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In Her Own Right: A Study of Freya von Moltke in the German Resistance 1940-1945

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In Her Own Right: A Study of Freya von Moltke in the German Resistance 1940-1945

Abstract

Freya von Moltke was a member of the Kreisau Circle resistance group in Nazi Germany from 1940 to 1944. This intellectual group planned for the future of Germany after the anticipated downfall of the Nazis and was led by Helmuth von Moltke, the husband of Freya, and Peter Yorck. Despite the significance of her resistance in comparison to the majority of the German population, the resistance story of Freya von Moltke is often overwhelmed by that of her husband. The examination of Freya von Moltke's interviews, letters, and memoirs as well as a variety of secondary sources reveals that she personally displayed a tremendous amount of ideological and active agency in a totalitarian society. She also displays various levels of female involvement in opposition to Nazism and was a distinct member of the resistance in her own right.

Keywords

Freya von Moltke, Kreisau Circle, German Resistance, Nazism, World War II, Nazi

Disciplines

European History | History | Military History | Social History | Women's History

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Senior History Thesis

**In Her Own Right:
A Study of Freya von Moltke in the German Resistance 1940-1945**



Sarah Hayes
Professor William Bowman
History 418
Nazism
April 21st, 2014

*I affirm that I have upheld the highest principles of honesty and integrity in my academic work
and have not witnessed a violation of the Honor Code.*

Freya von Moltke was a member of the Kreisau Circle resistance group in Nazi Germany from 1940 to 1944. This intellectual group planned for the future of Germany after the anticipated downfall of the Nazis and was led by Helmuth von Moltke, the husband of Freya, and Peter Yorck. Despite the significance of her resistance in comparison to the majority of the German population, the resistance story of Freya von Moltke is often overwhelmed by that of her husband. The examination of Freya von Moltke's interviews, letters, and memoirs as well as a variety of secondary sources reveals that she personally displayed a tremendous amount of ideological and active agency in a totalitarian society. She also displays various levels of female involvement in opposition to Nazism and was a distinct member of the resistance in her own right.

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Timeline of Events

11 March 1907-	Birth of Helmuth von Moltke in Kreisau
29 March 1911-	Birth of Freya von Moltke (née Deichmann)
1929-	First meeting of Freya and Helmuth von Moltke at the home of Eugenie Schwarzwald on the Grundlsee in Austria
Spring 1930-	Freya visits Kreisau, Silesia for the first time
18 October 1931-	Marriage of Freya and Helmuth von Moltke
1935-	Freya von Moltke completes Doctorate of Law at the Humbolt University in Berlin
2 November 1937-	Freya von Moltke gives birth to Caspar von Moltke
1939-	Helmuth von Moltke drafted as specialist in marital law & international law in the German High Command
January 1940-	Beginnings of the Kreisau Circle
1940-1943-	Meetings of Kreisau Circle in Berlin at Peter & Marion Yorck's house on Hortensienstrasse in Berlin
23 September 1941-	Birth of Konrad von Moltke
1942/1943-	Helmuth von Moltke gets copies of White Rose leaflets to Britain via Sweden
22-25 May 1942-	First weekend meeting at Kreisau
16-18 October 1942-	Second weekend meeting at Kreisau
12-14 June 1943-	Third weekend meeting at Kreisau
9 August 1943-	Date of the latest surviving copy of the Kreisau document
19 January 1944-	Helmuth von Moltke arrested in Berlin
20 July 1944-	The July Plot
8 August 1944-	Execution of Peter Yorck
September 1944-	Helmuth von Moltke transferred from Ravensbrück to Tegel Prison in Berlin
10-11 January 1945-	Trial of Helmuth von Moltke before the People's Court
23 January 1945-	Execution of Helmuth von Moltke
April 1945-	Freya, Caspar, and Konrad von Moltke evacuated to Hohenelbe in Czechoslovakia
Late Spring 1945-	von Moltkes return to Kreisau
Summer 1945-	Russians occupy Kreisau
August 1945-	Freya von Moltke travels to Berlin to establish contact with friends in the west, meets with the American Office of Strategic Services
October 1945-	von Moltkes leave Kreisau for the last time
1947-	von Moltkes move to South Africa
1949-	Freya von Moltke gives a lecture tour in the United States
1956-	von Moltkes move back to Germany
1960-	Freya von Moltke settles in Norwich, Vermont, USA
1988-	First publication in German of <i>Letters to Freya: 1939-1945</i>
1997-	First publication in German of <i>Memories of Kreisau and the German Resistance</i>
1989-	Foundation of the Kreisau Foundation for European Understanding
1 January 2010-	Death of Freya von Moltke

Introduction

“There is nothing at all about me of the liberated woman, but I have always lived an extraordinarily liberated life,” said Freya von Moltke in a 1993 interview.¹ At once self-deprecating and inspiring, this quote perfectly encompasses her story as a member of the Kreisau Circle, a German resistance group under the Nazi government of Adolf Hitler. By participating in this intellectual discussion group, she was involved in planning for the future of Germany after the fall of Nazism from 1940 to 1944. Her husband, Helmuth von Moltke was one of the group’s key leaders until his arrest and execution shortly before the end of the war.² Although he is a prominent figure in resistance history, it would be incorrect to assume her story is merely a subplot of his. Her engagement in the organized resistance and other forms of opposition distinguishes her from the large majority of Germans who remained silent.

This paper examines the personal beliefs of Freya von Moltke that led her to oppose the Nazis and her role in the German resistance. Scholars have been drawn to her story before, yet many of them place her within the larger story of the Kreisau Circle or examine her entire life in

¹ Freya von Moltke, interview by Alison Owings, “Mrs. Freya von Moltke: A Modest Woman of the Resistance,” in *Frauen: German Women Recall the Third Reich* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993), 246. Freya von Moltke was born in Cologne on March 29th, 1911 and married Helmuth von Moltke on October 18th, 1931. She survived the war and lived a long life in the United States until her death on January 1st, 2010. Frauke Geyken, *Freya von Moltke: Ein Jahrhundertleben 1911-2010* (Munich: Verlag C.H. Beck, 2011), 11; Sylke Tempel, *Freya von Moltke: Ein Leben. Ein Jahrhundert* (Berlin: Rowohlt, 2011), 75, 198. For an image of Freya von Moltke see Figure 1 in the Appendix.

² Rachel Freudenburg et al., “‘You see it too simply.’ Freya von Moltke Looks Back on the Kreisau Circle,” in *Confront! Resistance in Nazi Germany* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2005), 130-131, 138, 140. Although many scholars use the terms “resistance” and “opposition” interchangeably, for the purposes of this paper, “resistance” should be understood as active participation in an organized group working against the Nazis and “opposition” more general expressions of dissent against the regime. For a discussion of the difficulties associated with using these two terms see Hans Mommsen, *Alternatives to Hitler: German Resistance Under the Third Reich*, trans. Angus McGeoch (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 33. For an image of Helmuth von Moltke see Figure 2 in the Appendix.

a more biographical approach. She is of interest historically because of her place within the resistance, but the high profiles of Kreisau narrative and her husband often overwhelm her own principles and resistance. It is the goal of this study to concentrate on Freya von Moltke's personal beliefs against Nazism and her acts of opposition both within and outside of the Kreisau Circle. A close examination of Freya von Moltke as a distinct resister reveals that she personally displayed a tremendous amount of ideological and active agency in a totalitarian society and illuminates various levels of female involvement in German resistance and opposition to Nazism.

German Resistance to Nazism

Freya von Moltke's involvement in the Kreisau Circle occurred within the context of the small and fragmented, but significant German resistance during the Third Reich. It cannot be denied that the large majority of the German population supported or at least remained passive under the Nazi government.³ Unlike resistance movements in occupied countries, the German resistance worked within a populace that had seen the rise of the Nazi Party through legal avenues. In addition, the government suppressed the small resistance that did exist through the combination of the SS, Gestapo, and state approved terror.⁴ This made any kind of opposition extremely difficult and dangerous. It is, therefore, important "to realize how little the German resistance could do anyway" as Freya von Moltke said.⁵ Even so, resistance still existed as can be seen from the significant number of Germans who were sent to concentration camps,

³ Klemens von Klemperer, *German Resistance Against Hitler: The Search for Allies Abroad, 1938-1945* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 2.

