

"The Idea of Eliminating the Leadership Would Not Let me Rest." Georg Elser's Attempted Assassination of Hitler in November 1939 and Its Aftermath

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Thank USHMM and its wonderful, dedicated staff.

Thank Levine family for its generosity in making my fellowship possible.

Slide: NYT headline

On the evening of November 8th, 1939, in a beer hall in Munich, Adolf Hitler narrowly escaped being blown to bits. He had travelled from Berlin to Munich, the birthplace of Nazism, to deliver a speech to party comrades on the occasion of the 16th anniversary of the Beer Hall Putsch. The site of the speech was the Bürgerbräukeller, where the Putsch attempt of 1923 had taken place.

Slide: Hitler speaking

Hitler's speech was a tirade aimed at Great Britain. Having conquered Poland in cooperation with the Soviet Union in September, Germany now confronted Britain and France in the so-called Phony War, during which combat was limited to periodic air raids and naval engagements. Hitler had secretly ordered a western offensive to begin several days later, and his belligerent remarks about Britain were designed to incite German public opinion against that country. After concluding his speech, Hitler hastily departed for Munich Central Station, where he boarded a special Führer train bound for Berlin.

Slide: roof collapse in BBK

At 9:20 PM, thirteen minutes after Hitler had left the podium, a bomb exploded inside a structural column directly behind and above the speaker's platform. A substantial portion of the ceiling collapsed directly onto the spot where Hitler had stood 13 minutes earlier. Seven people were killed immediately, and one died soon thereafter. An additional 60 people were injured. Hitler learned of the bombing when his train reached Nuremberg on its way to Berlin. The next day, the German press declared that the leader had been saved by divine providence.

The assassination attempt in the Bürgerbräukeller, and the ways that Germans responded to it, bit at the time and for decades afterward, lie at the center of the story I will tell this evening. The story contains elements of a fascinating mystery, but is also much more than just that:

It's a story of how an incorrect understanding of an historical event was generated and perpetuated;

It's a story of how historians rectified an incorrect understanding of history through the discovery of new evidence;

It's a story of how Germans have dealt with the legacy of their society's widespread support for Nazism;

Finally, it's a story of an extraordinary act of resistance, carried out by a person of modest background, no network of powerful acquaintances, and no political influence.

I should emphasize at the outset that we do not know, and cannot know, how the course of history would have been altered had the assassination attempt been successful. One can only speculate about all sorts of questions:

-who would have replaced Hitler?

-would the Nazi regime have changed its course?

-would war with Britain, France, the Soviet Union, and the United States have been avoided?

-would the so-called Final Solution of the Jewish Question not have been pursued?

None of this is knowable.

So rather than focus on what might have been, let us look at the actual history of the events of November 1939, and at the factors that longed obscured a proper understanding of the actual history.

In the immediate aftermath of the explosion in the Bürgerbräukeller, theories about its origin were rampant. Germans projected their own prejudices and ideological sentiments onto the incident. Adolf Hitler's own immediate response was to suspect the British, a suspicion that was shared by SS-chief Heinrich Himmler. Joseph Goebbels, the Minister of Propaganda, first though the culprits were Bavarian monarchists, but soon shifted his suspicions onto a British plot involving Otto Strasser, Hitler's old Nazi rival who was now living in Switzerland. The head of the Reich Criminal Police, Artur Nebe, initially focused his own suspicions on members of the German Army High Command, as it was widely known in high government circles that several of Hitler's generals harbored serious reservations about the imminent military offensive against the western powers.

Many members of the German general public arrived at a much different conclusion. In their eyes, the bombing had been a

phony assassination attempt, staged by the Nazi government itself in order to justify a new wave of crackdowns against dissent and opposition. They saw the bombing as a repetition of the Reichstag Fire of February 1933. Even though most historians today do not believe that the Nazi government itself torched the Reichstag building in order to justify the imposition of martial law, the perception of precisely such a Nazi plot was widespread at the time. For many Germans who were critical of the Nazi regime, Hitler's narrow escape from death in the Bürgerbräukeller on November 8, 1939 was the result not of divine providence, but of careful staging by the Gestapo. This perception is understandable in retrospect, but it was not accurate, and it persisted well into the post-Nazi period.

