbels puts it, “an invitation for murder,” and he goes on to express his outrage in these terms:

The fact that 22-year-old eastern Jews [*Ostjuden*] should be participants in the latest firebomb attempts speaks volumes. I thus plead again for a more radical Jewish policy, an opinion with which the Führer is in full agreement.⁸

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 351–52. Most members of the Baum group were themselves engaged in forced labor, with a large percentage, including Baum himself, working in the same department at Siemens.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 351.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 392.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 405. Actually, only one member of the Baum group was born in eastern Europe and could thus be classified under the heading “Ostjude”—though a number had parents or grandparents with such origins.

The topics that Goebbels discusses in the course of these two weeks—the fire-bombing itself, the reprisals, the Heydrich case and its own reprisals, the need to hasten deportations of Jews—are all taken up in Klemperer's single entry, which, after all, was not written until well after the events themselves. Note how Goebbels's various entries culminate in determinations to eradicate all possible rebellion. In effect Goebbels plays the role of a cat about to corner its mouse, while Klemperer, in his role as mouse, holds out some hope for ultimately escaping the cat's claws. And he expresses himself, as becomes a professor in the humanities, by citing an analogy from history, indeed, from what counts as the first organized form of state terror, namely the terror of the French Revolution: for Klemperer, some had the bad luck of being called to the guillotine before Robespierre's fall, but those slated to be called after his fall were fortuitously saved.

I have dwelt on this series of events, interpreted as they are from radically opposing points of view, as a means of introducing some questions surrounding the Baum group's attempt to sabotage the Nazi anti-Soviet exhibit. This event, to be sure, constitutes what might seem one of the less significant moments in the history of both World War II and of the Nazi regime. It did not, after all, stir up a rebellion on the part of either Jews or ordinary Germans. Nor did it achieve the sort of symbolic status accorded immediately to the Nazi reprisal for Heydrich's murder, the Lidice massacre. Its interest for historians has come from the fact that it constitutes the only major act of resistance within Germany by a largely Jewish group.

When one examines the considerable research that has been done on the Baum group during the last two decades, it is also clear that the fire-bombing raises some questions both about the ethics and the efficacy of this event. Was the bombing justifiable, for instance, in view of consequences that might have been predicted? Should we judge it in terms of the group's intentions, or should we take the consequences into consideration? Should our judgment be influenced by what we now know to have been the Nazi government's ultimate plan, namely, the so-called final solution agreed upon secretly at Wannsee a few months before the fire-bombing?⁹

9. We now know that the one-day Wannsee conference on January 20, 1942, only served to confirm a decision, made privately among Nazi leaders in October, 1941, to proceed with mass extermination of the Jews. See Norman M. Naimark, *Fires of Hatred: Ethnic Cleansing in Twentieth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2001), p. 80.

And how has the incident been used by particular groups to advance their own agendas?

My consideration of these and related questions is not simply an attempt to probe an incident from public history. The fire-bombing also happens to play a role in my own family history, for my first cousin, Hanni Lindenerger Meyer, belonged to the Baum group and was guillotined as a result of her membership.¹⁰ Her husband, Gerd Meyer, was in fact one of the five Jews actually present at the bombing—chosen from among the group because these five, together with the two non-Jewish members, supposedly would not look Jewish enough to attract attention.

The limited knowledge we have of the Baum group's motivations and actions comes from a variety of sources that researchers have tapped during recent years: the records of Gestapo hearings in which the accused members of the group answered questions before their court appearances and executions; tapes made by two close members of the group, Richard and Charlotte Holzer, who survived the war but who died when serious research was just beginning;¹¹ memories of a few survivors who had known members of the group or had attended their meetings occasionally.¹²

10. I wrote about Hanni Meyer and the Baum group in an earlier essay, a dialogue with myself about Jewish identity. See "Between Texts: From Assimilationist Novel to Resistance Narrative," *Jewish Social Studies* 1 (Winter 1995): 48–68, later reprinted in Jeffrey Rubin-Dorsky and Shelley Fisher Fishkin, eds., *People of the Book: Thirty Scholars Reflect on Their Jewish Identity* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1996), pp. 357–74.

11. A third survivor, Rita Meyer, though not as closely involved with the group as the Holzers, sheltered members in flight and recorded her memories after the war.

12. The historical details in this essay derive from a large number of sources, but above all from the following three studies, each a decade apart and each with considerably more information than its predecessor: Konrad Kwiet and Helmut Eschwege, *Selbstbehauptung und Widerstand: Deutsche Juden im Kampf um Existenz und Menschenwürde 1933–1945* (Hamburg: Christians, 1984), especially pp. 114–39, 328–31; Michael Kreutzer, "Die Suche nach einem Ausweg, der es ermöglicht, in Deutschland als Mensch zu leben: Zur Geschichte der Widerstandsgruppen um Herbert Baum," in *Juden im Widerstand: Drei Gruppen zwischen Überlebenskampf und politischer Aktion Berlin 1939–1945*, ed. Wilfried Löhken and Werner Vathke (Berlin: Hentrich, 1993), pp. 95–158; and Regina Scheer, *Im Schatten der Sterne: Eine jüdische Widerstandsgruppe* (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 2004). I have also found valuable information in Wolfgang Scheffler, "Der Brandanschlag im Berliner Lustgarten im Mai 1942 und seine Folgen: Eine quellenkritische Betrachtung," in *Berlin in Geschichte und Gegenwart: Jahrbuch des Landesarchivs Berlin 1984*, ed. Hans J. Reichhardt (Berlin: Siedler Verlag, 1984), pp. 91–118, and in Eric Brothers, "On the Anti-Fascist Resistance of German Jews," in *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book 1987* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1987), pp. 369–82.

II. Intentions and Actions

What we have come to call the Baum group was actually a loosely defined collection of Jews with communist sympathies who, beginning in the late 1930s, met informally to take excursions in the countryside outside Berlin and in gatherings in various members' homes to exchange views on the increasingly threatening political situation that surrounded them. Baum himself, before the Nazis came to power, had worked within a communist youth organization with the mission of making contact with Jewish youth groups and drawing their members into political work. Group meetings often included the discussion of assigned readings from the classics of Marxist literature.¹³

By wartime, of course, all such groups had been banned, and his followers met secretly in the homes of several members. From all accounts, Baum was a most persuasive, even charismatic personality. He maintained contact with other, non-Jewish resistance groups, most notably the one headed by Werner Steinbrinck, who proved crucial in helping make the assault on the anti-Soviet exhibit possible.