⁴ Klaus P. Fischer, *Nazi Germany: A New History* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 536-537; Freya von Moltke, *Memories of Kreisau & the German Resistance*, trans. Julie M. Winter (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), 19.

⁵ Freya von Moltke, interview by Rachel Freudenburg et al., "'You see it too simply.' Freya von Moltke Looks Back on the Kreisau Circle," in *Confront! Resistance in Nazi Germany* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2005), 138.

emigrated for political reasons, or actively worked against the Nazis from within Germany.⁶ Not all Germans could reconcile Nazi policy within their own conscience or remain passive bystanders. Resistance groups were formed across the political and social spectrum, from the Communist Red Orchestra to the student organization the White Rose, conservatives led by Carl Goerdeler, military men such as Claus von Stauffenberg, the intellectual Kreisau Circle, and more.⁷ They differed greatly in their ideology and goals, but their firm belief in the need to resist is important to consider in examinations of Nazi Germany. For Freya von Moltke and the Kreisau Circle, resistance meant planning for Germany's future.

The democratic and deliberate planning of the Kreisau Circle sought to establish the fundamental principles upon which a new Germany would be built. In many ways, it was simply an informal discussion group of socially acquainted professionals.⁸ However, this characterization belies the dangers that these men and women faced by their participation in the organized meetings. Helmuth von Moltke, the husband of Freya, and Peter Yorck von Wartenburg first began to bring likeminded people together in 1940, when it seemed that the German army was unstoppable and the Third Reich was secure.⁹ This was not a group of people

⁶ Freya von Moltke to Daniel J. Goldhagen, August 10, 1996, Cynthia Oudejans Harris Papers, Rauner Special Collections Library, Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH; Klemperer, 3.

⁷ Fischer, 536-537. It is important to note that the name "Kreisau Circle" was first used by the Nazis after they discovered the group's existence and that it was never used by the Kreisauers themselves. Alison Owings, "Mrs. Freya von Moltke: A Modest Woman of the Resistance," in *Frauen: German Women Recall the Third Reich* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993), 245.

⁸ Owings, "Mrs. Freya von Moltke," 253; Freudenburg et al., 131.

⁹ Freya von Moltke, *Memories of Kreisau*, 22. Although the full name of Helmuth von Moltke's co-leader of the Kreisau Circle was Peter Yorck von Wartenburg, he is most commonly referred to in scholarly literature as Peter Yorck. Therefore, throughout this paper, I will use the shortened version of the name for both him and his wife, Marion. In addition, Peter Hoffmann writes that socially the Kreisau Circle began in 1937, but I have chosen to use the later date based Freya von Moltke's description in her own memoirs. Peter Hoffmann, *The History of the*

who chose to act when their mission seemed most likely to succeed, but rather when they had their smallest chance of success. When choosing members, Helmuth von Moltke and Peter Yorck sought to represent a wide ideological spectrum so that the group could plan for Germany's future as democratically as possible.¹⁰ Living in a totalitarian system, they recognized that Germany needed a variety of opinions in order to be a free country. The most effective way of utilizing these differing ideas were planning weekends that took place at von Moltke's estate in Kreisau, Silesia. At these three meetings between May 1942 and June 1943, the group drafted plans regarding education, religion, economics, government, foreign policy and war crimes.¹¹ The plans produced by these intense debates indicate a calculated attempt to ideologically resist the Nazi regime and construct a better society.

The ideas of the Kreisau Circle included a post-war Germany with a democratic and tolerant government as part of a larger European community. All of the plans that they made were intended for what Freya von Moltke called "Day X," the day that Nazi Germany came to an end.¹² The Kreisauers saw Nazi defeat as imminent and felt that the only way to keep the country from descending into chaos was to provide an organized response. Once instituted, the Kreisau government would be based on democratically elected, local legislatures under other governing bodies at the county, state and national level.¹³ Although the Kreisauers emphasized Christianity as the basis for the ideals of the new government, they also firmly declared that "[t]he freedom of

German Resistance 1933-1945, trans. Richard Barry, 3rd ed. (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996), 33. For an image of Peter Yorck see Figure 3 in the Appendix.

¹⁰ Freya von Moltke, "Harald Poelchau" in *Making a Difference: Rescue and Assistance During the Holocaust: Essays in Honor of Marion Pritchard*, ed. David Scrase, Wolfgang Mieder, and Katherine Quimby Johnson (Burlington, VT: Queen City Printers, 2004), 86.

¹¹ Freya von Moltke, *Memories of Kreisau*, 29, 31-33. For images of the Kreisau Palace and the von Moltke family home, the Berghaus, see Figures 4 and 5 in the Appendix.

¹² Freudenburg et al., 131.

¹³ "Draft of 9 August 1943" in Peter Hoffmann, ed., *Behind Valkyrie: German Resistance to Hitler, Documents* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2011), 79.

[religious] faith and conscience is guaranteed. Existing laws and regulations that violate these principles are repealed at once.”¹⁴ Various members of the Circle wielded considerable conservative and religious influence, but that did not detract from an overarching belief in liberal tolerance that clearly defined their opposition to the Nazis. It was also their hope the post-war world would include German involvement in a unified European community.¹⁵ At times their desire for cooperation almost foreshadowed today’s European Union. However, it is important to remember that what the Kreisauers produced were plans only and nothing official or definitive.¹⁶ Therefore any imperfections can partly be attributed to their unfinished state and assumptions that improvements would have been made prior to Day X are not improbable. Nevertheless, the plans represent organized resistance to the Nazi government within Germany and a German desire for a return to democratic principles. Freya von Moltke was in full support of these ideas as a member of the Kreisau Circle; however, the assessment of her role in the resistance has undergone major shifts since the end of World War Two.

Historiography

As the primary source of information on her own experiences in the Kreisau Circle, Freya von Moltke was often self-deprecating in her reflections on the period despite the significance of her opposition. Her interviews and writings are filled with requests to not overemphasize her role. She insisted that her contributions were not important compared to her husband’s and that she was unable to deal with the ideological principles of the resistance as he did.¹⁷ Given his

¹⁴ “Draft of 9 August 1943,” 76-77.

¹⁵ Tempel, 10.

¹⁶ Freya von Moltke, *Memories of Kreisau*, 35; Owings, “Mrs. Freya von Moltke,” 256.

¹⁷ Freya von Moltke, interview by Eva Hoffmann, in *Die Kreisauerin: Gespräch mit Eva Hoffmann in der Reihe “Zeugen des Jahrhunderts,”* ed. Ingo Hermann (Göttingen: Lamuv, 1992), 47-48; Freya von Moltke, interview by Dorothee von Meding, in *Courageous Hearts:*

leadership, one can hardly blame her; however she does not appreciate the significance of her own opposition in comparison to the majority of the German population. Rachel Freudenburg observes that “[v]on Moltke’s self-effacing demeanor causes her to undervalue her own accomplishments, but who can objectively judge him- or herself?”¹⁸ It is difficult for everyone to accurately depict themselves completely objectively, but in this case Freya von Moltke is being unfairly modest. In her attempt to be humble, she does not always take into account how her actions and support allowed the group to meet or how much any kind of free thinking meant in a totalitarian society. Dissent was so dangerous and restricted in Nazi Germany that even what she saw as a small role was significant and courageous. The diminished light in which she saw herself mirrored the Nazis’ assumptions of her insignificance.

Some of the earliest assessors of Freya von Moltke’s role in the resistance, or presumed lack thereof, were the Nazis themselves, who saw her as a naïve mother, ignorant of her husband’s treasonous activities. In Nazi Germany, women were expected to be simple mothers and were refused any kind of personal agency.¹⁹ According to Nazi believers therefore, it was not Freya von Moltke’s social place to be involved in resistance work and she lacked the capacity for involvement. When her husband was imprisoned, Heinrich Müller, the head of the Gestapo, made sure she knew that the regime would help her when she discovered her husband’s resistance activities after he executed.²⁰ They assumed she was unaware of the resistance

Women and the Anti-Hitler Plot of 1944, trans. Michael Balfour and Volker R. Berghahn (Providence: Berghahn Books, 1997), 74.

¹⁸ Freudenburg et al., 137.