There were also Germans who suspected that Jews, or "the Jews," were behind the assassination attempt. After all, the bombing in Munich had taken place on the very eve of the one-year anniversary of the Kristallnacht pogrom. Having long been saturated by propaganda depicting Jewish puppet masters plotting against Germany, some Germans unsurprisingly jumped to the conclusion that the attack on Hitler was revenge for the Kristallnacht. On the day after the explosion in Munich, anti-Jewish violence erupted in several German cities, including Berlin.

Slide: Buchenwald Karteikarte

Also on that day, November 9, guards at the Buchenwald concentration camp selected 21 Jewish prisoners and murdered them. There had been no announcement or internal communication of any kind suggesting that there was a Jewish connection to the bomb in the Bürgerbräukeller. But some of the staff at Buchenwald either reached this conclusion on their own, or exploited the assassination attempt as an opportunity to give vent to their anitisemitism. This card from the Buchenwald prisoner files exemplifies how the killings were legally covered up—the prisoner was shot while trying to escape.

Slide: Sonderkommission

Even as theories about responsibility for the Munich bomb proliferated, the official investigation into the incident was underway. To oversee the investigation, Heinrich Himmler appointed a special commission consisting of high-ranking police officials. These included Reinhard Heydrich, head of the Reich Security Main Office, Heinrich Müller, Chief of the Gestapo, and Arthur Nebe, Chief of the Reich Criminal Police. Nebe led the day-to-day work of the investigation, which involved scientific examination of the forensic evidence from the Bürgerbräukeller and the interrogation of a large number

of witnesses and others who were taken into custody for questioning.

Slide: DAZ

On November 22 - two weeks after the explosion, the German government announced the result of the investigation. The official story posited the existence of conspiracy involving, first, British intelligence as the sponsor; second, Otto Strasser as the organizer; and third, as the person who planted the bomb, a 36-year-old German cabinetmaker and leftist by the name of Georg Elser.

The British intelligence agents allegedly involved in the plot were S. Payne Best and Richard Henry Stevens. Both men had been kidnapped by German counter-intelligence agents in the Dutch town of Venlo, just across the border from Germany, and brought to Berlin on November 9, the day after the bomb exploded in Munich. All historians agree that there was no connection whatsoever between the British agents and the assassination attempt. The reason for their presence in Venlo was to establish contact with German officers and government officials who opposed a war against Britain. As some historians argue, Hitler, convinced from the outset of Britain's responsibility for the Munich bomb, ordered them kidnapped the next day. The official story appearing in

Germany newspapers on November 22 had the virtue of corresponding to Hitler's gut feeling. But it also had the disadvantage of being false. And by the time the story appeared on November 22, the special investigative position *knew* it was false, because by then it had already established that Georg Elser had acted as a lone assassin, even though Hitler was extremely reluctant to accept this conclusion.

One question that many of you might be asking yourselves is the following: why didn't the German government blame the Munich bomb on the Jews? Answering this question brings us once again back to Kristallnacht. The massive anti-Jewish violence that took place in open view in November 1938 had been received poorly by many Germans in the general population, in the government, in the diplomatic corps, and in the officer corps of the army. These Germans did not necessarily oppose the anti-Jewish policies of the Nazi regime, but they had a strong preference that the exclusion of Jews from German society proceed in a legal and orderly manner. Having sensed the disquiet produced in the country by Kristallnacht, during 1939 the Nazi leadership sought to avoid a repetition of the mass outburst of anti-Jewish violence. One might say that the Kristallnacht had achieved its purpose by accelerating Jewish emigration from Germany. In fact, more Jews emigrated from the German Reich in 1939 than in any year since the Nazi assumption of power - 77,000. So at that

particular moment in time -- November 1939 - concocting a new conspiracy theory about the Jews made less strategic sense to the German leadership than concocting a conspiracy theory about the British.

Attention to the Munich bomb diminished after November 1939. While Hitler had planned to launch the German offensive against Britain and France in that month, bad weather forced a postponement until the spring of 1940. The Phony War turned into a real war, and the conflict soon expanded to include a war of annihilation against the Soviet Union and a campaign of genocide against Europe's Jews. The United States entered the war in December 1941, making it a truly global conflict. The Soviet Union refused to fold, German cities were reduced to rubble in Allied air raids, and the Allies opened up new fronts in Italy and France. On July 20, 1944, a group of German Army officers, diplomats, and public officials, fearing defeat and the destruction of their country, attempted to kill Hitler with a bomb at his military headquarters in East Prussia, and take over the national government.