During the early years of the war, the freedom of Jews to move about and to conduct their lives in any normal way had gradually and also systematically been circumscribed. Forced labor, instituted by 1940, actually offered an opportunity to a resistance group, for Baum used his workplace in the electric-motor department at Siemens as a way of recruiting new members. A number of other measures were instituted one by one to limit Jewish autonomy: the forced sale of dwellings or the removal of Jews from rented quarters to a place designated as a *Judenhaus*; restrictions on shopping hours; exclusion from cultural events; prohibitions on the use of public transportation; the mandatory wearing of the star of David;

13. Readers living in our present post-communist world may wonder how much the Baum group knew about those events in the Soviet Union—for example, Stalin's pact with Hitler and the purge trials of the late 1930s—that caused many communists in Western Europe and the United States to leave the party. It is known from survivors' accounts that the group discussed the Stalin-Hitler pact and that most members were shocked by the news. Baum himself strongly defended the pact on the grounds that it was Stalin's only option to protect the Soviet Union against a German attack. The accounts differ as to whether Baum was alone in this opinion or whether some other members sided with him. No records are left of any attitude they expressed toward the purge trials, whose significance they would likely have dismissed as Nazi propaganda. After all, the exhibit on the so-called "worker's paradise" that they sabotaged was itself a vivid demonstration of how effectively the Nazi propaganda machine functioned.

the insistence that every Jew use the name “Israel” or “Sara.” Even the possession of bicycles, typewriters, or cameras was forbidden. In view of the restrictions imposed upon them, it is no wonder that the Baum group depended on its two non-Jewish members for typing its documents and on Steinbrinck, who, as Goebbels recorded, worked at the Kaiser-Wilhelm Institute, for manufacturing the bombs used in the assault.

During the first part of 1942, the Baum group’s activities consisted principally of writing and distributing pamphlets to mobilize anti-war sentiment among the German populace. Other, non-Jewish resistance groups at the time were engaged in the same thing, and they often borrowed ideas from each other’s writings. Pamphlets were addressed to specific segments of the population—to doctors and soldiers, for instance.¹⁴ One Baum-group pamphlet, entitled “An die Hausfrau,” encouraged housewives to protest against food shortages. It is known that these pamphlets were distributed by being placed, among other sites, under doors, on windshield wipers, and in telephone booths.

Yet what motivated so radical a step as the bombing? It is known that Herbert Baum himself, as well as Werner Steinbrinck, who planned the action together with him, were convinced that by the summer of 1942 the German people would be ready to overthrow the Nazi regime. The German campaign in Russia had not resulted in the swift victory that had been expected when it was launched nearly a year before the bombing. Indeed, the anti-Soviet exhibit, which sought to portray the poor living conditions that citizens in the so-called “workers’ paradise” experienced, was itself an attempt to whip up enthusiasm for the war. Parts of this exhibit had already been shown in Vienna, Prague, and Paris, and an assault on it in the last-named city had resulted in some executions—though the Baum group would not likely have known of that incident.

A further motivation for the bombing was the desire to demonstrate both to the Germans and to the world at large that there was, in fact, a resistance to the regime. What the group failed to realize was that the Nazi control of the media was sufficient to prevent any record of the event from reaching those whom it might have influenced. Although the news evidently spread to some extent by word of mouth, the absence of any official

14. The pamphlet addressed to doctors, entitled “An die deutsche Ärzteschaft!” and the two addressed to soldiers, both of them entitled “Der Ausweg: Antifaschistische Kampfschrift,” are reprinted in Margot Pikarski’s book on the Baum group, *Jugend im Berliner Widerstand: Herbert Baum und Kampfgefährten* (Berlin: Militärverlag der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, 1978), pp. 187–90 and 191–220, respectively.

recognition or corroboration may well have worked to stifle any further resistance.

We now know that the group was by no means unanimous in approving the decision to bomb the exhibit. One of the survivors, Richard Holzer, reported after the war that he had objected because of the fear of reprisals. A sometime visitor to group meetings, Harry Cühn, whose fiancée was arrested with other group members, distanced himself from the rest because, as he put it during the 1990s, it was “a time in which lives should be preserved, not endangered.” The widower of Suzanne Wesse, one of the two non-Jewish members, described her death to her brother as “senseless.”¹⁵

Hans Fruck, leader of a non-Jewish communist group with which the Baum group had maintained ties, said after the war that he had separated his group from Baum’s because “the latter operated with a total misunderstanding of what illegal work involves and unfortunately themselves became the victims.”¹⁶ It does not seem accidental that a well-disciplined revolutionary such as Fruck should eventually emerge as a top official within the Stasi in East Germany. By contrast, Herbert Baum, together with his wife and some of his closest followers, possessed a certain romantic streak that, long before the decision to attack the exhibit, caused associates from outside the group to speak of a certain “carelessness” in his behavior.¹⁷ Yet this very romanticism may well have been crucial to the intense loyalty he excited from the members, even from those, like Holzer, who disagreed with him on the wisdom of the attack.

Besides the writing and distribution of anti-war pamphlets, the bombing of the exhibit was not the only action that the Baum group undertook. The bombing was preceded by an event that took place over a week before, on May 7, and that proved so ethically discomfiting that earlier historians—whether defending them as Jews or as communists—tended to suppress or at least to minimize it. For some time members of the group had asked Jews slated for imminent deportation to contribute household belongings that the group might sell as a means of financing its anti-Nazi activities. After getting a refusal from an elderly couple, Felix and Rosetta Freundlich, who claimed they would need their possessions once they

15. Scheer, *Im Schatten der Sterne*, pp. 251, 132, 158, respectively. Scheer, a good bit of whose research is based on interviews with Harry Cühn held shortly before his death in 1994, refers to him throughout her book by a pseudonym, Robert Mohn.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 44.

17. *Ibid.*, pp. 32, 44.

“returned” from deportation, Baum, together with Steinbrinck and a member of the group, Heinz Birnbaum, who did not appear Jewish, decided to appropriate some of these possessions on their own. While Baum waited outside the building, Steinbrinck and Birnbaum, disguised as Gestapo officers, demanded a number of possessions, including a portable typewriter, an opera glass, a painting, and several Oriental rugs. As it turned out, the gradual sale of these items helped support the group well after some of its members had been caught and executed.¹⁸

By current-day terrorist standards, the bombing of the exhibit seems impossibly benign. The exhibit occupied a series of large tents situated in the Lustgarten, an open space between the old imperial city palace and the Altes Museum in central Berlin. Originally planning to act on Sunday, May 17, the group assigned to the sabotage discovered what they took to be too large a crowd and decided to postpone the action a day in the hope that there would be fewer in attendance on a Monday. Although the decision to postpone was due mainly to the difficulty of setting off the bombs in front of onlookers, at least one participant reported it also resulted from the group’s desire not to harm bystanders.¹⁹ The weather on that Monday was rainy, which kept the crowds down even further than on an ordinary weekday. On an earlier scouting expedition, members of the group had determined to set off their ammunition in a model of a Russian restaurant, but this section was closed that night, and instead they chose a room representing a Russian laborer’s home. They set off the explosives they had prepared and quickly fled.