¹⁹ Alison Owings, introduction to *Frauen: German Women Recall the Third Reich* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993), xxxiii-xxxiv; Claudia Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, The Family, and Nazi Politics* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1987), 335; Jill Stephenson, *Women in Nazi Germany* (Harlow, England: Longman, 2001), 19-20.

²⁰ Freya von Moltke, interview by von Meding, 72; Freya von Moltke, interview by Hoffmann, 69.

activities going on in her own home and that she would be grateful for their help. It was largely due to the cultural aura of the Field Marshal Helmuth von Moltke, a Prussian war hero and Helmuth von Moltke's great-granduncle that the Nazis tried to woo Freya von Moltke in order to ideologically appropriate the couple's two young sons.²¹ The Nazis saw her as a possible ally because of her position as a mother and caretaker to children with desirable German heritage. Clearly, the Nazis were willing to use female resisters if they could be used for the future Aryan generations of the Reich. The Nazis never even considered the possibility that Freya von Moltke was involved in the resistance and saw no involvement whatsoever, which is so misguided that it is an affront to her intelligence and the courage that it took for her to stand up against them. Though never nearly as erroneous, this initial devaluing of her role in the resistance is one that would often be continued by historians after the war.

When the Kreisau Circle was first seriously considered by scholars in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Freya von Moltke was most often depicted only as Helmuth von Moltke's wife. In 1971, Ger van Roon published *German Resistance to Hitler: Count von Moltke and the Kreisau Circle*. Although it is frequently cited by other academics and was an important part of the initial secondary interest in the Circle, his descriptions of Freya von Moltke are somewhat lacking. He writes that she "made an ideal partner for him [Helmuth], and supplemented with her own considerable gifts those of her husband."²² He acknowledges that she was exceptional, but it is clear that her connection to her husband is her most notable characteristic. She is important to

²¹ Owings, "Mrs. Freya von Moltke," 245, 263; Geyken, 40. It is important to note that although Helmuth James is often referred to as "Count von Moltke," hereditary titles were abolished during the Weimar period and therefore, the title was no longer legally attached to the family name at this point. Otto Friedrich, *Blood and Iron: From Bismark to Hitler the von Moltke Family's Impact on German History* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1995), 4, fn. 1.

²² Ger van Roon, *German Resistance to Hitler: Count von Moltke and the Kreisau Circle*, trans. Peter Ludlow (London: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1971), 26.

him solely because of her marriage rather than the intriguing aspects of her own life or exceptional nature of her own actions. Like van Roon, Michael Balfour and Julian Frisby focus on the benefits that the von Moltke marriage brought to her husband when discussing Freya von Moltke in their biographical work from 1972, *Helmuth von Moltke: A Leader Against Hitler*.²³ Although the purpose of both of these books is to examine Helmuth von Moltke and his role in the Kreisau Circle, the casting of Freya von Moltke in a supporting role is one that does not do justice to the impressive strength that she displayed. She is almost a footnote to her husband and his biography, rather than her own person. Although it was not the intention of these works to focus on her, she is only defined through her relationship to her husband rather than a member of the resistance. This view of their relationship often translates into the study of Freya von Moltke's role in the Kreisau Circle.

When Freya von Moltke was mentioned in connection with the Circle's work at all during this period, she was frequently portrayed as the social hostess of the Kreisau gatherings. Van Roon fails to even name her and Marion Yorck when discussing the Circle meetings, indicating the presence by merely writing "the wives".²⁴ This utterly divests her of any agency or true participation at all. Even when she is named, she is a passive figure rather than an active participant. Writing in 1967, Eberhard Zeller takes a slightly more balanced view in his *The Flame of Freedom: The German Struggle Against Hitler*. He describes Freya von Moltke and Marion Yorck by saying that they "created a congenial atmosphere; but they also met the men of their own terms."²⁵ While this is a fairer depiction of Freya's experience within the Kreisau

²³ Michael Balfour and Julian Frisby, *Helmuth von Moltke: A Leader Against Hitler* (London: Macmillan, 1972), 47.

²⁴ van Roon, 141-142. For an image of Marion Yorck, see Figure 6 in the Appendix.

²⁵ Eberhard Zeller, *The Flame of Freedom: The German Struggle Against Hitler*, trans. R.P. Heller and D.R. Masters (Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Press, 1967), 113.

Circle than that allowed by van Roon or Balfour and Frisby, the emphasis placed on their hospitality is social instead of how it facilitated the discussions or provided a cover for the gatherings. None of these scholars give her the same treatment as the male members of the group or acknowledge that her safety was also at risk. It was not until later that she came to the forefront of resistance history.

After the renewed interest in resistance groups in the 1990s following the Reunification of Germany, writers began to portray Freya von Moltke as the elderly keeper of and authority on von Moltke family and Kreisau history. In his impressive 1995 book, *Blood and Iron: From Bismarck to Hitler the von Moltke Family's Impact on German History*, Otto Friedrich describes her as a “white-haired octogenarian” and places her in “the role of guardian of family traditions.”²⁶ The primary strength of Friedrich’s work is how he traces the history of the von Moltke family from the nineteenth century to the present, making his characterization of Freya von Moltke as the best living authority on the family history not unreasonable. However, he uses her almost exclusively in that role rather than focusing on the important place she occupied in the family and Kreisau Circle. Though she also began the trend of focusing on Freya von Moltke herself, Alison Owings also portrays her as an accurate source in a swirl of debate.²⁷ Unlike historians who are distanced from events, she is the primary source, which makes her more of an authority on the subject as few others can claim. Nevertheless, neither author manages to

²⁶ Friedrich, 5.

²⁷ Owings, “Mrs. Freya von Moltke,” 250. Owings exhibits a number of earlier and later trends in her excellent work on Freya von Moltke. Like the writers of the 1970s, she also emphasized Freya’s relationship to Helmuth writing that “[c]onsidering the reputation of her husband, it is understandable that Freya von Moltke’s story is less that of her own life than theirs.” She does see Freya as in partnership with Helmuth rather than defined by him, but they still are seen together. At the same time however, Owings shows signs of a later trend of heroic representation from the early 2000s, which will be discussed below. Owings, “Mrs. Freya von Moltke,” 248.

separate Freya von Moltke from her husband as a resister or focus on her own motivations for joining the resistance. Her narrative is still largely dependent on his, but scholars were beginning to give her a voice in history.

Freya von Moltke's increased presence in resistance memory coincided with scholars researching her actions during the Nazi period, especially during her husband's imprisonment. Friedrich elaborates on the wide variety of attempts she made to negotiate with the SS and Gestapo for her husband's freedom and her shrewd dealings with the Poles after the war.²⁸ He describes her as more than just the hostess of a house party, but he only views these actions as an effort to save her beloved husband rather than acts of opposition. Writing in 1993, Owings also highlights Freya von Moltke's desperate courage in 1944 and early 1945. She describes Freya von Moltke's trips to Berlin to visit Helmuth von Moltke as "urgent missions connected with working out his trial defense, and saving his and others lives."²⁹ This could not be further from the portrayals by scholars of the 1970s, but again Owings never fully distinguishes her actions from her husband's. What is significant about Owings is that she does pull away from Helmuth von Moltke to make Freya von Moltke the focus of her research. Though imperfect, her work formed the basis for the shift of scholarship further towards Freya von Moltke herself.

In the early 2000s and after Freya von Moltke's death, her role in the Kreisau Circle was seen supportive although no less involved and important than other resistance members. Citing Freya von Moltke herself in 2005, Rachel Freudenburg sought to balance her resistance work between active involvement and secondary support.³⁰ By looking at her personal story,

²⁸ Friedrich, 390, 396, 401-402.

²⁹ Owings, "Mrs. Freya von Moltke," 262.

³⁰ Freudenburg et al., 136. Like Owings, Freudenburg depicts Freya von Moltke in multiple historiographic ways. She also sees her as a kind of Kreisau historian, yet views her simultaneously as a critical thinker with a highly nuanced story. Freudenburg et al., 127, 142.

