

# One Man Against the Nazis— Wolfgang Köhler

MARY HENLE *New School for Social Research*

**ABSTRACT:** This is the story of Wolfgang Köhler's courageous struggle against the Nazi authorities to try to save the Psychological Institute of the University of Berlin. The period covered is 1933 to August 1935. The account is based on contemporary letters and other documents, mainly heretofore unpublished, many of them translated from the German. Eyewitness reports that could be checked are also used.

In the 1920s and early 1930s, psychology was flourishing at the Psychological Institute of Berlin University under the direction of Wolfgang Köhler. There was truly an all-star cast of characters. In addition to the director, Max Wertheimer had been there from about 1916 until 1929, when he left to accept the chair at Frankfurt. Kurt Lewin, too, came to Berlin after World War I and remained until his resignation in 1933. Köhler's last assistants in Berlin are still known, although all of them died young: Karl Duncker, whose studies of problem solving and of induced movement remain classics; von Lauenstein, who is known mainly for his theory and investigation of time errors—an important problem, since time errors offer a good opportunity to study the behavior of young memory traces; von Restorff, whom we know for her work with Köhler on the isolation effect (sometimes called the Restorff effect) and on theory of recall. The Chief Assistant at the institute, Hans Rupp, chief by virtue of seniority, will hardly figure in our story.<sup>1</sup>

Berlin, with Köhler and Wertheimer, was the seat of Gestalt psychology in those days, along with another highly productive seat at Giessen under Koffka until 1924, when Koffka came to America. Berlin had seen the publication of major theoretical and experimental contributions to Gestalt psychology. Wertheimer published, among others, major papers on Gestalt theory, including the paper on perceptual grouping. Köhler's *Die physischen Gestalten in Ruhe und im stationären Zustand* appeared in 1920. His work on chimpanzees was still appearing, and there were numerous

papers, both theoretical and experimental, many of them in perception but also in other fields. His translation of his book, *Gestalt Psychology*, into German was published in 1933. Lewin's early papers on perception and on association appeared, and then the long and influential series, published with his students, on *Handlungs- und Affektpsychologie*.

Among the students at the institute, I will mention only a few, mainly names we know today. Rudolf Arnheim and later Werner Wolff worked in the field of expression; Metzger's work on visual perception was under way, including the work on the *Ganzfeld*. Gottschaldt's studies on the influence of past experience on visual form perception came out of the institute; his figures are still in use in the Embedded Figures Test. Hans Wallach did his first work there. Kopfermann's beautiful experiments on depth perception, Ternus's on

---

Acknowledgment is gratefully made to the Harvard University Archives for permission to publish the three letters from Köhler to Ralph Barton Perry; to the Archives of the History of American Psychology for permission to use Köhler's letter to Donald K. Adams; and to the Library of the American Philosophical Society for permission to publish all the other documents and letters here included. I would like to express warm thanks for cooperation to Whitfield J. Bell, Jr., and Murphy D. Smith of the American Philosophical Society and to John A. Popplestone and Marion White McPherson of the Archives of the History of American Psychology.

I am grateful to Margaret Speicher, who translated some of the documents and who checked all of my translations.

This article is to be a chapter of a larger work on Wolfgang Köhler. It is the story neither of the destruction of German psychology by Hitler nor of the fate of the Gestalt psychologists after the Nazis' rise to power. (For a good account of the latter, see Mandler and Mandler [1968].) It is, rather, a chapter in the life of Wolfgang Köhler.

Requests for reprints should be sent to Mary Henle, The Graduate Faculty, New School for Social Research, 65 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York 10003.

<sup>1</sup> It should be mentioned that at that time an *Assistent* in a German university already had the PhD but was not yet *habilitiert*, that is, had not yet the so-called right to teach, which was conferred after a second dissertation.

phenomenal identity, von Schiller's on stroboscopic movement, and much, much more excellent work were all products of the Psychological Institute. A number of young American PhDs came to study and work at the institute, for example, Robert B. MacLeod, Donald K. Adams, Karl Zener, Carroll Pratt, Leonard Carmichael, and others.

On January 30, 1933, the Nazis came to power. The first effects on German universities were dismissals of Jewish professors and others considered to be hostile to the new regime. This story is well known. The dismissals ranged from Nobel laureates (including Einstein, Haber, Franck, Hertz) to *Assistenten*. Hartshorne relates an anecdote which he says was widely believed—that Max Planck, the great physicist, petitioned Hitler to stop the dismissal of scientists for political reasons; he stressed the importance of science for the country. Hitler is said to have replied, "Our national policies will not be revoked or modified, even for scientists. If the dismissal of Jewish scientists means the annihilation of contemporary German science, then we shall do without science for a few years!" (Hartshorne, 1937, pp. 111-112).

