

**“A TIME TO STAND:
LETTERS OF COURAGE, HOPE, AND FAITH”
BY HELMUTH JAMES VON MOLTKE**

Background on the Selection

Helmuth James von Moltke (1907–1945) was a German lawyer, nobleman, and statesman who was tried and executed by the Nazis just weeks before the defeat of Hitler and the end of World War II. Called “the greatest person on either side of the war” by American diplomat George Kennan, Moltke used his position in the Nazi German intelligence service to argue openly against Hitler’s orders, sometimes winning temporary support and saving the lives of many Jews and POWs. He was also one of a small group who met to plan for a post-Nazi Germany, anticipating Germany’s defeat and setting out a Westernized structure for the nation’s government, diplomacy, and social systems.

Unlike other resisters, notably theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Moltke did not advocate assassinating Hitler or attempting a coup. He believed Germany would only be freed of the Nazis through a sound defeat in war and then being rebuilt. Arrested in January 1944, Moltke eventually was one of thousands executed after the failed “July Plot” assassination attempt in July 1944.

Group Discussion Questions

1 Before Britain and England declared war on Germany on September 1, 1939, Helmuth and Freya von Moltke had laid plans to leave Germany and move to London. What is his attitude during the early months of the war when he found himself not only trapped but also drafted into service?

2 In his letter of 1 June 1940, read from “Peace is not complacency” through the end of the letter. What is the difference between accepting evil for good “for the sake of outward calm” and not endangering “a peaceful atmosphere” that Moltke sees as being so important?

3 On 8 November 1941, Moltke describes his own uncle and others who question his resistance as being “chameleons” and “mere filler.” What difference does this kind of person make in a society?

4 In his letter of 3 November 1942, he remarks, “It is interesting to see again how such people can be swayed to the right side by a resolute stand.” What does this say of the power of leadership?

5 In Moltke’s lengthy letter to Lionel Curtis, he describes how the average German is overwhelmed by life circumstances in the war, undermining their ability to resist the inhumanity of the Nazis. In what ways is this true of most people? What motivates a person to think beyond his or her own situation?

6 How would you describe Moltke’s frame of mind in what he sees as his last twenty-four hours? What do you find most striking in his description?

7 In his letter of 25 November 1939, he describes persevering in one of his arguments in the *Abwehr* as “this hardest part of the road,” and again in his last letter, he writes about a “hard bit of road ahead of me” as he faces the last hours before his execution. What would it take to embrace all of life’s challenges like this? Where does Moltke receive his strength?

8 What did Moltke hear in Judge Freisler’s statement, “we demand the whole man”? How does he see that he has been uniquely prepared for this moment of reckoning? Why is it important to him that he stood before the Nazis “as a Christian and nothing else”?

9 How do you find his relationship to Freya and his parting words to her about their marriage?

10 Moltke writes, “I shall write tomorrow, but since one never knows what will happen, I wanted to touch on every subject in [this] letter.” In what sense is this not knowing the future true of everyone? How might living as if every day is the last change the way you live?

11 What difference did Moltke’s battles and temporary little victories make? Why did he see this as worth dying for?

12 Are you in a situation now where you could take a stand that would make a difference?

13 How would you have to live now to be able to write a paragraph like the last one by Moltke?

Further Reading

- “Abraham Lincoln: The Spiritual Growth of a Public Man” by Elton Trueblood, *The Trinity Forum Reading* (1993).
- “Poor Man’s Earl. An Introduction to Lord Shaftesbury” by John Pollock, *The Trinity Forum Reading* (1999).
- “Shantung Compound” by Langdon Gilkey, *The Trinity Forum Reading* (1997).
- “Surprised by Goodness” by Philip Hallie, *The Trinity Forum Reading* (2002).
- “Telling Truth to Kings” by Reinhold Schneider, *The Trinity Forum Reading* (1998).
- “William Wilberforce: A Man Who Changed his Times” by John Pollock, *The Trinity Forum Reading* (1996).

- Aikman, David, *Great Souls: Six Who Changed the Century* (Word, 1998).
- Hallie, Philip, *Lest Innocent Blood be Shed: The Story of Le Chambon and How Goodness Happened There* (HarperCollins, 1979).
- Moltke, Helmuth James von, *Letters to Freya* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1990).
- Schneider, Reinhold, *Imperial Mission (Las Casas von Karl V)* (Gresham Press, 1948).
- Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (Macmillan, 1972).