Freudenburg extrapolated that her role was different from that of her husband yet also highly significant. Following Freya von Moltke's death in 2010, two complete German language biographies were published, the one of which was Frauke Geyken's *Freya von Moltke: Ein Jahrhundertleben 1911-2010*. Focusing on her as never before, Geyken forwarded the idea that she was an active participant in the Kreisau Circle and took significant risks through her work with the group.³¹ This excellent characterization allows that Freya von Moltke might not have actively taken part in the discussions but still acknowledges the enormous amount of danger she was in by simply being present. That same year, Sylke Tempel wrote similarly in *Freya von Moltke: Ein Leben. Ein Jahrhundert* and took one step further writing that they were "so intelligent and educated, so liberal, open-minded and independent- however, they clearly see their role in the support of these men's work."³² Tempel argues that Freya von Moltke was highly accomplished woman, but continues to emphasize her support of Helmuth von Moltke as a primary motivator. This current wave of scholarship gives her more credit than ever before, neither biography devotes a significant amount of time to her own motivations or how she was involved. Instead the focus continues to be on her involvement through her husband. Nevertheless, they do see her as an active member of the German resistance and some would say a hero.

When scholars do focus on Freya von Moltke's life, they commonly portray her as a courageous and heroic woman in the resistance. In her 2011 biography, Tempel sought to

Freudenburg also sees evidence of Freya's agency outside the Kreisau Circle, like writers of the 1990s when she writes that Freya "corresponded with Helmuth and worked tirelessly for his defense." Freudenburg et al., 140.

³¹ Geyken, 93, 106.

³² "So intelligent und gebildet sie auch sind, so liberal, aufgeschlossen und selbständig-sie sehen ihre Rolle doch klar in der Unterstützung der Arbeit dieser Männer." Tempel, 125. Like Friedrich, Owings and Freudenburg, Tempel also sees Freya as a calm keeper of the real version of history, calmly waiting for people to come to her. Tempel, 10.

emphasize Freya von Moltke's resistance work as an example of her great compassion.³³ Her impressive bearing and dramatic story are such that one cannot help but see her in a noble light. Furthermore, her place as a redeemable figure in the German history of the Third Reich makes it extremely tempting to portray her in a noble way. The most recent study of her life is a 2013 documentary film by Rachel Freudenburg, entitled *Freya*. When watching the film, one cannot help but feel uplifted by the representation of Freya von Moltke's resilience and bravery.³⁴ In death, she has become not only a symbol of the resistance but also a symbol of its memory. These works do speak the truth by showing that Freya von Moltke is what the Germans want to remember about their collective past. However, no one has ever specifically focused on her personal experience or role within the Kreisau Circle or her reasons for involvement. Everything is colored by her connection to her husband or her own post war mythology. This paper will study Freya von Moltke as a historical player in her own right and provide insight into the personal beliefs and agency that led her to resist Nazism as well as understanding about the nuanced role of women in the German resistance.

Resistance, Women, and Freya von Moltke in the Kreisau Circle

While women often had less prominent positions in the German resistance, they were also critical to resistance activities. It cannot be denied that the most notable faces in the German nonmilitary resistance were men such as Helmuth von Moltke and Carl Goerdeler.³⁵ However this does not mean that women did not play an important role, but rather that they participated in different and more subtle ways. Claudia Koonz argues that "skills that the culture normally considers as feminine: deception, analyzing the enemy's personality, manipulating weaknesses

³³ Tempel, 11.

³⁴ Rachel Freudenburg, director, *Freya*, DVD (Newton Center, MA: Charles River Media Group, 2013).

³⁵ Geyken, 104.

of the more powerful, and cultivating an innocuous appearance” were inherent to the nature of opposition.³⁶ Women, such as Freya von Moltke, were therefore uniquely positioned to oppose the regime in undetected ways because of the gender norms of German society. Resistance created a space outside of Nazism’s strictly gendered spaces and although, female opposition often took on a different role than that of the men, it was not less important as an act of opposition.³⁷ This more subtle opposition might be more difficult to understand for the modern reader, however those who facilitated resistance, in this case, women, were just as necessary as theoreticians. Furthermore, female resisters still risked their own safety; they were still engaged in treasonous activity regardless of how specifically they were involved.³⁸ They were in just as much danger as males, even their roles differed. This different, but still significant resistance is very evident in the resistance of the Kreisau women, including Freya von Moltke.

Although it cannot be denied that the role of women in the Kreisau Circle differed from those of the men, there were a number of women who were highly involved in significant ways. Accounts differ with respect to what qualifies involvement, but most sources include Freya von Moltke, Marion Yorck, Irene Yorck, and Margit von Trotha as the female members of the group.³⁹ Rachel Freudenburg argues that the women of the Kreisau Circle are best viewed as having distinct and different roles from their husbands and yet at the same time of equal importance in their involvement.⁴⁰ One should not dismiss the resistance of the Kreisau women just because they were not assassinating Hitler. Freya von Moltke herself admitted that “I shared

³⁶ Koonz, 310.

³⁷ Koonz, 16-17; Frances Henry, *Victims and Neighbors: A Small Town in Nazi Germany Remembered* (South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey Publishers, 1984), 104.

³⁸ Freudenburg et al., 128.

³⁹ Freya von Moltke, *Memories of Kreisau*, 1; Freudenburg et al., 137; Marion Yorck von Wartenburg, *The Power of Solitude: My Life in the German Resistance*, trans. and ed. Julie M. Winter (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 37.

⁴⁰ Freudenburg et al., 137.

in everything but our role was different from that of the men.”⁴¹ Her role might have been different from that of the men, but she was still very much involved, a member of the group, and therefore deserves equal recognition as a resister. Geyken makes an important distinction when she writes “[t]hey [the Kreisau women] were made privy to treasonous activities by their husband and supported them. Through this knowledge they became co-conspirators.”⁴² In a totalitarian state such as Nazi Germany, where the majority of the population remained passive, any form or connection to resistance was incredibly dangerous. The courage and agency that it would take to face these risks had always been an important part of Freya von Moltke’s life.

Throughout most of her life, Freya von Moltke inhabited a familial environment where the women held significant roles, which influenced her role in the resistance. When recalling the influences that led to her own democratic beliefs, she said that “[i]n my family my mother [Ada Deichmann] actually played the larger role...she influenced us much more.”⁴³ Her mother encouraged the liberal ideals that left a lasting impression on Freya von Moltke. Ada Deichmann was such a strong influence that it seems unlikely that her daughter would have remained completely secondary to her husband or uninvolved in her resistance work. In addition to her own mother, Freya von Moltke’s mother-in-law, Dorothy, was also a strong influence on her staunchly democratic ideals.⁴⁴ Two of the most important women in Freya von Moltke’s life held prominent positions in their own families. Freya von Moltke once told Alison Owings that “I had the luck to come into a family where the men were not autocratic and totalitarian, which they are

⁴¹ Freya von Moltke, interview by von Meding, 74.

⁴² Geyken, 106.

⁴³ “In meiner Familie spielte eigentlich meine Mutter die größere Rolle. Sie...hat uns viel mehr beeinflußt” Freya von Moltke, interview by Hoffmann, 13-14. Unless otherwise noted, all translations to English are my own.

⁴⁴ Constantine Fitzgibbon, *To Kill Hitler: The Officers’ Plot July 1944* (Herts, United Kingdom: Spa Books, 1956), 95.

in most German households. The women had the same rights.”⁴⁵ The atmosphere of her families’ was one where she was encouraged to have her own ideas and make her own decisions. Freya von Moltke came from a tradition of strong women making it doubtful that she would have only been a social hostess or uninvolved member of the Kreisau Circle. This is further supported by her clear decision to me a member of the group.

Rather than passively following her husband, Freya von Moltke is an example of female agency in the distinct choice that she made to join the resistance. Although the von Moltkes had never supported the Nazi party, she did recall the conversation where she explicitly decided to become involved. “He [Helmuth] told me he was going to be seriously involved and said ‘This you have to know and I can only do it when you are with me’” she remembered, “And of course I was with him. So I said yes we should do it.”⁴⁶ This moment of confession was one where she could have withdrawn from any kind of involvement in the resistance. Instead, she made a conscious choice, making her role an active one that cannot be glossed over. She pushed her husband to follow his oppositional beliefs, which she saw as a personal act of resistance.⁴⁷ This encouragement implies a level of activism and involvement could not be further from the social or subordinate role given to Freya von Moltke by many authors. Deliberately supporting action against a totalitarian government was itself an act of resistance and so intentional that it can be applied to the various aspects of Freya von Moltke’s own involvement in the Kreisau Circle, where she saw herself as an engaged coconspirator.