Slide: Stauffenberg Postage Stamp

Like the Army Colonel who planted the bomb, Claus Scheck Count von Stauffenberg, most of the conspirators hailed from aristocratic backgrounds. The bomb injured Hitler but did not

kill him. Stauffenberg and some additional participants in the plot were summarily executed on the same day, while others were hauled before the so-called Peoples' Court to be publicly humiliated in show trials prior to execution. When the war in Europe ended in May 1945, the July 20th 1944 plot was far fresher in the memories of Germans than was the assassination attempt in the Bürgerbräukeller of 1939.

After the war, many Germans, perhaps even most, were reluctant to embrace as heroes or patriots their countrymen who had attempted to assassinate the nation's leader during wartime. Stauffenberg and his co-conspirators were widely regarded as traitors. Years passed before the July 20 plot came to be recognized as an act of patriotism. The slide shows a West German postage stamp issued to honor Stauffenberg in 1964. Until the present, the date on which Germany ceremonially commemorates resistance to Nazism every year is the 20th of July.

Recognition for Georg Elser was much longer in coming than it was for Stauffenberg. After the war, Elser remained an object of widespread revulsion in the eyes of many Germans. Either he had been a traitor, like Stauffenberg, or he had been an agent or a confederate of the Gestapo, a participant in a faked assassination attempt intended to justify intensified oppression.

Slide: Gisevius and Schellenberg

Interestingly enough, already in 1946, a German who had been highly placed police officials during the Nazi period publicly disclosed the 1939 finding of the special investigative commission, namely that Elser had acted as a lone assassin. Hans-Bernd Gisevius had been a highly respected police and judicial official who ended up working for German military intelligence under Admiral Canaris. He was involved in the July 20, 1944 plot, but evaded capture and eventually escaped to Switzerland with the assistance of Allan Dulles of the American Office of Strategic Services, a forerunner of the CIA. Although he, himself, had not been involved in the interrogation of Georg Elser, he had received a great deal of first-hand knowledge from Arthur Nebe, whom he had known well. In 1946, Gisevius published his memoir, in which he described how the investigation had concluded early on that Elser had acted alone. When the official government version of the story was published on November 22, 1939, write Gisevius, "we all burst into laughter," referring to his circle of police and intelligence officials in Berlin. The memoir contains an accurate description of the deed:

"Elser had reflected that once a year, Hitler always stood at the same spot at the same hour and always for the same length of time. This took place on the occasion of his traditional address in the Bürgerbräukeller on the eveing of November 8.

Elser found a place that was both effective and easy to work on unobserved - a column directly behind the speaker's podium."

Gisevius' account of the Elser investigation was echoed in 1956 in the posthumously published memoir of Walter Schellenberg. He was the German counter-intelligence officer who had kidnapped the two British agents from Venlo the day after the Munich bombing in 1939. In the 1956 memoir, Schellenberg described having been present at Elser's interrogation. Despite torture, hypnosis, and drugging, Elser never deviated from his story that he had acted alone. According to Schellenberg, the professional investigators came to believe Elser, but Hitler and Himmler continued to insist on a broader conspiracy.

Even in the face of the accounts provided by Gisevius in 1946 and by Schellenberg in 1956, the belief that Elser had acted on behalf of the Nazi government persisted, delaying by decades the recognition of Georg Elser as a legitimate figure of the German resistance against Nazism. Two people were most instrumental in perpetuating the myth that Elser had been an agent or confederate of the Gestapo. One of them was S. Payne Best, and the other was Martin Niemöller.

Slide: Venlo Incident

S. Payne Best was one of the British agents kidnapped at Venlo on November 9, 1939. He spent most of the war imprisoned in a wing of the Sachsenhausen concentration camp reserved for special prisoners, who included Leon Blum, the former Prime Minister of France, Kurt von Schuschnigg, the former Prime Minister of Austria, and the son of Josef Stalin. Georg Elser was incarcerated there as well. In 1950, Payne Best published his memoir about his kidnapping at Venlo and its aftermath, dedicating a substantial section to Elser. Payne Best noted that Elser lived in an unusually large and comfortable cell, and enjoyed access to a woodworking bench and tools. According to Payne Best, Elser also seemed to get along well with the guards. This kind of privileged treatment for Elser, Payne Best believed, would be consistent with the rumor that Elser had worked for the Gestapo. But there was more. Even though Elser had not been allowed to talk with the other prisoners, Payne Best claimed to have received from him a handwritten note containing the entire story of the bomb plot. To summarize this version: the Gestapo had uncovered a plot by some of Hitler's closest associates to remove him from power. To foil this plot, the Gestapo recruited Elser from Dachau, where he had been imprisoned for anti-social behavior. Elser was instructed to plant a bomb that was timed to explode after Hitler's departure from the building. The bomb would collapse

the ceiling and thereby eliminate the anti-Hitler conspirators.