The fires that resulted were easily extinguished. Nobody was killed, and eleven persons were reported injured from smoke inhalation. The exhibition reopened the following day as if nothing had happened.²⁰

III. Consequences and Interpretations

As one can see from Goebbels’s diary, the consequences of the bombing came swiftly. These took three forms—reprisals, arrests and trials of members of the Baum group, and deportations. The reprisals, in which 500 hostages were arrested and half of them, as described above, shot

18. For a description of the robbery, see Kreutzer, “Die Suche nach einem Ausweg,” pp. 130–32, and Scheer, *Im Schatten der Sterne*, pp. 220–31. Harry Cühn, though he disapproved of the bombing plans, aided in the sale of the Freundlichs’ goods.

19. See Kreutzer, “Die Suche nach einem Ausweg,” p. 137.

20. All studies of the Baum group in one way or another center around the fire bombing. The most up-to-date account is in Scheer, *Im Schatten der Sterne*, pp. 258–73.

immediately, took place within a little over a week—as soon as Goebbels had received Hitler’s permission to proceed.

The first arrests of group members were made only four days after the bombing and continued until the autumn since a number had gone into hiding; only Richard Holzer, who escaped to Hungary, avoided arrest. It has long been assumed that some members were identified to the police by Joachim Franke, co-leader of the Steinbrinck-Franke group, which had collaborated in the action. Franke’s motive, it is thought, was to spare the life of his wife, though Franke himself, together with all the others present at the action, was guillotined the following August 18. Since Franke did not himself know most of the group members, some have speculated the existence of a Gestapo spy within the group. Baum himself had died on June 11 while in police custody—either by his own hand or as a result of torture.

A second group of executions, which included my cousin Hanni Meyer, took place early the following year, on March 4, 1943. The Nazis held formal short trials for each group; although most members of the second group were guillotined, a few were given prison sentences, but even those given these sentences were eventually sent to the death camps. A final group of executions (by hanging, since the guillotine at Plötzensee Prison had been damaged in an air raid) was held on September 7, 1943, for three members who had been arrested too late for the earlier trials.

Goebbels’s call for immediate deportation of the remaining Jews in Berlin may well have resulted in a significant increase in deportations beginning June 13, 1942. Deportations from Berlin (first to ghettos in Eastern Europe, then directly to the extermination camps) had begun on October 18, 1941, long before the bombing of the exhibit; the last one before the bombing had taken place on April 14. After May, in which there were no deportations, at least one, sometimes as many as six, took place each month (except for July, 1943), until the beginning of 1945.²¹ But Berlin had been largely emptied of its Jewish population within a year after the fire-bombing. The last train carrying more than a hundred deportees, on June 28, 1943, included Hanni Meyer’s mother, my aunt Dora Lindenberger.²² I might add that the increase in deportations directly after the bombing may also have been due to the fact that the gassing facilities

21. Statistics on the Berlin deportations can be found in *Gedenkbuch Berlins der jüdischen Opfer des Nationalsozialismus* (Berlin: Hentrich, 1995), pp. 1420–22.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 789.

in Auschwitz, to which most of the Berlin deportees were sent, also happened to reach their full capacity by June, 1942.²³

Whatever the real reasons for the delays in deportations, Goebbels, after finding that a number of Jews had escaped what he had hoped would be a last roundup on February 27, 1943, placed the blame on German intellectuals, who, as he put it, “do not understand our policy on the Jews and partially take their side”—to which he added, “I shall not rest until the capital of the Reich has become wholly free of Jews [*Judenfrei*].”²⁴

The consequences that Baum had hoped to achieve with the bombing, namely a revolt of the Germans against its regime, proved as unrealistic as Goebbels’s hopes proved achievable. Even if the Baum group, instead of setting fire to an exhibit, had staged a suicide bombing of the Berlin S-Bahn and U-Bahn akin to the London tube bombings of July, 2005, the result, like that of the British and American air raids, would likely have been an increase in German determination to stick it out. (The idea of a suicide bombing by Europeans during the 1940s is of course difficult to conceive.)

Moreover, at the time of the bombing the Germans were still far from sensing any impending defeat. To be sure, the invasion of Russia a year before had not resulted in the swift victory they had hoped for; the exhibit, after all, had been motivated to counter the public’s feelings of discouragement. But the advance into Russia continued through the summer and autumn of 1942. It was not until the battle of Stalingrad in January, 1943, that an ultimate German defeat came to seem likely.

Nor was Baum’s wish fully realized to let the world know that a resistance to Nazism existed. It was surely no surprise that the tightly controlled German press failed to note the bombing. But word of mouth obviously could not be controlled, and the news gradually made its way, including to Klemperer in Dresden. Moreover, Rabbi Leo Baeck, the president of the Organization of German Jews, was ordered on May 29 to let his membership know that because of a Jewish act of sabotage “500 Jews in Berlin have been arrested, of whom 250 were shot and 250 sent to a camp.”²⁵ And Baeck himself roundly condemned the bombing.

23. *Ibid.*, pp. 1424–25.

24. Goebbels, *Tagebücher*, II, 7 (1993): 449. Although relatively few Berlin Jews survived the war, Goebbels never succeeded in rendering the city “Judenrein.”