⁴⁵ Freya von Moltke, interview by Owings, 246-247.

⁴⁶ Freya von Moltke, interview by Rachel Freudenburg, director, *Freya*, DVD (Newton Center, MA: Charles River Media Group, 2013). As the von Moltke’s objections to the Nazis grew, they did have opportunities to leave Germany, particularly on the trips they took to South Africa and England, but they chose instead to stay with the estate and work in the resistance. Freya von Moltke, *Memories of Kreisau*, 14; Friedrich, 308-309.

⁴⁷ Freya von Moltke, interview by von Meding, 72; Freya von Moltke, *Memories of Kreisau*, 28.

Freya von Moltke herself believed that she was an active member of the Kreisau Circle and the resistance, which must be taken into account in any examination of her story. She clearly states to Eva Hoffmann that “I feel myself to be a full resister of the ‘Third Reich’ and a member of the Kreisau Circle and I am sure that if you ask Marion Yorck, she will answer the same as me.”⁴⁸ Of course there is often a desire to portray oneself in a positive light when remembering the past, but it is difficult to argue with such a definitive statement. According to Freya von Moltke herself, she was active member of the resistance, rather than a woman in her husband’s shadow. She also describes the strong connection that she felt as a fellow resister with other members of the Kreisau Circle.⁴⁹ Solidarity implies more than passive support, it means participation in a struggle of defiance. It should be noted however, that she did express as desire to have done more for the group and been more involved, but who does not display similar feelings with the benefit of hindsight?⁵⁰ Freya von Moltke still opposed the Nazi regime in ways that most German women never even dreamed. Her actions were partly due to her firm stance on defending one’s beliefs.

Personal Oppositional Beliefs of Freya von Moltke

The strength of Freya von Moltke’s personal ideology against Nazi totalitarianism can be traced to the liberal influences of her own family and the von Moltke’s. Michael Balfour and Julian Frisby write that “Thanks to a long line of Rhineland ancestors, thanks in particular to her own mother, Freya had grown up and been allowed to develop in a genuinely liberal tradition.”⁵¹

⁴⁸ “Ich fühle mich doch vollkommen als aktive Gegnerin des “Dritten Reiches” und als Mitglied des Kreisauer Kreises, und ich bin überzeugt, wenn Sie Marion Yorck befragen, dann wird sie genauso antworten wie ich” Freya von Moltke, interview by Hoffmann, 48.

⁴⁹ Freya von Moltke, quoted in Otto Friedrich, *Blood and Iron: From Bismark to Hitler the von Moltke Family’s Impact on German History* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1995), 397.

⁵⁰ Freya von Moltke, interview by von Meding, 69.

⁵¹ Balfour and Frisby, 47.

Again, the significance of her mother is apparent, but absence of the conservative and nationalistic forces within Germany that led to the growth of Nazism set Freya von Moltke on a philosophical path towards opposition. She also was exposed to an international mindset early in life due to contact with family members in England and the United States and was fluent in English and French.⁵² Thus she had access to the wide variety of ideals and principles that existed outside of early twentieth century Germany. The von Moltkes had a similar progressive mindset and she described them as a “tolerant family.”⁵³ She was constantly surrounded by ideas that were the complete opposite of Nazi bigotry. However, it should not be assumed from the influence of her husband’s family that she perceived opposition as he did.

Although they remained united in their opposition, Freya von Moltke was distinct from Helmuth von Moltke in her approach to the resistance. Her optimism in contrast to his natural pessimism was one of the reasons their marriage was so successful, but it did mean that they looked at things in different ways.⁵⁴ If their outlooks were so different, they cannot have viewed various aspects of the Kreisau resistance, such as hope of success, in the same way. His strong Christian background was central to his opposition, whereas the religious practices of Freya’s childhood were far more social than spiritual.⁵⁵ Religion was without a doubt a part of their married life, but her commitment to the Kreisauers Christian principles was probably not as strong as that of her husband. Where he was highly ideological she admitted to being “very much orientated toward this world” and that she had “no transcendental thoughts at all.”⁵⁶ This is one of the key personality differences that characterized their separate roles within the Circle. Her

⁵² Geyken, 16, 20.

⁵³ “...tolerante Familie” Freya von Moltke, interview by Hoffmann, 34.

⁵⁴ Balfour and Frisby, 47-48.

⁵⁵ Freya von Moltke, interview by Hoffmann, 15.

⁵⁶ Freya von Moltke, interview by von Meding, 80-81.

role was not different simply because she was a woman, but rather because she felt herself ill-suited to theorization. This is not to say that the von Moltkes did not influence each other, but rather that they were different people with distinct experiences in the resistance.

A close examination of Freya von Moltke's feelings towards Nazi ideology and policy reveal a strong basis for her opposition and resistance. In the most basic sense, Freya von Moltke "was really directly opposed to the Nazis."⁵⁷ The entire party ideology was despicable to her in every way; she remained personally committed to this belief from the Nazi seizure of power to the today. For her, Nazi ideas were an insult to the integrity of mankind and she dreaded their plans for war.⁵⁸ She found their racial ideology and desire for territorial expansion so abhorrent that she acted against the Nazis when many other did not. In a later interview she stated that the ideals of Nazism were "wrong, bad and evil and wrong."⁵⁹ In her repetition and word choice, one can sense the vehemence that compelled her into action against Hitler and his followers. These are the individual feelings of Freya von Moltke and even though they did not develop in a vacuum, they need to be acknowledged as hers because of the significance of personal opposition in Nazi Germany. This general sense of opposition is directly connected to her personal commitment to a democratic nation.

A desire to live in a land of personal liberty was one of the core principles that guided Freya von Moltke to the resistance. She herself states that the as a part of the resistance, she worked so that "people could live together in freedom."⁶⁰ She was willing to endure immense

⁵⁷ Freya von Moltke, interview by Hoffmann, 47.

⁵⁸ Freya von Moltke, interview by Owings, 249; Freya von Moltke, "Aus dem Kreisauer Kreis," in *Widerstand und Verweigerung in Deutschland 1933 bis 1945*, ed. Richard Löwenthal and Patrik von zur Mühlen (Berlin: Verlag J.H.W. Dietz Nachf. GmbH, 1984), 173.

⁵⁹ Freya von Moltke, interview by Hoffmann, 29.

⁶⁰ "...daß die Menschen besser in Freiden zusammenleben können" Freya von Moltke, interview by Hoffmann, 155.

hardship and danger for the sake of a future where basic rights would be upheld, rather violated as they were under the Nazis. In her 1993 interview with Owings, she definitively stated that “Tolerance...was most important of all.”⁶¹ Later she says to Freudenburg in *Freya*: “There was nothing in Nazi Germany like free speech,” and each case, her outrage is apparent.⁶² These two tenants of democracy, freedom from discrimination and freedom of speech, were two of the governing principles of Freya von Moltke’s life. She believed in them so strongly that she went against a totalitarian government so that they might be upheld. Her emphasis on their importance is also evidence for the existence of female support of the same ideas espoused by prominent men in the resistance. In many ways, her opinions on these ideals are related to her support for a just legal system.

From the very beginning of the Nazi period, Freya von Moltke opposed the regime due based on her belief in the rule of law. As early as May 1933, Dorothy von Moltke wrote in a letter “he [Helmuth] and Freya with hundreds of other law students say: what’s the good of studying something that becomes more obsolete each month?”⁶³ Freya von Moltke was studying to be a lawyer just as the Nazis came to power and made the legitimate practice of law nearly useless. Although she never used her legal degree, the constant violation of everything that she could not reconcile what she had learned with the practice of the government.⁶⁴ She later remembered that after the Röhm Putsch in 1934, “everything was completely lawless.”⁶⁵ Like the distinct choice she made to be involved in the resistance, this was a specific moment of personal horror towards the methods of the regime. She also saw a breakdown on the judicial

⁶¹ Freya von Moltke, interview by Owings, 256.

⁶² Freudenburg, *Freya*

⁶³ Dorothy von Moltke, May 1933, quoted in Michael Balfour and Julian Frisby, *Helmuth von Moltke: A Leader Against Hitler* (London: Macmillan, 1972), 54.

