The Holocaust: assessing responsibility and conscience

Resisters: The White Rose

The White Rose was a non-violent, intellectual resistance group in Nazi Germany, consisting of students from the University of Munich and their philosophy professor. The group became known for an anonymous leaflet and graffiti campaign, lasting from June 1942 until February 1943, that called for the active opposition of the German people to Nazi oppression and tyranny. During this time the group prepared and distributed six leaflets.

The group was motivated by ethical and moral considerations. In summer 1942, many of the male medical students at the University of Munich were obliged to serve a three-month stint on the Russian front. The idea was to send all medical students to the Russian front for a period of three months in order for them to experience the rendering of medical care under fire, and to work as physician assistants in field hospitals.

Several White Rose members were among them, where they witnessed the horrors of war and the unbelievable cruelty the Germans displayed to the Jews. Some witnessed atrocities of the war on the battlefield and against civilian populations in the East. One member saw the Warsaw and Łódź Ghettos and could not get the images of brutality out of his mind.

They appealed to what they considered the German intelligentsia, believing that they would be intrinsically opposed to Nazism. Their leaflets were left in telephone books in public phone booths, mailed to professors and students, and taken by courier to other universities for distribution. The leaflets caused a sensation, and the Gestapo began an intensive search for the publishers.

In February 1943 a janitor at the university reported students throwing leaflets from a balcony. The student activists were soon arrested and everyone associated with them were brought in for interrogation. Sixteen would eventually be executed and others jailed.

Yet the White Rose had the last word. Their last leaflet was smuggled to the Allies, who edited it and air-dropped millions of copies over Germany. Today, the members of the White Rose are honored in Germany amongst its greatest heroes, since they opposed the Third Reich in the face of almost certain death.

1. What are characteristics of young students that might have encouraged them to undertake such a risky endeavor?

2. Does seeing atrocities change the level of risk you are willing to take?