This story is not credible for a variety of reasons. First, many of the biographical details about Elser related by Payne Best are demonstrably false, and were demonstrably false in 1950, when he published his memoir. Elser was not imprisoned at Dachau before the war, just to name one easily refutable claim. Other details strain credulity as well. Payne best asked his readers to believe that the Gestapo, faced with a plot inside the Nazi party to remove Hitler from power, would recruit a concentration camp prisoner with known leftist sympathies to rescue the Führer. He also asked his readers to believe that the Gestapo, in trying to save Hitler, would knowingly let him stand within a few feet of a live ticking time-bomb. Despite these non-credible assertions, the account contained in Payne-Best's memoir were quoted and cited by journalists and scholars.

SLIDE: NIEMÖLLER

Even more influential than Payne Best in perpetuating the story of Georg Elser as Gestapo operative was Martin Niemöller. A protestant pastor who had originally supported Nazism but then became an opponent, Niemöller spent eight years imprisoned in Sachsenhausen and then Dachau. His resistance to Nazism won him international recognition, as

reflected on this Time Magazine cover from 1940. Having survived the war, Niemöller became a leading exponent of the view that the German churches had not done enough to oppose Nazism. He became the President of the World Council of Churches, and emerged as an active critic of the Vietnam War. He is perhaps most famous for the phrase "first they came for the communists, and I did not speak out," and so on, which he used many times in speeches in different versions.

Niemöller spent years as a prisoner in the special section of the Sachsenhausen concentration camp. He never spoke with Georg Elser. He did observe Elser's unusually large cell and his convivial relationship with the guards, from which he concluded that Elser had probably been an agent or confederate of the regime. Niemöller made this accusation publicly on several occasions after the war, and refused to retract it when asked to do so by Elser's mother. Niemöller's assertions, perhaps more than any other factor, validated the perception, already widely held since November 1939, that the bomb in the Bürgerbräukeller had been a Nazi plot.

Slide: Rothfels-Shirer-Bullock

This view remained the consensus position well into the 1960's. It was expressed in a number of influential works by scholars and journalists. These included:

The first significant book on the German resistance, by the prominent German historian Hans Rothfels;

Two very widely read *Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* by the American journalist William Shirer;

and the important Hitler biography by the British scholar Alan Bullock;

Slide: Verhörprotokoll

All the while, evidence of the truth lay buried in the archives. In 1964, the German historian Lothar Gruchmann stumbled upon a document while conducting research for a study of the Reich Ministry of Justice during the Nazi period. It was the record of Georg Elser's interrogation by the Gestapo in November 1939. Nobody had thought to search for records related to Elser in the files of the Ministry of Justice, as that agency had not been known to have been involved in the case. Moreover, nineteen years after the demise of the Third Reich, many of its archival records lay in unmarked boxes, uncatalogued. After Gruchmann's accidental discovery of the document, a scholar at the Institute for Contemporary History in Munich, Anton Hoch, conducted numerous interviews and

collected additional documentation in an effort to authenticate it and explain its contents. He published his findings in 1969, and in 1970 the full text of the document appeared in the form of a book.

Slide: Gruchmann book

Georg Elser had actually been interrogated twice in November 1939. The first interrogation was carried out in Munich by the special investigation commission. No documentary record of that interrogation has survived. The second interrogation was conducted by the Gestapo after Elser had been transferred from Munich to Berlin. It is this interrogation that is summarized in the document. I say "summarized" because the document does not contain a transcript of the questioning. Instead, Gestapo agents summarized their own questions as well as Elser's responses to them. Even in view of this limitation, the document constitutes the single most important source we have for proving Elser's lone responsibility for bombing, understanding how he constructed and planted the bomb, and assessing his motivation for doing so.