⁶⁴ Owings, “Mrs. Freya von Moltke,” 248.

⁶⁵ Freya von Moltke, interview by Owings, 249.

level. In her last letter to her husband in 1945 she wrote the “judiciary does not do things halfway. They know only how to kill or pardon.”⁶⁶ Her disgust is evident; she clearly saw the Nazi courts as anything but a healthy legal system. Equally firm was her opposition to Nazi racial ideology.

Nazi anti-Semitism was a strong motivator in Freya von Moltke’s opposition due to her awareness of racial policies and personal experiences. She and her husband knew about Auschwitz after her brother, Hans Deichmann, travelled there as part of his job.⁶⁷ The atrocities perpetrated by Nazi Germany informed her decision to resist and her choice to act on the knowledge of what was being done separates her from the majority of the German population. She was quiet honest in her aversion to racism, which put her directly against Nazi racial ideals.⁶⁸ Her opposition to the Nazi government for racial reasons the same as more prominent figures in resistance history. After the war, she would recall that she “didn’t see it at all...[as] a religious matter...We weren’t anti-Semitic, but we considered the Jews basically as if they were us.”⁶⁹ This could be seen as an oversimplified outlook in complex situation; however, for her, the argument against discrimination really was that simple. Her opposition to racism was not only theoretical; the von Moltke family had a number of friends that were Jewish.⁷⁰ Discrimination was not something she opposed only in the abstract; she knew Jews who were impacted by Nazi

⁶⁶ Freya von Moltke to Helmuth von Moltke, January 23, 1945, in *Abschiedsbriefe Gefängnis Tegel: September 1944-Januar 1945*, ed. Helmuth Caspar von Moltke and Ulrike von Moltke (Munich: Verlag C.H. Beck, 2011), 541.

⁶⁷ Owings, “Mrs. Freya von Moltke,” 252. As part of his job, Hans Deichmann, brought Italian workers to construct the IG-Farben plant near Auschwitz. However, he was also an active member of the resistance. Geyken, 102.

⁶⁸ Freya von Moltke, interview by Freudenburg. This continued when she lived in South Africa after the end of the War, where she “did not wish to have anything to do with apartheid policy.” Freya von Moltke, interview by von Meding, 82.

⁶⁹ Freya von Moltke, interview by Owings, 256.

⁷⁰ Freya von Moltke, interview by Hoffmann, 23.

policy. The desire to oppose the suffering of the Jews through organized resistance to Hitler was one of the beliefs that Freya von Moltke shared with her husband and other members of the Kreisau Circle. Such was not the case with assassination attempts.

Although the Kreisau Circle was not directly involved as a group in the 20 July Plot to assassinate Hitler, Freya von Moltke had a distinct opinion on the matter which differed significantly from that of her husband. Helmuth von Moltke hoped for Hitler's downfall, but believed that Hitler needed to defeat himself.⁷¹ He was firm in this belief, but despite his influence on Freya she had a different opinion. From her point of view, assassination had a place in resistance discussions as a legitimate option. She also admitted that she did not have the doubts about its consequences the way that Helmuth von Moltke did.⁷² For her, the importance of the 20th of July is its prominent example of resistance within Germany to punish Hitler for what he had done.⁷³ She had the benefit of hindsight, but this is still a distinct instance where her oppositional beliefs were separate from those of her husband. With such contrasting opinions on one of the most significant moments of the German resistance, it would be wrong to assume that she completely shared all of her husband's beliefs. The various principles that set Freya von Moltke in opposition to the Nazi government would lead to a wide range of significant involvement in the German resistance.

Freya von Moltke's Role in the Resistance

Freya von Moltke's participation in the Kreisau Circle discussions is one of the more complicated aspects of her resistance to Nazism; however, her presence at the meetings and knowledge of the information still constitutes significant involvement. She herself recalls that

⁷¹ Freya von Moltke, interview by von Meding, 73.

⁷² Owings, "Mrs. Freya von Moltke," 255.

⁷³ Freya von Moltke, interview by von Meding, 70, 74.

“when the men planned, we [herself and Marion Yorck] listened. We didn’t feel ourselves qualified to plan.”⁷⁴ It is not the intention of this paper to contradict her, however this statement does not do justice to danger she was in by simply being present at the gatherings. Freya von Moltke was at all of the discussions that took place at Kreisau and when she visited her husband in Berlin, she was also participated in meetings.⁷⁵ Her attendance alone places her involvement far above many of the wives of Kreisau members and the majority of the German population. Marion Yorck would later recall in an interview that the “men did not have to guard their words around either Freya or me.”⁷⁶ Freya von Moltke was therefore privy to everything that was being discussed and it is quite possible that she would have shared her feelings on these topics with Helmuth von Moltke in private. He supported her involvement and encouraged her presence at the meetings.⁷⁷ That is far more than many husbands would have done in the social climate of Nazi Germany. Therefore, awareness of resistance and attendance at meetings must be seen as an important form of female opposition. Another form was her practical assistance for the theoretical discussions.

The organizational support provided by Freya von Moltke for the meetings of the Kreisau Circle created an important cover for the group and facilitated the gatherings. It would be easy to see her as only a hostess, but the perception that she created of a perfectly normal entertaining weekend provided the perfect front for more clandestine activities.⁷⁸ The need for secrecy

⁷⁴ Freya von Moltke, interview by von Meding, 74.

⁷⁵ Geyken, 99.

⁷⁶ Marion Yorck von Wartenburg, interview by Dorothee von Meding, in *Courageous Hearts: Women and the Anti-Hitler Plot of 1944*, trans. Michael Balfour and Volker R. Berghahn (Providence: Berghahn Books, 1997), 110.

⁷⁷ Freya von Moltke, interview by von Meding, 75.

⁷⁸ Freya von Moltke, “Harald Poelchau,” 87; Freya von Moltke, *Memories of Kreisau*, 14, 27. A coworker house party and the wedding of Helmuth’s sister provided a number of the excuses. Freya von Moltke, *Memories of Kreisau*, 27-28.

established a critical role for her within the group and made her an important part of its continuing existence. From a practical perspective, it was also her job to organize all aspects of the three weekends not related to the discussions.⁷⁹ The discussions could not have taken place without her practical facilitation, which also allowed the resisters' plans to take shape. She was even involved in the Berlin meetings by providing Helmuth von Moltke with food produced by Kreisau.⁸⁰ Even from a distance she facilitated meetings and remained involved in the group's activities. In August 1943, Helmuth wrote to her that the "first thing I did was to open the parcel [of food], which was really magnificent...I'll cook beans from it for today's lunch for Steltzer and myself."⁸¹ Theodor Steltzer was a member of the Circle, making the implications of this letter twofold. First, it provides an example of Freya von Moltke's functional support of the meetings and second, imparts to her that a resistance discussion would have been taking place. It is just one example of the immense amount of information she gained about the resistance from her correspondence with her husband.

Although she was only occasionally at the Berlin meetings of the Kreisau Circle, Freya von Moltke remained involved through the constant letters that she exchanged with her husband, Helmuth von Moltke. When asked about it in the 1990s, She was firm in her statements that she knew "everything" about the Circle's activities and that he wrote in such detail because "he wanted to keep me involved."⁸² The degree to which she remained informed was a major factor

⁷⁹ Geyken, 100.

⁸⁰ Freya von Moltke, *Memories of Kreisau*, 25.

⁸¹ Helmuth von Moltke to Freya von Moltke, Berlin, August 10, 1943, in *Letters to Freya: 1939-1945*, trans. and ed. Beate Ruhm von Oppen (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), 332.