25. Scheer, *Im Schatten der Sterne*, p. 260.

Even if the media in Germany and its occupied territories maintained their silence, news of the bombing was reported in a most prominent spot in the United States, namely, on the front page of the Sunday *New York Times*. On June 14, less than four weeks after the bombing, American readers would have seen the following headline: “258 Jews Reported Slain in Berlin For Bomb Plot at Anti-Red Exhibit.” The story opens with the following lines:

At the Gross Lichterfelde Barracks in the western suburbs of Berlin, 258 Jews were put to death by the S.S. on May 28, and their families deported, in retaliation for an alleged Jewish plot to blow up the anti-Bolshevist “Soviet Paradise” exhibition at the Lustgarten. Reproductions of hovels allegedly moved stone by stone from Russia have been on display for some time to represent the living conditions of Soviet workers. On May 27—the day on which Reinhard Heydrich was fatally wounded in Prague—it was claimed that five time bombs were found at the exhibition.²⁶

The story, with a follow-up the next Thursday, was reported by the *Times*’s Swedish correspondent, George Axelsson. One might note that, several weeks before, Goebbels had railed against the role of Swedish journalists in leaking information abroad and in thus aiding the British and Americans—Goebbels in fact vowed to put an end to their work.²⁷ Although Axelsson did not report the numbers with total accuracy—he wrote of 258 instead of 250 shootings, which actually occurred in Sachsenhausen rather than the barracks he mentioned—his story, as Goebbels’s earlier statement anticipated, presented an image within the Allied world of the Nazis’ extraordinary brutality.²⁸ Axelsson went on to report that Jewish-community leaders were instructed to warn their constituents that “if again a Jewish attempt was made to harm a single hair on the head of single German, 5,000 Jews would be put to death in each of the following cit-

26. George Axelsson, “258 Jews Reported Slain in Berlin For Bomb Plot at Anti-Red Exhibit,” *New York Times*, June 14, 1942.

27. Goebbels, *Tagebücher*, II, 4 (1995): 385.

28. If the executions had taken place at the barracks, they would have excited the curiosity of nearby residents. Sachsenhausen, site of a long-standing concentration camp, offered the privacy that the Nazis desired. Of the 250 who were shot, only 154 were newly arrested hostages. The remaining 96 had already been incarcerated in Sachsenhausen. See Scheffler, “Der Brandanschlag im Lustgarten,” pp. 106–11.

ies: Berlin, Vienna and Prague.”²⁹ One might remember that in mid-1942 nothing was known publicly of the Wannsee conference that, in January of that year, had determined a “final solution,” nor did observers in the West know of the extermination camps, which in fact did not get into full gear until 1942.

Despite the publicity that the bombing gained in the *Times*, the incident and its aftermath never captured the imagination of the public in the West—certainly not in the way that the destruction of Lidice, which occurred soon after the reprisals for the Berlin bombing, immediately became a symbol for Nazi evil. Indeed, for many years the term *Lidice*, like *Guernica* during the Spanish Civil War, could be used without modifiers or further explanation to illustrate the horrors of modern warfare. It is significant that Axelsson mentions the coincidence of the Heydrich assassination with the bombing and, later in the story, speculates “a link between the Berlin executions and the massacre at Lidice.”³⁰ Until his Czech killers were found, there was in fact some question whether these executions were not really intended as punishment for Heydrich’s death.

Yet the story of the Baum group has had its own after-life, which, however, took shape only gradually over many years. My own introduction to this story came during my first trip to Germany during the summer of 1953. Rumors circulating soon after the war among those of my family in the United States told of my cousin Hanni and her husband helping Allied bombers locate targets in Berlin. But none of the research on the Baum group has confirmed these rumors.

In my 1953 visit to Berlin, I sought out an elderly non-Jewish family employee, Peter Weber, who had managed my grandfather’s office since the First World War. He came to West Berlin from East Germany expressly to see me, and he used this opportunity to catch me up on what had happened to my family during the 1930s and 1940s. Much of his narrative centered around the bombing of the exhibit, of which I had known nothing before. At the time of the bombing, the only people left in the family house near Alexanderplatz were Hanni and her husband Gerd, whom she had married in January, 1941; her mother; and our uncle, Nathan Lindenberg. Our grandfather had died the preceding October, and her father, Adolf Lindenberg, had died, presumably of natural causes, the month before her marriage.

29. Axelsson, “258 Jews Reported Slain.”

30. *Ibid.*

Peter Weber's narrative was colored throughout by a fierce condemnation of the bombing. "How could she have done anything so foolish?" he kept saying. Having experienced the whole Nazi period from the safe distance of the American West Coast, I expressed my strong support for Hanni and for her group's actions. This was true heroism, as I put it. Weber obviously had no sympathy, no understanding even, for what must have seemed to him an altogether foreign point of view. And then I added that since everybody was going to be deported and killed anyway, Hanni did much better by dying with dignity instead of being herded into a gas chamber.

He quickly countered by explaining that Hanni's actions had cost her and the rest of her family the protection they had enjoyed up to then. Our Uncle Nathan, as I remember Weber's story, had been a schoolmate of the Berlin chief of police, who had promised—at least until the Baum group's sabotage was exposed—to keep Nathan, as well as Hanni and her mother, from being deported.³¹ Nathan, it turned out, was transported to Theresienstadt in early October, 1942, some four months after the bombing, while Hanni's mother, as mentioned earlier, was not deported until mid-1943, almost four months after her daughter's execution.³² At this point in my

31. While researching this essay, I sought to identify our family's erstwhile protector. Hanni's brother Manfred thought he remembered his name to be Hellwig. Although I could find no police official with that name, I discovered that the Berlin police chief (*Polizeipräsident*) from 1935 to 1944 was a Nazi of Prussian Junker background named Wolf-Heinrich von Helldorf. When I mentioned this name to Hanni's brother, he acknowledged that it might well have been Helldorf. But Helldorf, who was born in 1896, twenty-one years after Nathan, could not have been the latter's schoolmate. Obviously my memory of a conversation over half a century before was faulty. Could Helldorf perhaps have known my family through Nathan's purported schoolmate? And what about Helldorf's vaunted anti-Semitism, which, according to the available biographical sources, was of a particularly vehement nature? (See the article "Anti-Semite Police Chief Named to 'Purge' Berlin of Jews and Communists," *New York Times*, July 20, 1935.) Yet Helldorf, I discovered, was also known to help individual Jews: in 1938 he wrote a letter to help a Jewish woman, Bella Fromm, emigrate (see John V. H. Dippel, *Bound upon a Wheel of Fire: Why So Many German Jews Made the Tragic Decision to Remain in Nazi Germany* [New York: Basic Books, 1996], p. 228). If Helldorf was indeed the family protector, it is ironical that, as an active participant in the July 20, 1944, conspiracy led by Claus von Stauffenberg, he was executed soon after the failure of the conspiracy in the same chamber in which my cousin Hanni had been guillotined little more than a year before. (I thank Ron Coleman, a librarian at the United States Holocaust Museum, for helping me track down Helldorf.)

32. Nathan died in Theresienstadt on August 25, 1943, after a ten-month stay. (See *Gedenkbuch Berlins*, p. 789.) Peter Weber, who visited him there, found him employed carrying buckets of water from a stream. According to Weber, he died as a result of having his

conversation with Weber, I realized that the ethical considerations had become so complex that there was no use continuing this dialogue.