Slide: Elser portrait

Let us now reflect for a few moments on Georg Elser and his act. Johan Georg Elser was born in 1903 in the town of Hermaringen, in Swabia (South-Central Germany, between Munich and Stuttgart). He spent most of his life in the nearby town of Königsbronn. He trained as a cabinetmaker, a demanding artisanal vocation. For several years in the late 1920's, he worked for a firm on Lake Constance, producing hand-made housings for clocks. His political sympathies lay on the left, but he was not ideologically dogmatic. During the Depression, he voted for the Communist party because of its support for workers. He never actually joined the Party, although he did become a nominal member of the Alliance of Red Front-Fighters, a paramilitary organization connected to the Party. In the late 1930's, he worked for a firm producing valves and metal fittings. He remained single, although he fathered a child out of wedlock. Like most people in his immediate region, he was a Protestant, but he sometimes prayed in a Catholic Church. After the war, friends and relatives described him as introverted but good-natured. He took enormous pride in his skills as a craftsman, and was an enthusiastic amateur folk musician, specializing in the zither.

Elser's opposition to Nazism was generally known to his relatives, friends, and workmates, but he did not share with them his intention to assassinate Hitler. The only direct evidence of his motive is what he told the Gestapo. In explaining his act, Elser cited three main reasons:

First, the Nazi regime's exploitation of the German working class;

Second, the likelihood that the regime would plunge Germany and Europe into a ruinous war;

And third, the regime's attack on freedom of religion, and especially its promotion of the pro-Nazi German Christian movement.

Slide: Verhörprotokol Text

Elser told the Gestapo that he reached his decision to kill Hitler in the autumn of 1938, after the Sudeten Crisis, when it became clear that the regime was steering the country toward war. From that point forward, he said, "the idea of eliminating the leadership would not let me rest." He concluded that Hitler and other top-level Nazis could be taken out in a single strike at annual commemoration in the Bürgerbräukellar on November 8.

There is no mention of Jews in the interrogation report. Does this mean that objections to Nazi anti-Jewish measures were not part of Elser's motivation? Our contemporary understanding of Nazism rightly places a great an emphasis on antisemitism, so we may have difficulty accepting the proposition that it did not factor into Elser's thinking. In a German movie about Elser released in 2015, the filmmaker manufactured a statement made by Elser to his Gestapo

interrogators, citing objections to the treatment of the Jews as a reason for his action. Is there a case to be made for the plausibility of this particular exercise of cinematic license?

Let's look at three pieces of evidence:

First: a brief passage in the interrogation report suggests that the subject of Jewish policy was in fact raised in Elser's questioning. As we see in the slide, the writer of the report took pains to emphasize that Elser reached his decision to kill Hitler "before November 1938," this phrase being a euphemistic reference to the November Pogrom, or Kristallnacht. Had Elser cited the Kristallnacht as a key factor in his decision, this would have most certainly been recorded by the Gestapo. But it seems as though the opposite happened, and the Gestapo ruled the Kristallnacht out as a decisive factor.

A second piece of relevant evidence arose in an interview conducted in 1989 with Eugen Rau a friend of Elser's in Koenigsbronn in the 1930's. In response to a question about Elser's opinion about "the Jewish Question," Rau stated the following: "Georg was no enemy of the Jews. I can still remember a comment by him. He once said to me: 'Why do they torment the Jews, why are they destroying them?' It's entirely plausible that Rau's memory was accurate. It's also entirely plausible that Rau, in 1989, unconsciously adjusted his memory to correspond to the emerging consensus in German society about the centrality of antisemitism to the Nazi regime. Even

if Rau's memory was accurate, there is no suggestion that outrage at Nazi antisemitism was an important factor in Elser's thinking.

Slide: Stolpersteine Jews in Heidenheim

A third relevant fact was the presence of persecuted Jews in Elser's proximity. There were no Jews in Koenigsbronn, where Elser lived, as far as I could establish, but there were a few Jewish families in the nearby town of Heidenheim, the town where Elser worked between December 1936 and August 1939. During Kristallnacht, the homes of one of these families was attacked and demolished. Although Elser never commented on this incident, he may well have been aware of it. Nevertheless, given the totality of evidence, I remain agnostic on the question of whether opposition to Nazi antisemitism played any role in Elser's decision to kill Hitler.