⁸² Freya von Moltke, interview by von Meding, 75. It might seem astonishing that the von Moltkes were able to exchange such an amount of sensitive information, however Freya von Moltke explains that due to the close relationship with the post office in Kreisau, they did not fear that Helmuth's letters would be read. Freya von Moltke, *Memories of Kreisau*, 31.

in her participation. This was in contrast to many of the other Kreisau wives; for example, Julius Leber told his wife nothing in order to protect her.⁸³ If the wives of other resisters knew nothing, then Freya von Moltke's intimate knowledge of the group's activities through her husband's letters is an example of female resistance through complicity. Not only do Helmuth von Moltke's letters detail his struggle to work against the war from his job with in the German High Command, but they also described extensively the meetings of the Kreisau Circle that took place in Berlin, who was at them and what was discussed.⁸⁴ In October 1941 he wrote, "In France there are extensive shootings while I write...all this is child's play compared with what is happening in Poland and Russia...What shall I say when I am asked: And what did you do during that time?"⁸⁵ Through her husband's letters, Freya von Moltke knew exactly what was going on in the war and the resistance when others remained ignorant. When correlated with her obvious support for the resistance, she clearly used the knowledge to act in opposition. In this case, possession of knowledge was a form of resistance; however, she also did practical work for the Kreisau Circle.

In addition to her extensive knowledge of the Kreisau Circle's activities, Freya von Moltke worked for the Circle by providing her opinions on potential group members and

⁸³ Yorck von Wartenburg, *The Power of Solitude*, 35.

⁸⁴ Helmuth von Moltke to Freya von Moltke, Berlin, December 17, 1939, in *Letters to Freya: 1939-1945*, trans. and ed. Beate Ruhm von Oppen (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), 49; Freya von Moltke to Ricarda Huch, Stuttgart, June 7, 1946, in *In einem Gedenkbuch zu sammeln...: Bilder deutscher Widerstandskämpfer*, by Ricarda Huch, ed. Wolfgang Matthias Schwiedrzik (Leipzig: Leipziger Universitäts Verlag, 1997), 205; Helmuth von Moltke to Freya von Moltke, Berlin, June 4, 1942, in *Letters to Freya: 1939-1945*, trans. and ed. Beate Ruhm von Oppen (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), 221; Helmuth von Moltke to Freya von Moltke, Berlin, August 2, 1942, in *Letters to Freya: 1939-1945*, trans. and ed. Beate Ruhm von Oppen (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), 237.

⁸⁵ Helmuth von Moltke to Freya von Moltke, Berlin, October 21, 1941, in *Letters to Freya: 1939-1945*, trans. and ed. Beate Ruhm von Oppen (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), 175.

preserving the documents that it produced. In her documentary *Freya*, Freudenburg states that Freya von Moltke supported the group directly outside of her duties as a hostess and her implicit support through her husband's letters.⁸⁶ According to Freya von Moltke, her husband frequently asked her opinion on the people that they were considering approaching about joining the group.⁸⁷ In this way then, she had influence over who joined and who did not. Her most significant work for the group however, was in the preservation of the drafts and documents that it produced. After the final Kreisau weekend in 1943, Helmuth von Moltke wrote to her asking, "Please make 3 copies yourself of the main Kreisau texts: C[hurch] & St[ate] & E[ducation], Whitsun '42, Political and Economic Constitution Oct. '42 and Principles of Foreign Policy Whitsun '43...Also I'd like you to ring Marion and ask her to bring these 3 sets of copies to Berlin so that they are here Friday lunchtime."⁸⁸ Not only was she aware of the contents of these documents, but it was also her job to ensure that there were multiple copies and then ensure their delivery back to the group. Furthermore, she was also directly responsible for their survival of the war. "I received a complete copy of the documents and of all papers that Helmuth wanted to save, in order to hide them in Kreisau" she remembered, "Helmuth did not want to know where I hid them. I hid them in an attic of the manor and didn't retrieve them until May 1945, when the Russians occupied Kreisau."⁸⁹ Possession of such documents would have been highly incriminating, putting her in a significant amount of danger. Her nearly single-handed preservation of the documents gave the Kreisau Circle a postwar legacy and shows how women

⁸⁶ Freudenburg, *Freya*.

⁸⁷ Freya von Moltke, interview by von Meding, 75.

⁸⁸ Helmuth von Moltke to Freya von Moltke, Berlin, July 28, 1943, in *Letters to Freya: 1939-1945*, trans. and ed. Beate Ruhm von Oppen (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), 323.

⁸⁹ Freya von Moltke, *Memories of Kreisau*, 36.

were important chroniclers of the resistance. Possibly her most significant direct contributions to the group, these actions were also augmented by other acts of opposition.

Freya von Moltke's Opposition to Nazism

Throughout the Nazi period, Freya von Moltke was also involved everyday opposition that was independent of the Kreisau Circle. Instead of choosing Hitler or Paul von Hindenburg in the spring 1932 presidential election, both Freya and Helmuth von Moltke both voted for Ernst Thälmann, the Communist candidate.⁹⁰ This form of political opposition would soon become obsolete after the suspension of free elections, but was one of Freya von Moltke's earliest acts against the Nazis. In general, the von Moltkes avoided open dissent in order to conceal their involvement in the organized resistance, but Freya von Moltke was still able to subvert the regime in small ways by avoiding the Nazi salute and refusing to hang the swastika flag outside her home.⁹¹ These seemingly insignificant acts of opposition were nevertheless examples of subtle but important defiance in a totalitarian state. She even was able to resist the Nazi use of concentration camps by "sometimes 'accidentally' drop[ping] bread or other food while walking by" Russian and Jews prisoners at a work camp near Kreisau.⁹² Although this was far different than resister who gave their lives in opposition to Nazism, it does show how women could express dissent and opposition towards the perpetration of atrocities. They also resisted in defense of their husbands.

Freya von Moltke's actions during her husband's imprisonments are impressive examples of how German women opposed Nazism by remaining loyal to their incarcerated husbands. Helmuth von Moltke was arrested in January 1944 for warning "an acquaintance that

⁹⁰ Freya von Moltke, *Memories of Kreisau*, 13; Fischer, 236.

⁹¹ Freya von Moltke, interview by Hoffmann, 29, 37.

⁹² Owings, "Mrs. Freya von Moltke," 257.

he [the acquaintance] was about to be arrested.”⁹³ There would be almost a year between his arrest and execution and in that time, Freya von Moltke would display a tremendous amount of resourcefulness and determination. As her husband’s situation grew direr following the failure of the 20 July Plot, she wrote to him that she would “fight for your [Helmuth’s] life, if it also doesn’t help to leave no stone unturned.”⁹⁴ Even without her involvement in the organized resistance, she opposed the Nazis by refusing to give up on her traitorous husband. She visited him as often as she could in prison by lying to the SS guards about needing his guidance the management of the estate.⁹⁵ Given that she had been running the estate in Helmuth’s absences since the 1930s, this was a deliberate exploitation of Nazi assumptions of female dependency. During these meetings, the von Moltkes were able to exchange information that led Freya to write letters to Heinrich Himmler in Helmuth’s defense, carry messages to those members of the resistance who were also imprisoned, and warn others who were free not to return to Germany.⁹⁶ These activities were not explicitly connected with the Kreisau Circle, yet they are still acts of opposition for the aid that they provided to other resisters. Freya von Moltke was also defiant in more direct ways.

There were a number of instances during Helmuth von Moltke’s imprisonment where Freya von Moltke displayed remarkable defiance and opposition directly to feared Nazi officials. Following the 20 July Plot, She went to the office of Heinrich Müller, chief of the Gestapo, in an

⁹³ Freya von Moltke, “Harald Poelchau,” 90. After the failure of the 20 July Plot that summer, many members of the Kreisau Circle and their wives were arrested, but Freya remained free because of the heavy surveillance under which she had already been while visiting Helmuth in prison. 92.

⁹⁴ “...zu kämpfen um Dein Leben, wenn es auch nichts hilft, nichts unversucht zu lassen...” Freya von Moltke to Helmuth von Moltke, October 4, 1944, in *Abschiedsbriefe Gefängnis Tegel: September 1944-Januar 1945*, ed. Helmuth Caspar von Moltke and Ulrike von Moltke (Munich: Verlag C.H. Beck, 2011), 48.

⁹⁵ Freya von Moltke, interview by von Meding, 72.