If I had had the curiosity to learn more about the Baum group, I could doubtless have done so by going to East Berlin (far more accessible than it would be after the Wall was built eight years later), where I might have sought out the surviving members of the group and others familiar with their activities. I might have seen a monument to the group that had been erected in the Jewish cemetery in the Weissensee district in 1951. This monument bears the names of all the executed Baum-group members plus those of the Steinbrinck group who participated in the bombing—though the purported traitor Franke was omitted from the list.

The Weissensee monument contains the following inscription following the names of the dead: “They perished in the fight for peace and freedom.” These words, drawing upon a vocabulary typical within the communist world at the time, immediately reveal how the Baum group was to be interpreted in East Germany during subsequent years. However much some individual members may have questioned the wisdom of bombing the anti-Soviet exhibit, this action, together with the martyrdom that followed, provided the newly created German Democratic Republic with a model of heroism that was to help shape the mythology of that now-defunct nation. In the same year that the monument was erected, the East German man of letters Stephan Hermlin published a book, *Die erste Reihe*, on anti-Nazi resistance, with a whole chapter on the Baum group—more eulogistic than informative, for at that point there were still few reliable facts about their work available.³³

Regina Scheer, in her recent book on the Baum group, records a memory from her school days in 1967 when the twenty-fifth anniversary of the bombing was celebrated publicly in East Berlin with considerable fuss.³⁴ In the course of the nation’s forty-year history, schools and a barracks were named after Herbert Baum, and the street leading to Weissensee cemetery was renamed Herbert-Baum Strasse. Scheer, in another publication, speaks of a series of Herbert-Baum workshops initiated during the 1960s

usual medications for anemia withheld. Since those who were deported to Theresienstadt were, in most cases, sent on to be gassed at Auschwitz, it is possible that the privileged status he had enjoyed in Berlin still extended, to a degree, to his stay at Theresienstadt.

33. Stephan Hermlin, *Die erste Reihe* (Berlin: Neues Leben, 1951), pp. 165–73.

34. Scheer, *Im Schatten der Sterne*, pp. 266–68.

that numbered seventy-six by the end of the GDR.³⁵ To cite my own personal experience, whenever I met educated persons in East Germany they generally knew something about the Baum group.

Not so in the old West Germany. For those who wished to show that a resistance existed in Nazi Germany, Baum's communist orientation proved a considerable stumbling block. Obviously there were some politically safer groups to commemorate. Shortly before reunification I remember visiting the West Berlin Museum for the Resistance. This museum was closely associated with the family of Claus von Stauffenberg, whose leadership of the July 20 conspiracy was amply remembered in an exhibit there. When I asked an attendant where I could find something about the Baum group, I was directed to an obscure corner of the museum where I found a small exhibit.

In a similar move, an attempt by leftist students at the Technische Universität in West Berlin in 1984 to rename its main building after Herbert Baum was turned down by the university administration. On January 30 of that year, the anniversary of the day that Hitler took power, the students attached the name "Herbert-Baum Gebäude" in large letters above the building's entrance. The discussions that took place in the university senate during subsequent weeks revealed how little was still known about the Baum group in the west.³⁶

Yet several short accounts of the Baum group had been published outside East Germany during the first two decades following the war. A volume first published in 1953, *Der lautlose Aufstand* [*The Silent Rebellion*], called attention to a large variety of resistance organizations, including the Baum group, to which it devoted a page, that functioned during the Nazi period.³⁷ As its title suggests, the book asserts the ubiquitousness of resistance despite the silence of the German media. With an introduction by

35. Scheer, "'... Die Lösung von der Gruppe Baum war durchaus richtig': Die Erinnerung an die Widerstandsgruppe Herbert Baum," in Annette Leo and Peter Reif-Spirek, eds., *Vielstimmiges Schweigen: Neue Studien zum DDR-Antifaschismus* (Berlin: Metropol, 2001), p. 256.

36. Records of senate speeches, newspaper stories, together with photographs of the building, can be found in a 79-page pamphlet issued by the students, *Die Berliner Widerstandsgruppe um Herbert Baum: Informationen zur Diskussion um die Benennung des Hauptgebäudes der TU Berlin* (Berlin: Allgemeiner Studentenausschuss der Technischen Universität Berlin, 1984).

37. Günther Weisenborn, ed., *Der lautlose Aufstand: Bericht über die Widerstandsbewegung des deutschen Volkes 1933–1945*, 2nd ed. (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1954), pp. 164–65.

the theologian Martin Niemöller, the book seeks to defend the “millions of Germans who did not agree with the measures taken by the Nazis.”³⁸ And it is little wonder that the Baum group is characterized by its Jewishness, with no mention at all of its communist sympathies.

Full chapters on the Baum group appear in two early books devoted to the history of Jewish resistance throughout Europe. It is significant that the English-language titles of these books are *They Fought Back* (1967) and *Not as a Lamb* (1974, French edition 1970),³⁹ for each book is explicitly a response to Hannah Arendt’s well-known contention in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963) that Jewish resistance to the Nazis was minimal and that the various Jewish councils were complicit with the Nazis.⁴⁰ In each of these books, the fire-bombing of the anti-Soviet exhibit is used to provide a counterexample to Arendt’s thesis. I might add that the Baum chapter anthologized in *They Fought Back* actually predates Arendt’s book, for it was originally an essay published in Yiddish in 1961 by the Polish scholar Ber Mark. Though it is inaccurate in view of what we have since learned about the group—it mistakenly argues, for instance, that the “ideological background . . . of the Baum Group was Zionist”—this essay offered the most detailed account published up to that date.⁴¹ In contrast with earlier accounts, Steinberg’s chapter shows full cognizance of the group’s communist affiliations.

These affiliations were of course central to the role assigned to the group in East Germany. Indeed, the first full-length book, *Jugend im Berliner Widerstand* by Margot Pikarski, appeared in East Berlin in 1978.⁴² Pikarski succeeded in digging up innumerable details that had not been published before, and she included individual biographical sketches and

38. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

39. Yuri Suhl, ed. and trans., *They Fought Back: The Story of the Jewish Resistance in Nazi Europe* (New York: Crown, 1967); on the Baum group, see the chapter by Ber Mark, “The Herbert Baum Group: Jewish Resistance in Germany in the Years 1937–1942,” pp. 55–68. Lucien Steinberg, *Not as a Lamb: The Jews against Hitler*, trans. Marion Hunter (Farnborough, England: Saxon House, 1974), originally published in France as *La Révolte des justes: Les Juifs contre Hitler* (Paris: Fayard, 1970); for the chapter on the Baum group, entitled “The Herbert Baum Campaign,” see pp. 26–43.

40. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Viking, 1963), see especially pp. 10–12, 117–26. For statements questioning Arendt’s contention, see Suhl, ed., *They Fought Back*, p. 4, and Steinberg, *Not as a Lamb*, p. 109. Arendt’s thesis about Jewish passivity, as she herself acknowledges, was based on Raul Hilberg’s *The Destruction of the European Jews* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1961).

41. Mark, “The Herbert Baum Group,” in Suhl, *They Fought Back*, p. 59.

42. Pikarski, *Jugend im Berliner Widerstand: Herbert Baum und Kampfgefährten*.

photos of members of the group. As mentioned earlier in this essay, she reproduced a number of the pamphlets that the group had distributed. Yet the book's ideological commitment is unmistakable: although the author cannot deny the members' Jewish background, she stresses their communist sympathies above all. The very title page gives it away: the word *Jugend*, virtually a suppression of *Juden*; the term *Kampfgefährten* [comrades in battle] in the subtitle; even the publisher, the "Militärverlag der DDR."

Similar language pervades the monument that the East German government placed in the Lustgarten, the scene of the bombing, in 1981: "Unforgotten the brave deeds and steadfastness of the young communists led by Herbert Baum's anti-fascist resistance group." The other side of the monument bore an even more overtly political message: "Forever bound in friendship with the Soviet Union." Twenty years later, a full decade after the joint demise of the GDR and the Soviet Union, the latter statement was eliminated and replaced by the addition of thirty-four names of individual members of both the Baum and the Steinbrinck-Franke groups. The name of the alleged informer, Joachim Franke, which had been omitted from the Weissensee monument, was even included in the revised monument in the Lustgarten. After all, Franke, whatever the truth of his role in the betrayal, had suffered the same punishment as his fellow members.

Still another memorial, this one built in 1988 in what was still West Berlin, commemorates the role of forced labor in the lives of members of the group. It is devoted to my cousin Hanni Meyer and takes the form of a bronze plaque, with a bas relief of her face, attached to a brick wall at the site of the Paulus lampshade factory in Kreuzberg district. Whereas several members of the Baum group, including Hanni's husband and Baum himself, performed their labor at Siemens, Hanni was the only member of the group working in this factory. The inscription acknowledges both the Jewish and the communist aspects of the group:

As a Jew, Hanni Meyer (1921–1943) had to perform forced labor at the Paulus lampshade factory, Ritterstrasse 16. She distributed anti-fascist pamphlets together with the Herbert Baum Jewish-communist resistance group. On March 4, 1943, she was executed in Berlin/Plötzensee at the age of 22.

Although I have been unable to discover how the erection of this memorial came about, the word *anti-fascist* suggests its origin on the other side of the

Wall, which, as it turned out, was to come down only a year later. Except for the addition, in 2001, of the group members' names to the monument in the Lustgarten, I am unaware of any commemorative efforts in post-unification Germany.

Yet the Baum group figures prominently in a recent guidebook directed to anglophone Jews, *The Goldapple Guide to Jewish Berlin*. To explain the failure of the various monuments to the group to mention the members' Jewish identity, the book, writing for a public that is fast forgetting the world of the Cold War, states:

In the strict ideology of the German Democratic Republic, meaningful resistance to the Nazis came only from the Communist Party, and resistance from Jews...was not recognized as having any special significance....The fact that they [the Baum group] were Jewish most certainly had an effect on their thinking and the conduct of their resistance.⁴³

With this affirmation of the group's Jewish background, the story has come full circle to its characterization in the early diary entries of both Goebbels and Klemperer.

IV. Reading History as Historical Drama

Suppose that Herbert Baum had proved correct in his assumption that the German people would be ready to turn against their Nazi masters by the summer of 1942. Without the hindsight afforded by later events, his assumption was not wholly unwarranted. The Russian war seemed to be going badly even though the Germans were still advancing; but they had been thoroughly rebuffed in their attempts to take Moscow and to gain the quick victory their leaders had led the populace to expect. After all, the anti-Soviet exhibit that the Baum group attacked was designed to regain support for what by then was fast becoming an unpopular war. And there were severe food shortages, acknowledged in one of the Baum group's pamphlets, that should surely have made Germans feel discouraged about their leadership.

It is conceivable, moreover, that, without the betrayal of Joachim Franke (or of a possible Gestapo informer in case Franke was not the cul-

43. Andrew Roth and Michael Fraiman, *The Goldapple Guide to Jewish Berlin* (Berlin: Goldapple, 1998), p. 124. See also pp. 53, 65, 75–76, 122–23.

prit), the group might never have been caught. (Needless to say, the high technology by means of which terrorists can be identified today did not exist in 1942.) In that case nobody would have known that there were five Jews perpetrating the Lustgarten bombing, and, as a result, Goebbels would not have conceived his plot to arrest 500 hostages or to accelerate deportations in order to punish a specifically Jewish crime. Although several members of the group are known to have feared the consequences for their fellow Jews in case they were caught, Baum must have believed, first, that they would get away with it and, second, that he was helping ensure this outcome by sending to the exhibit those members who did not appear Jewish.

Baum's subsequent battle plan included a mass escape of his group to France soon after the bombing. At Siemens he maintained contact with non-Jewish forced laborers from France from whom he obtained French identification papers for a number of group members. (My cousin and her husband, for example, used their French cards to rent a room in a suburb where they spent weekends during the spring of 1942—a genuine, if also only temporary, escape since, with these cards in hand, they did not need to display their stars of David!)⁴⁴ Had this script played itself out as planned, one can imagine the group avoiding deportation and even continuing its political activities in France—all while awaiting the imminent collapse of the Nazi regime and the establishment of communist rule across Europe.

Or let us suppose a less triumphant scenario, this one in the form of a Brechtian *Lehrstück*. Assume that Baum's friend Hans Fruck, whose statement about Baum's "total misunderstanding of what illegal work involves" I quoted above, had succeeded in dampening Baum's enthusiasm and forced him to question the wisdom of attacking the anti-Soviet exhibit. It is known that Fruck tried to work through the two non-Jewish members of the Baum group, Irene Walther and Suzanne Wesse, whom he sought to wrest from Baum's sway so that they might devote themselves solely to his own group. He failed to succeed in this, for both women possessed close emotional ties to Baum's people: Walther was the girlfriend of Heinz Birnbaum, who had lived with Baum during the late 1930s, and Wesse felt a special bond with Sala Kochmann, who, with her husband, Martin, was Baum's longest-term associate.