Slide: Interior of BBK

In November 1938 - an entire year before the assassination attempt - Elser travelled to Munich to stake out the Burgerbraukeller. In the months following, he designed a device consisting of two interconnected clocks and explosives he smuggled out of a local stone quarry. In August 1939, he

moved to Munich, where he rented an apartment and carried out further inspections of the Bürgerbräukeller. When it came time to plant the bomb, he went to the beer hall, and hid himself in an isolated spot until after closing. He did this night-after-night, 30 to 35 times, as he described to his interrogators. In the middle of the night, over many visits, he excavated a hole into the pillar above and behind where Hitler spoke every year on November 8th. Before morning, he completed his work, covered the hole with a false surface he had constructed, and slipped out of the building through a service exit. In the week preceding November 8th, he installed first the explosives and then the clock mechanism. On the night of November 7th, he performed one final check to ensure that everything was properly in place.

One may rightly ask how it was possible for Elser so easily to penetrate a venue so soon before a scheduled public appearance by Hitler. Wasn't there tight security around the Führer? Normally, there was. But for the annual event in the Bürgerbräukeller, a special arrangement was in place. Security at the venue was entrusted to the Munich office of the Nazi party rather than to the team normally in charge of Hitler's personal security. After the bombing, an investigation revealed the amateurishness of the measures that had been in place, and security procedures around Hitler were revamped.

After performing the final checks on his bomb, Elser travelled to Konstanz with the intention of crossing the

border into neutral Switzerland. German border guards regarded him as suspicious and held him for questioning. Only then did his bomb explode in the beer hall. Although there were many suspects initially, the investigators quickly zeroed in on Elser.

Slide: Elser Prisoner Photo

After interrogation, torture, and confession to the crime, Elser was transferred to the special prisoner's section of the Sachsenhausen concentration camp. Rather than executing him, the Nazi regime kept him alive for exploitation in a prospective show trial, in which he would testify to having worked on behalf of the British. This is, presumably, why a copy of the interrogation report landed in the files of the Ministry of Justice, whose experts were probably asked to vet the case for potential prosecution. In Sachsenhausen, Elser received an extra-large cell equipped with tools and woodworking bench because officials in the camp administration had him make furniture for them. This fact became known to historians only in the 1960's, but was not recognized by S. Payne Best and Martin Niemoller, who drew a much different conclusion from what they observed. Late in the war, along with other special prisoners, Elser was transferred to Dachau. In April 1945, Heinrich Mueller, the head of the Gestapo, instructed the commandant of Dachau to arrange for Elser's

execution. Elser was murdered on the evening of April 9, 1945, and his body was cremated in the Dachau camp crematorium. He was 42 years old.

The discovery and publication of the interrogation report eliminated any credible doubt that Elser had acted on his own behalf. But it remained difficult for many Germans to accept the proposition that a person of modest background and no political influence had been capable of mounting resistance against the Nazi regime. Elser's example flew in the face of the self-exculpatory arguments of millions of his countrymen, who believed that ordinary Germans had been powerless to act against a tyrannical regime. His action reminded them of their own passivity, indifference, fear, or support for Nazism. For many Germans, it proved much easier to honor Stauffenberg and the other conspirators of July 20, 1944. Those people had been well-connected aristocrats with influential positions in the military, the intelligence service, or the diplomatic corps. Unlike ordinary Germans, it was thought, they had been in a position to do something.

Elser's leftist political leanings also posed a problem for many Germans. In West Germany, during the Cold War, there was great reluctance to honor a person who had harbored Communist sympathies. Ironically, Communist East Germany also did little to recognize Elser's action because he had not been a member of the Party or been involved in any form of organized Communist resistance.

Slide: Elser-Mahnmal-Heidenheim

The reluctance to honoring Elser diminished with time, generational transition, and the conclusion of the Cold War. An important role was played by the George Elser Working Group, an organization of amateur historians based in Heidenheim, who collected documentation and lobbied for public recognition of Elser in the form of street-namings and monuments. The first public monument to Elser was erected in Heidenheim in 1972 as a result of the Working Group's efforts.

Slide: Georg-Elser-Strasse in Hermaringen

In 1984, a street was named after Elser for the first time, in Hermaringen, the place of his birth. The twelve-year interval between the erection of the monument and the street-naming was indicative of the continuing reluctance to honor Elser. This reluctance was especially pronounced in Königsbronn, where Elser had actually spent most of his life. Many of the locals there had been traumatized when the Gestapo descended on the town in November 1939, and they were slow to embrace the assassin whose action precipitated their troubles. The town council established an Elser archive in 1969, but a monument to Elser was not erected until 2010.