About the dismissed scholars, their university colleagues kept silent. As Köhler remarked years later, "Nothing astonished the Nazis so much as the cowardice of whole university faculties, which did not consist of Nazis. Naturally this corroborated the Nazis' contempt for the intellectual life" (Köhler, Note 1).

The future of an independent professor was, of course, uncertain. As early as April 1, 1933, Köhler, briefly outside of Germany, wrote to Ralph Barton Perry:

Nobody in Germany with any decency in his bones . . . knows very much about his near future. If nothing happens, I shall be in Chicago for the meeting of the American Association. . . .

As to myself, my patriotism expects the Germans to behave better than any other people. This seems to me a sound form of patriotism. Unfortunately it is very different from current nationalism which presupposes that the own people are right and do right whatever they are and do. However, there will still be some fight during the next weeks. Don't judge the Germans before it is over.

With the dismissal of James Franck, the great experimental physicist, Köhler made public his stand. The fight had begun. On April 28, 1933, he wrote, for the *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*, the last anti-Nazi article to be published openly in Germany under the Nazi regime, "Gespräche in Deutschland" (Conversations in Germany). The courage of such an act may be indicated by the

fact that everybody expected Köhler to be arrested for it.

Why, ask the powerful men who rule Germany, have many valuable people not joined the Nazi party? Of them Köhler comments, "Never have I seen finer patriotism than theirs." Regarding the wholesale dismissal of Jews from universities and other positions, he continues,

During our conversation, one of my friends reached for the Psalms and read: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. . . ." He read the 90th Psalm and said, "It is hard to think of a German who has been able to move human hearts more deeply and so to console those who suffer. And these words we have received from the Jews."

Another reminded me that never had a man struggled more nobly for a clarification of his vision of the world than the Jew Spinoza, whose wisdom Goethe admired. My friend did not hesitate to show respect, as Goethe did. Lessing, too, would not have written his *Nathan the Wise* unless human nobility existed among the Jews. . . . It seems that nobody can think of the great work of Heinrich Hertz without an almost affectionate admiration for him. And Hertz had Jewish blood.

One of my friends told me: "The greatest German experimental physicist of the present time is Franck; many believe that he is the greatest experimental physicist of our age. Franck is a Jew, an unusually kind human being. Until a few days ago, he was professor at Göttingen, an honor to Germany and the envy of the international scientific community."

Perhaps the episode of Franck's dismissal

shows the deepest reason why all these people are not joining [the Party]: they feel a moral imposition. They believe that only the quality of a human being should determine his worth, that intellectual achievement, character, and obvious contributions to German culture retain their significance whether a person is Jewish or not.

Expecting arrest, the Köhlers and members of the institute spent the night of April 28 playing chamber music. But the Nazis did not come.

Four months later, reprints of this article were still being circulated. Letters poured in, for the most part from strangers, occasionally critical, but the overwhelming majority was full of admiration for Köhler's courageous stand. Warm thanks were expressed by Jew and non-Jew alike. The following letter, as a single example, was signed only "A German Jew":

Today I read your article, "Conversations in Germany." I am not ashamed to admit that, despite my 65 years, I was deeply moved by it and tears came to my eyes. I asked myself: Are there really Germans in Germany who can still muster such courage?

I am a Jew, born in Germany as were my father and grandfather. I am a simple merchant, not a politician, who formerly for many years employed hundreds of Christian workers of all parties and religions and who enjoyed the greatest respect and recognition from them.

These lines are simply intended to express to you my respect for your straightforward, fearless way of thinking.

I omit my name since it is not relevant. I feel that in spirit I want to shake your hand, since I have children who now may no longer look upon Germany as their homeland.

On November 3, 1933, the government decreed that professors must open their lectures with the Nazi salute. Köhler flipped his hand in a caricature of the salute and said:

Ladies and gentlemen, I have just saluted you in a manner that the government has decreed. I could not see how to avoid it.

Still, I must say something about it. I am professor of philosophy in this university, and this circumstance obligates me to be candid with you, my students. A professor who wished to disguise his views by word or by action would have no place here. You could no longer respect him; he could no longer have anything to say to you about philosophy or important human affairs.

Therefore I say: the form of my salute was until recently the sign of very particular ideas in politics and elsewhere. If I want to be honest, and if I am to be respected by you, I must explain that, although I am prepared to give that salute, I do not share the ideology which it usually signifies or used to signify.