But let's say that Fruck persuaded Walther and Wesse to overcome all sentimental considerations in favor of political discipline, and that both of

44. Scheer, *Im Schatten der Sterne*, p. 242.

these women successfully exercised their own persuasive powers on their friends in the Baum group. Moreover, because their non-Jewish status allowed them the freedom to do certain things—for instance, to own and use typewriters—necessary for the Baum group’s activities, their threat to leave might alone have had some effect.

Fruck in turn would have worked on Baum personally, and perhaps even threatened to exclude him from any role in the future communist state. As a result, the need for party unity overcomes all romantic urges. Members now confine their activities to the writing and distribution of antiwar pamphlets and wait quietly until they are deported one by one—though one or two of them, like Charlotte Paech Holzer in her real-life role within the Baum group, go underground and manage to survive the war. They all end up as anonymous as those six million others whose humiliating end helps define what we have since come to call the Holocaust.

Given this scenario, no significant memories of Herbert Baum and his associates remain. If remembered at all, they constitute only one among a number of organizations that opposed the Nazis but were unable to leave any significant mark. The GDR, of course, would now have been deprived of an image of heroism (however undisciplined from a party point of view) to legitimate its anti-fascist credentials during the war. As a non-Jew, Hans Fruck, though jailed by the Nazis from 1943 to 1945, was able to avoid the deportation to which his Jewish fellow-communists were subjected. And as someone fully cognizant of “what illegal work involves,” he was in an ideal position to become the Stasi luminary that was to be his lot in later life. (He died in late 1990, supposedly of a “broken heart” resulting from the fall of the state in which he had played a central role.)⁴⁵

If we read the story not prospectively, as in these scenarios, but wholly by means of hindsight, a different picture emerges. Certain facts are now firmly embedded in the historical record. For example, the bombing of the anti-Soviet exhibit, unpublicized as it was, failed to encourage Germans to change their regime. And even if it had made it into the newspapers, it would likely have hardened German resolve. The bombing’s only tangible results, as it turned out, were the rounding up and shooting of hostages and the probable acceleration of deportations.

So was it worth it after all? My initial reaction in 1953 to Peter Weber’s condemnation of Hanni Meyer’s action—she was “heroic” not “foolish,” and “everybody would have been killed anyway”—though I still essen-

45. *Ibid.*, p. 43.

tially hold this opinion, was by no means as nuanced as it should have been. For one thing, I now recognize that any decision to resist a regime involves conscious ethical choices that are rarely clear-cut and that are also so loaded with contingencies that no single solution seems satisfactory.

Take, for instance, an issue analogous to the decision to resist, namely, whether it was right for the Jewish councils throughout Germany (organizations that had been themselves created by the Nazis) to decide which Jews were to be deported and in which order. Hannah Arendt, one remembers, objected vehemently to the fact that Jewish leaders were willing to collaborate at all, claiming, in fact, that a large proportion of Jews might have been saved without this collaboration.⁴⁶ Berel Lang, in his searching study of the philosophical implications inherent in some key issues surrounding the Holocaust, approaches the question of whether the councils should have made these decisions—“to decide or not to decide,” as he puts it—by confronting two traditions within Jewish thought: the first that of Moses Maimonides, namely, that a community may not choose to turn over an individual at an enemy’s demand; and the second, voiced by the rabbi of the Kovno ghetto at the time of the deportations, that even if a community has been marked for destruction, it should work “to rescue what is possible.”⁴⁷ Each tradition, Lang explains, represents a quite distinct view of human nature, the communitarian one of Maimonides and the individualistic one of the Kovno rabbi.⁴⁸ As it turned out, of course, the councils, with a few exceptions, were not able to rescue their communities but only to determine the order in which particular individuals were to be destroyed.

Yet who was to know this outcome in advance? Similarly, the Baum group’s decision to proceed with the bombing, despite some demurrals among members, had to be made without any sure knowledge of its eventual consequences. If Baum’s idea of leading his people to France with forged papers (improbable though we now take it to be) had succeeded, there would have been no reprisals against Jews and no accelerated deportations. After all, they had succeeded in distributing pamphlets for months without getting caught. And even if they knew there was a strong risk of being arrested for the bombing, how certain were they that others besides

46. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, pp. 117–25.

47. Berel Lang, *Act and Idea in the Nazi Genocide* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. 69–72.

48. *Ibid.*, pp. 76–77.

themselves would be sacrificed for their act? Moreover, if their act could help motivate a change of regime (another improbable assumption, as we know by hindsight), it might have justified even the reprisals that followed the act. If, retrospectively, the bombing may look more foolish than heroic, prospectively its heroic quality has a clear edge.

And what about my earlier argument that the consequences of the bombing hardly mattered since the Jews (with of course a few exceptions) would all eventually have been killed? But prospectively how much was known when the bombing occurred? Surely not the results of the Wannsee conference. Still, everybody knew about deportations: in the earlier stages, and certainly still at the time of the bombing, victims were told in advance when to report. Yet even if nobody knew the details surrounding the gas chambers, did anybody really expect the deportees to return home? Of course, the Freundlich family, before their robbery, refused Baum's request for their possessions, which they claimed they would need once they returned from camp. But was this family, probably like many others, simply engaged in wishful hoping?⁴⁹

When Klemperer, in the quotation above, wrote, "We were agreed that our existence is now a race with death," he expressed a sense of ultimate doom evident not only throughout his diary but also in innumerable other accounts of the time. Klemperer, to be sure, knew that, because of his non-Jewish wife, he enjoyed privileged status, but he did not fool himself into thinking that this status could last forever. Indeed, he assumed he was scheduled for deportation in early 1945, but the confusion resulting from the massive Dresden bombing on February 13 allowed the Klemperers to wander around southern Germany without identification until the war ended.

Would my cousin Hanni have known that her family's privileged status would be lost if she were caught? And how secure was that status, since, unlike that of Klemperer, it was based not on a particular rule but on the whims of the police chief who was evidently protecting our family? But even if she had been fully cognizant of the danger, how successfully could she have distanced herself from the demands for solidarity that her husband and other members of the group would likely have placed on her?

49. The Freundlichs, together with their unmarried daughter, were deported to Theresienstadt in August, 1942, three months after the robbery. No one in the family returned. The father died in Theresienstadt, and the mother and daughter were sent on to Auschwitz. See *Gedenkbuch Berlins*, p. 335.