Slide: Brandauer

A breakthrough development in the wide public acceptance of Elser as an important figure of the German resistance was the release of the film *Georg Elser - Einer aus Deutschland* in 1989. The title role was played by the celebrated Austrian actor Klaus Maria Brandauer, who also directed. The movie received several major German film awards. . . .

Slide: Book Jacket Comparison

. . . . and also prompted the re-publication of the interrogation report, this time with Brandauer on the cover instead of Elser.

Slide: Georg-Elser-Platz, Munich

Elser's status as a hero of German resistance to Nazism became increasingly normalized during the 1990's. Streets were named after him in several cities, and citizen's initiatives were launched to erect monuments in his honor.

This did not occur without a backlash. In 2009, on the 70th anniversary of the explosion in the Bürgerbräukeller, a major German newspaper, the Frankfurter Rundschau, published an essay critical of Elser. The author, Lothar Fritze, was a

philosopher affiliated with the Hannah Arendt Institute for Research on Totalitarianism at the University of Dresden. Fritze acknowledged the moral legitimacy of assassinating a tyrant, but questioned the moral legitimacy of Elser's particular method of assassination, which failed to kill Hitler, but cost the lives of eight people in the beer hall, including two waitresses. (explain image). According to Fritze, Elser failed in his moral obligation to remain at the scene of the assassination in order to protect potential victims of collateral damage.

Slide: Polish Girls Mourns her Sister

Fritze's critics in the press and the academic world suspected a more sinister agenda behind his argument, one aimed at relativizing the crimes of Nazism by ignoring the historical context of Elser's action. Several weeks prior to Elser's assassination attempt, hundreds of thousands of Poles had been killed during the German invasion of their country, but Fritze's sympathy lay with the eight Germans killed in the Bürgerbräukellar, six of whom were long-time Nazi party members who had gone there to "Sieg Heil" with their Führer. One must also consider the tens of thousands of Germans languishing in concentration camps, as well as the Nazi regime's abolition of civil rights, a free press, and political opposition. There was no legal, peaceful way to

change the German government or hold its leadership accountable for their actions. Elser's action clearly passed any reasonable standard or proportionality. One result of the controversy over Fritze's attack on Elser was the resignation of the eminent Holocaust historian Saul Friedländer from the academic council of the Hannah Arendt Institute in Dresden.

Slide: Elser Briefmarke

Fritze's critique failed to halt the momentum of Elser's memorialization. To the contrary, his champions redoubled their efforts, and since the turn of the century, commemoration of Elser has become ubiquitous in Germany.

A few examples:

The German Postal Service honored Elser with a postage stamp in 2003 to mark the 100th anniversary of his birth. (Recall that the postage stamp for Stauffenberg had appeared in 1964.)

Slide: Munich and Berlin Monument

Monuments to Elser were erected in Munich, Berlin and other cities.

Georg-Elster-Strassenschild

Today there are 64 streets or squares named after Elser in Germany.

Slide: 13 Minutes

In 2015, a second feature film about Elser appeared in Germany. Whereas the Brandauer film of 1989 had the feel of an action movie, this more recent film focuses more on Elser's private life and on his motivations for the assassination. This is the film (mentioned earlier) in which Elser is depicted as acting out of revulsion at Germany's treatment of its Jews.

Slide: Elser Stolperstein

In the end, the question of what motivated Georg Elser to want to kill Hitler is easier to answer than the question of what gave him the resolve and the courage to attempt it. Why did this person act when others chose not to, or when the military-aristocratic resistance continued to temporize? Did it have to do with Elser's psychological constitution? With some aspect of his personal biography? With his deep commitment to fairness rooted in experience as a member of the

working class during the Depression? With his deep but undogmatic religious faith? The specific combination of these and other factors that enabled Elser to act must remain a mystery. Whatever its origin, Elser possessed a moral compass that could not be thrown off by ambition, political calculation, ideological dogma, or the mass popularity of a demagogue. His act may have been logistically and technically ingenious, but on the ethical level, it was uncomplicated. Elser recognized evil when he saw it, and acted against it with the means available to him. That is all one could ask of a patriot and a decent person.

Thank you very much for your patience.