⁹⁶ Friedrich, 390; Freya von Moltke, interview by Owings, 260, 262-263.

attempt to arrange a meeting between him and her husband.⁹⁷ The following is her account of how the meeting ended:

He [Müller] said “When it is over” – over, that means when they had killed my husband! - , “then I must tell you when your husband has done... You will really be amazed!” Do you understand? That is how he spoke to me and that is what made me angry, outraged! I sat there and thought: What can I say that will separate me from him, but also not tell him that I know everything... I told him: “Whatever you tell me, I will raise his sons to love and revere their father.”... He was no doubt surprised.⁹⁸

Müller was the head of one of the most feared organizations in Nazi Germany and Freya von Moltke stood up to him in an act that took just as much courage as her participation in the Kreisau Circle. Such a blatant defense of her traitor husband was as opposition as her preservation of the Kreisau documents and facilitation of the meetings. She might not have taken part in an assassination attempt and preferred to listen at the discussions, but she directly challenged Nazi authority when most other Germans dared not. Such a woman cannot be seen as a mere bystander, a fact that is further proven by her actions after the execution of her husband.

Epilogue: After Kreisau

Although her role in the organized resistance ended with her husband’s arrest, Freya von Moltke’s actions after the end of the war reveal a strength that cannot be covered by other narratives. As the Russians drew closer to Kreisau in April 1945, she and the other estate residents were evacuated to Hohenebelbe, which was about one hundred kilometers away in Czechoslovakia. She made two trips all the way to Kreisau alone by bike to be there when the

⁹⁷ Owings, “Mrs. Freya von Moltke,” 263.

⁹⁸ “Er [Müller] hat gesagt: “Wenn es vorbei ist”- vorbei, das heißt, meinen Mann haben sie umgebracht!-, “dann muß ich Ihnen mal sagen, was Ihr Mann gemacht hat... werden Sie sich wirklich wundern!” Verstehen Sie? So hat er mit mir geredet, und das hat mich dermaßen in Wut, in Empörung gebracht! Ich saß da und dachte: Wie kann ich dem sagen, daß ich mich von ihm trenne und daß er nicht merkt, daß ich das alles wußte... Jedenfalls habe ich ihm gesagt: “Was Si emir auch erzählen, seien Söhne werde ich in Liebe und Ehrfurcht für ihren Vater aufziehen.”...Er war wohl überrascht.” Freya von Moltke, interview by Hoffmann, 68-69.

Red Army arrived, before returning permanently with her children in the late spring.⁹⁹ At that point, any kind of travel was extremely difficult, and for a woman to make such a trip by herself was incredibly brave. During the Russian occupation, she illegally kept a radio in the house in order to maintain a connection to the outside world through the British news. Although she was at the mercy of the villages occupiers, she still defied them when she felt it was necessary. Eventually she travelled to Berlin to establish contact with friends and important in western Germany, England and America.¹⁰⁰ After successfully navigating the fluctuating Polish border a number of times, Freya von Moltke and her children left the estate for good with the help of the British in October 1945.¹⁰¹ Her astonishing tenacity and perseverance allowed her to make extremely difficult trips and create a new life for herself and her children. The determination and strength that she displayed in the months after the war were essential qualities to her opposition under Nazism and her long-term work for the memory of the Kreisau Circle.

Although the war had ended and the Nazis had been defeated, Freya von Moltke continued to play a vital role in what remained of the Kreisau Circle as the primary promoter of the group's memory. Just before his death, Helmuth von Moltke wrote to her that his letters "together must be made into legend."¹⁰² Through this task, Freya von Moltke became the leader of the group and the breadth of her activism is truly impressive. Almost immediately after the war, she and Marion Yorck wrote "The First Account of the Kreisau Circle from the Year 1945" and when Freya left Kreisau, she made sure to retrieve her husband's letters and Kreisau

⁹⁹ Freya von Moltke, *Memories of Kreisau*, 49-54.

¹⁰⁰ Freya von Moltke, interview by Hoffmann, 82.

¹⁰¹ Freya von Moltke, *Memories of Kreisau*, 66-67; Geyken, 129.

¹⁰² Helmuth von Moltke to Freya von Moltke, Tegel, January 10, 1945, in *Letters to Freya: 1939-1945*, trans. and ed. Beate Ruhm von Oppen (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), 412.

documents that she had hidden for future use.¹⁰³ As early as 1949 she gave a series of lectures on her experiences in the United States.¹⁰⁴ Her ability to work for the group's memory and legacy when such painful events were still so fresh is astonishing. In a 1997 interview with Dorothee von Meding she said, "I wanted to contribute to letting my husband and their friends speak for the future; to see to it that they were 'used'."¹⁰⁵ Due to her efforts, such as the publication of compilations of her husband's letters and her own memoirs, the Kreisau Circle is considered one of the most important civilian resistance groups to Nazism.¹⁰⁶ Because of her the Kreisauers have a place in the German collective memory today and the Freya von Moltke's determination towards this goal was rooted in the same strength she had as a member of the resistance.

Freya von Moltke had strong personal beliefs against Nazism and was involved in the German resistance in various ways. Her story is fascinating, but it far too often serves as a vehicle for a larger narrative of opposition or becomes secondary to that of her husband. When Freya von Moltke reflected on her own experiences in the resistance, she said "I think this kind of activity- to object and then to stand for what you believe in- is one of the most important human activities to this day."¹⁰⁷ This is not the kind of statement that would come from a woman who was not actively involved in opposition. Her connection to the resistance is what makes her a compelling figure in history and therefore, it is her own involvement that should be the focus of researchers in the future. Freya von Moltke provides insight into the reasons that resisters had for

¹⁰³ Freya von Moltke and Marion Yorck von Wartenburg, "Erste Bericht über den Kreisauer Kreis aus dem Jahr 1945," in *Rote Kapellen-Kreisauer Kreise-Schwarze Kapellen: Neue Sichtweisen auf den Widerstand gegen die NS-Diktatur 1938-1945*, ed. Karl Heinz Roth and Angelika Ebbinghaus (Hamburg: VSA Verlag, 2004), 243; Freudenburg, *Freya*.

¹⁰⁴ Freya von Moltke, interview by Hoffmann, 93.

¹⁰⁵ Freya von Moltke, interview by von Meding, 81.

¹⁰⁶ Freudenburg, *Freya*; Fischer 537. For an image of Freya von Moltke later in life, see Figure 7 in the Appendix.

¹⁰⁷ Freya von Moltke, interview by Freudenburg et al., 143.

opposing Nazism and demonstrates various forms that opposition and resistance. For a woman who displayed such resolve, bravery and defiance, it would be a disservice to see her as anything but a resister in her own right.

Appendix



Freya von Moltke at Kreisau in the 1930s.¹⁰⁸



Figure 1: Freya von Moltke in the 1940s.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ Kreisau-Initiative Berlin and Stiftung Kreisau für Europäische Verständigung, *Kreisau-Krzyżowa: Geschichts- und Zukunftswerkstatt für Europa* (Berlin: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2010), 40.

¹⁰⁹ Helmuth von Moltke, *Briefe an Freya: 1939-1945*, ed. Beate Ruhm von Oppen (Munich: Verlag C.H. Beck, 1988), 45.



Figure 2: Helmuth von Moltke around 1928.¹¹⁰



Figure 3: Peter Yorck in 1939.¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ Helmuth von Moltke, *Letters to Freya: 1939-1945*, trans. and ed. Beate Ruhm von Oppen (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990).

¹¹¹ Freya von Moltke, *Erinnerungen an Kreisau: 1930-1945* (Munich: Verlag C.H. Beck, 1997), 44.



Figure 4: The Palace on the Kreisau Estate.¹¹²



Figure 5: The Berghaus on the Kreisau Estate, home of the von Moltke family and location of the Kreisau Circle Meetings.¹¹³

¹¹² Kreisau-Initiative, “Kreisau als historischer Ort,” <http://www.kreisau.de/neues-kreisau/historischer-ort.html> (accessed April 19, 2014).

¹¹³ Kreisau-Initiative Berlin and Stiftung Kreisau für Europäische Verständigung, *Kreisau-Krzyżowa: Geschichts- und Zukunftswerkstatt für Europa* (Berlin: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2010), 77.



Figure 6: Marion Yorck around 1940.¹¹⁴



Figure 7: German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Freya von Moltke in 2007.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ Marion Yorck von Wartenburg, *The Power of Solitude: My Life in the German Resistance*, trans. and ed. Julie M. Winter (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2000).

¹¹⁵ Kreisau-Initiative Berlin and Stiftung Kreisau für Europäische Verständigung, *Kreisau-Krzyżowa: Geschichts- und Zukunftswerkstatt für Europa* (Berlin: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2010), 75.

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