Although some who had attended meetings, for example, Harry Cühn, the central source for Scheer's recent book, chose to distance themselves from the group at an earlier stage, those who participated in their activities during the winter and spring of 1942 were, except for the one who escaped, arrested.

Just as Lang approaches the controversy surrounding the role of the Jewish councils as a conflict between two views of human nature, so we might describe the opposing stands one could take to the bombing as a conflict between two distinct views of action. The first of these, represented by the decision to bomb the exhibit, assumes that some form of action, no matter how great the odds against you, is worth whatever risks it entails, for the fact that this action was taken may eventually (if also posthumously) work to make one's particular cause prevail. During the more than six decades since the exhibit bombing, we have had ample opportunity to observe this view of action embodied (and with considerably more violence) among groups throughout the world who have felt themselves suppressed by a dominant power.

The second view of action, represented by all but a handful of the millions of Jews in Nazi Europe, assumes the uselessness of battling a regime so overwhelming in power, so secretive in communication, that any attempt to combat it would prevent the possibility that by some miracle you, and perhaps also those closest to you, might survive. Klemperer's diary, preserved for us only because he stored it at regular intervals with a non-Jewish friend in a nearby town, represents a detailed incarnation of this view of action.

How can we today, so long after the bombing, situate ourselves in relation to this event? The term *heroic* would be far easier to apply to the event if its outcome had been more positive—if, for instance, it had resulted in a large conflagration of the whole exhibit instead of the fire's being quickly doused out; if, moreover, word had spread throughout Germany; and if, finally, it had inspired other underground groups to take actions of their own (even if these actions would not really have altered the progress of the war and even if Baum's expectation of imminent revolution had not been fulfilled). Obviously we are more likely to judge actions by their consequences and by hindsight than by the intentions and the foreknowledge of their actors. And from what we know of the absoluteness with which the Nazi regime exercised its terror, any happy result of the bombing now seems improbable.

But the word *foolish* also does not seem wholly appropriate to portray the Baum group's action. When one looks at this action in view only of the consequences it had for the Baum group, for the Jews of Berlin, and for my family in particular, one might be tempted to apply this term. And certainly the warnings that came from a few dissenting members, perhaps also from other resistance groups if, though this seems unlikely, they had any advance knowledge of the bombing, can easily lead us to dismiss the action in this way. Yet if one sets oneself within the historical moment, one would recognize the confined viewpoint within which Baum and his group were forced to make decisions. Writing and distributing pamphlets—a chief activity of other groups as well—did not, at least as they probably perceived it, seem to be hastening the end of the regime. Given the tightly controlled media, it was difficult to gauge precisely how well (or badly) the German army was faring in Russia or how ready the populace was to overthrow its masters. A decision for action was at best a calculated guess, foolish though it might in retrospect turn out to be.

It may well be impossible to maintain a single, stable point of view on an incident fraught with the complexities inherent in the Lustgarten bombing. I can attest that Hanni Meyer's only sibling, Manfred Lindenberg, who had emigrated from Germany to the United States in 1937, has, over the years, responded to the incident at varying points on the scale between heroic and foolish. Let me suggest that we look at the incident in something of the way that we consider the great historical dramas of the past. Whether we read them silently, or write about them analytically, or witness them in live performance, our interpretive responses vary over time, often as a result of new events that color our apprehension of the depicted events.

To cite an example from the far past, note the ways that one can, as it were, "tilt" the meanings of Shakespeare's *Richard II*. The text itself seems flexible enough to allow a range of interpretations. At one extreme one can look at this work as a martyr play, in which the title character becomes the victim of the machinations of his usurper, Bolingbroke. At the other extreme it would be possible to play Richard as pathetic and sentimental, with Bolingbroke portrayed as bringing a needed order to replace a corrupt regime.

Historical plays thus often allow us to tilt our attitudes toward their characters and their events over time as we reassess their significance. Shakespeare's histories have yielded quite diverse readings at different

historical moments. Compare, for example, the chauvinistic *Henry V* film produced by Laurence Olivier during World War II with Kenneth Branagh's antiwar version of the same play some forty-five years later.

Or consider two great historical dramas written during the same period as the event around which this essay is centered. Brecht's *Mutter Courage* and *Leben des Galilei* are notable for the interpretive gap between the ways that their creator and his audiences have approached the title characters. Whereas the author insisted that these characters should not be viewed as heroic, audiences (and many actors and directors as well) have refused to withhold the sympathy that they customarily grant to tragic heroes.⁵⁰

What we now know about the Baum group constitutes a dramatic text of sorts, a composite of the various texts—survivors' accounts, Gestapo files, monument inscriptions, the diary entries quoted above, plus diverse later studies of the incident—that have accumulated over the years. Like a historical drama, this text has been open to a variety of attitudes. It served the GDR as a model for anti-fascist resistance. Moreover, it has also provided an example of Jewish pugnaciousness within Nazi Germany, in which there was a paucity of resistance in comparison with what transpired in some of the occupied territories, above all in the Warsaw ghetto. But the pathos inherent in the failure of the group to inspire further resistance, and instead its incitement of reprisals and perhaps also deportations, has likewise invited a range of judgments along the scales from heroic to foolish.

I conclude with another literary analogy, Yeats's poem "Easter 1916," itself concerned with a political act similar to that of the Baum group, namely, the occupation by Irish nationalists of some key sites in Dublin on Easter Monday, 1916. Unlike the bombing of the anti-Soviet exhibit, this assault was publicized immediately throughout the world, though it at first seemed a futile act, with its leaders, like the members of the Baum group, executed soon afterwards. But Yeats, writing just after the event, dramatizes his shifting attitude toward the revolutionists: indeed, in the course of its mere eighty lines, he moves from a tone of disdain toward their rigidity and political impracticality to elegiac compassion for the sacrifice he now sees them as having made.

By turning to literature, I do not intend to aestheticize a brutal historical moment but rather to call attention to the plasticity characterizing the ways that we think and rethink the past. Just as the Easter rebellion now stands as an originating moment in a still-continuing tradition of violence

50. See Brecht's notes in *Stücke* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 1962), VII:210–11; VIII:204–6.

in Ireland, so the bombing of the exhibit is colored for us today by that relatively recent phenomenon we now label terrorism—not through any real similarities but rather through the contrast we can draw between the relative mildness of the Baum group's attack (including their purported fear of inflicting too many injuries on that crowded Sunday) and the utter destructiveness that we regularly witness today. Whatever assessments we continue to make of this attack, whether we take it to be heroic or foolish, effective or futile, inspiring or exasperating, or, more likely, something in between these extremes, our interpretations of history are subject to much the same instabilities as our interpretations of literature.