The National Socialists among you will particularly welcome this explanation. Nobility and purity of purpose among the Germans are goals for which the National Socialists are working hard. I am no National Socialist. But out of the same need to act nobly and purely, I have told you what the German salute means in my case and what it does not mean. I know you will respect my motives.

A witness reports that the audience of 200 greeted these remarks with thunderous applause, despite the presence of numerous brownshirts and many Nazi sympathizers (Crannell, 1970).

There was no real interference with the work of the institute until one evening in the beginning of December 1933, when Köhler gave the psychological colloquium. The doors to the colloquium room were guarded by troops, some in uniform, others in civilian clothes. When the students and assistants wanted to leave after the colloquium, they were stopped and their student cards examined.

Köhler did not then interfere with the inspection. When it was over, he telephoned the rector of the university, Eugen Fischer, protesting the unannounced raid. A discussion was arranged: The rector, who admitted that the procedure had been incorrect, agreed to exempt the Psychological Institute from further inspections of this kind. He had no objection to Köhler's informing the psychological colloquium of this agreement, and Köhler did so.

In the rector's absence, on February 26, 1934, Deputy Rector Bieberbach ordered another inspection of the institute. In accordance with his agreement with the rector, Köhler refused per-

mission, and the inspection was not carried out. The rector was informed and offered no objection.

But trouble was ahead. A trip to Norway the next month gave Köhler another opportunity to write freely to Perry:

I am trying to build up a special position for myself in which I might stay with honour. As yet it seems to work, but the end may come [any] day. Quite exciting sometimes, not a life of leisure, occasionally great fun. The art is not to act in passion, but to make at once use of any occasion when the others make a mistake; then it is time to push a foot forward or to hit without serious danger for oneself. You will say that such is the method of cowards. But think of the difference in strength! . . .

Good work is being done in Berlin, as though we had to do what the emigrants are no longer able to do in Germany. Unfortunately my assistants have been in serious danger several times because of political denunciations—a denunciation a month is more or less our current rate; as yet, however, it has always been possible to save them.

Again the rector left town, and on April 12, 1934, Bieberbach ordered a new inspection "despite the agreement between Rector Fischer and Professor Köhler." The search of the institute was carried out under the leadership of a law student named Hennig, who submitted a report full of suspicions, innuendoes, and accusations but no more hard evidence than the discovery of a couple of foreign newspapers in an office (newspapers not banned by the regime) and the smell of cigarette smoke in an unoccupied room. His impudent report insulted Professor Köhler and ended with the recommendation that two assistants, Drs. Duncker and von Lauenstein, as well as three employees, be dismissed. He recommended that the institute be moved to new quarters which would be easier to supervise and even suggested the need for another structure of the institute "which corresponds better to our time and our spirit."

Köhler angrily informed the rector on April 13 that he was, for the time being, unable to continue to direct the institute and that he had therefore transferred the directorship to his chief assistant, Professor Rupp. He reminded Rector Fischer that the agreement between them had been violated and that his authority as director had been seriously undermined; only when the situation was rectified would he resume his duties as director.

Bieberbach, the deputy rector, replied (April 14), reaffirming his "self-evident right" to inspect every part of the university. Köhler telephoned the Minister of Science, Art, and Education, Dr. Achelis, and on April 18 sent him a copy of the

whole correspondence, including Hennig's report along with his own detailed reply. He requested an immediate end to a situation which he could not regard "as compatible with the dignity of the University of Berlin."

On the same date, Rector Fischer replied to Köhler's letter of April 13, denying that there had ever been any agreement that the Psychological Institute be exempted from inspections. He expressed the desire to settle the disagreement without the intervention of the Ministry and requested an oral reply from Köhler.

Köhler's reply was *written* (April 20, 1934). In his letter he assures the rector that he welcomes an oral discussion when clarification has been achieved on the earlier one in which the agreement had been made, but he makes it altogether clear that the rector's account does not correspond with the facts:

With the greatest astonishment I read in your letter the sentence: "Of an agreement between us that there would be no inspection of students in your Institute there was obviously never any question," as well as the further one: "I have only said to you that the inspecting student had to announce himself to the Director of the Institute on his appearance." . . . Something of value is to be expected from an oral discussion with you only when you recall how we came to this agreement and how, until a short time ago, it was taken for granted by both of us.

Köhler concludes that as soon as the rector and he agree again about that earlier agreement, he will welcome an oral discussion.

Two weeks later, May 3, Fischer expresses his disagreeable surprise that Köhler attaches a condition to an oral discussion to try to settle the issues between them. He asserts that it is "a matter of one opinion against another."

Köhler's reply on May 8, even less than the others in this series, hardly corresponds to the kind of communication normally expected from a professor to the rector of his university.

I can give the following explanation: If another person, in a discussion with me, makes a detailed and completely unmistakable agreement with me, if for months afterwards this agreement is carried out on both sides, but one day the other declares that the agreement was never made, then prudence forbids me to have another discussion with this person before he has corrected his mistake in a manner that produces confidence again. For who would protect me from a mistake of the same kind which could result from a further discussion? This holds for discussions with the Rector Magnificus exactly as for anyone else.

He points out that the rector has simply continued to renounce his agreement without giving any thought to the actual facts of the case.

This cannot continue. . . . It is . . . extremely important, even if it has until now been taken for granted, that the administration make no error in memory which concerns matters of morals. I therefore ask you to communicate with me in writing by May 19 whether you have, in the meantime, recalled our agreement. I assume that in the meantime you will also find words of reproach and regret about the behavior of Hennig as authorized by the Rectorate and about his incredible report.

Thus Köhler is again in effect calling the Rector Magnificus of his university a liar, he makes clear that a matter of morals is involved, and he delivers what can only be called an ultimatum.<sup>2</sup> A copy of this letter and of Fischer's letter of May 3 was sent to the minister with the following remark:

It is unusual for a professor to behave in this way toward the Rector. But the behavior of the Rector which leads me to do so is much more unusual. The dilatory handling of the matter I can no longer permit, and I must therefore insist that an untenable situation come to an end in a reasonable time.

Apparently no reply was received, either from the rector or from Dr. Achelis. On May 21, after the expiration of the ultimatum, Köhler (now in Scotland on a brief lecturing tour) sent to the Ministry and to the Dean of the Philosophical Faculty a request for retirement.

On the same day he wrote to Perry:

My resignation is most likely to be final. Since most of the serious workers in psychology had to leave before, and since my excellent assistants would not stay without me, this means the abolition of German psychology for many years. I do not regard myself as responsible. If only 20 professors had fought the same battle, it would never have come so far with regard to German universities.

The reply to Köhler's request for retirement was a letter from an official of the Ministry to the effect that the transfer of civil service personnel to retirement status cannot simply be done upon request. Köhler is asked to discuss the matter with Dr. Achelis.

Meanwhile, the situation was deteriorating at the institute. A handyman, one Herr Schmidt, whose denunciation was apparently responsible for the dismissal of von Lauenstein, refused to carry out instructions, claiming the protection of the rector. Representatives of the German Student Organization (Nazis, of course) interfered in the administration of the institute, and the rector did nothing about it. In June 1934 a torchlight procession planned by students at the institute to honor Professor Köhler was forbidden. Students

<sup>2</sup> The letters lose something in translation. For example, the form of address to the rector was not simply "you," but "your Magnificence."

were called to the Department for Political Education and threatened when they tried to defend the institute. Two students, in an interview with the leader of the German Student Organization, heard Köhler attacked as a man who does not "stand on the ground of National Socialism" and who "identifies with the Jew Wertheimer." They learned that Duncker's habilitation would be prevented and that the attack on Köhler and his assistants was just the beginning.

In July 1934, matters had temporarily improved: The Ministry had intervened. On July 21, after a morning meeting, Köhler wrote to thank the *Ministerialdirektor* for his "intervention and benevolent justice." He assured him that he would withdraw his resignation as soon as the following conditions were met: the reinstatement of von Lauenstein, the granting of leave and subsequent transfer of the handyman Schmidt, the dismissal of the leader of psychology students of the German Student Organization, and a public statement from the Ministry.

It was not until September 24, 1934, that the Ministry, represented by Vahlen, wrote to the rector of the University of Berlin the conclusions of his investigation of the Psychological Institute. Vahlen expresses his conviction that the personal attacks on Professor Köhler were unjustified, nor can he approve of the measures taken, with the Rector's permission, by the student organization. No action was taken against Hennig, the student leader of the raid on the institute, only because he had been removed from his position for other reasons. The Ministry considered justified Köhler's objections to the methods used by the leader of the student group.

On the other hand, Vahlen finds reason to criticize Köhler's refusal to discuss matters with the rector as well as the tone of his letters. He disapproves in particular of Köhler's interruption of his duties as director of the institute and of his activities there. He assures the rector that Professor Köhler has his confidence, and he expects all measures aimed at discrediting the institute to stop immediately.

The public statement made by the Ministry is the following:

Accusations which have been raised against the Psychological Institute force me to point out that Professor Köhler has the confidence of the Minister. I expect from the Student Organization that no more cases of hostile behavior take place against Professor Köhler, his Institute, and his students.

A copy of this letter was sent to Köhler, along

with a repetition of criticisms of Köhler's behavior toward the rector, with whom Vahlen asks him to cooperate in the future.

A month later Köhler was in the United States, delivering the William James Lectures at Harvard. Here he received a letter from Bieberbach, the deputy rector, asking him to sign an oath of loyalty to Adolf Hitler. The letter went unanswered until February. In the meantime, on January 7, 1935, Vahlen wrote to Köhler that the vacancy created by the departure of Professor Kurt Lewin had been filled. Dr. Keller of Rostock had been appointed in December, although Köhler had not been consulted. Vahlen assumes that Köhler will give his consent retroactively, and he is reassured by the opinion of the acting director, Rupp, that Köhler would have no objection. The minister asks for Köhler's opinion and wants to know whether, under these circumstances, Köhler's request to resign still holds.

On February 2, Köhler wrote that the law requiring a loyalty oath does not apply to him, since he has submitted his resignation to the Ministry. On the next day he replied to Vahlen's communication of January 7. He refers to the minister's earlier criticisms of the intrusions into the administration of the institute, for which he is grateful. But that same letter had contained reference to the "peculiar composition" of the circle close to Professor Köhler and had criticized the manner in which he had defended himself against the rector. He takes exception to both points, and on the basis of them had been considering for some time whether to renew his request to resign. Then he received the news of Dr. Keller's appointment. He can only see this as a continuation of the measures that first led him to request retirement: It is totally impossible for him to direct the institute when, time after time, important decisions are made without even consulting him. He can therefore not withdraw his request for resignation. For this, as he writes to the minister, he would need a most dramatic and binding assurance that he could be Director of the Psychological Institute of the University of Berlin "without repeatedly being subjected to the kind of treatment that only a weakling with no sense of honor could tolerate."

Apparently Köhler again requested reinstatement of his assistants, and this request was denied. Accordingly, a new request to resign was addressed to the minister on August 22, 1935, when Köhler was again in Germany. In it he points out that

it is impossible for him to continue his work without these assistants, who represent new points of view now beginning to spread to all countries.

And so ended the great days of the Psychological Institute of the University of Berlin. Even before his final resignation, Köhler wrote an obituary notice to an American friend, Donald K. Adams:

I feel obliged to announce to all those who have taken a friendly interest in the Psychological Institute at Berlin that this institute does not exist any more—though the rooms and the apparatus and Mr. Rupp are still there. The government has decided in May to dismiss all the assistants who were trained by me and in June, during the term, they were suddenly forbidden to continue their work and their teaching: Duncker, von Lauenstein and von Restorff. Since, at my last visit in Berlin, I had expressly stated orally and in official documents that I could not possibly remain as director without the help of my young friends and since this is a clear case of their modern brutality (another man uses this method in order to push *me* out), the measure is morally equivalent to my own dismissal too. I shall have a last interview with the Nazi authorities in August. But there is not one chance in a hundred for my staying on in Germany. . . . We were depressed for some days but have come back to the fighting spirit once more. Personally, I shall be glad when I have no contact with the official Germany of today, and I have so many good friends in this country, more indeed than over there. My deepest anxiety refers to the assistants. I am not yet sure whether I shall be able to place them somewhere.

The new Nazi director of the institute would not allow Köhler's students to remain (Wallach, Note 2); and of course his assistants were gone. A few went to other universities, some emigrated, some died. The young generation of Gestalt psychologists was effectively wiped out.

It is difficult to guess what would have been the effect on psychology in Germany, and indeed in

the world, if the Psychological Institute had been allowed a few more productive years. It was perhaps the outstanding psychological institute of its time. Max Planck, in a letter to Köhler in the midst of the struggle, speaks of the importance of its preservation "in its unique significance for science and for our university." The institute attracted students from many countries; and the ideas of Gestalt psychology were respected and were spreading in Germany and in other countries. It is possible that our science would be different today if that institute had been able to continue its work.

The courageous struggle of Wolfgang Köhler against the Nazis could not save the Psychological Institute. Was that struggle in vain? I think not. For as we look back on it, it shows us once more what a human being can be.

#### REFERENCE NOTES

1. Köhler, W. *Peace and education*. Unpublished lecture given during World War II. In the Library of the American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.
2. Wallach, H. Personal communication, September 10, 1973.

#### REFERENCES

- Crannell, C. W. Wolfgang Köhler. *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*, 1970, 6, 267-268.  
Hartshorne, E. Y. *The German universities and National Socialism*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1937.  
Mandler, J. M., & Mandler, G. The diaspora of experimental psychology: The Gestaltists and others. *Perspectives in American History*, 1968, 2, 371-419.