

Sophie Scholl and The White Rose

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In 1942 a group of medical students in Munich began to write and distribute anti-fascist leaflets clandestinely in the name of the White Rose. Two of them, Hans Scholl and his sister Sophie, were caught in the act of distributing leaflets at their university on February 18, 1943. Along with their comrade Christoph Probst, they were charged with high treason, found guilty by a kangaroo court, and put under the guillotine five days later. Today they and the rest of the group, who were all either executed or sentenced to long prison terms, are regarded as heroes by the German people. They should be so regarded today by anybody struggling for peace, democracy, the rule of law, and social justice.

Last Friday night I watched "Sophie Scholl: the final days," a new German film based on the White Rose history that is playing at the Film Forum in NYC. And yesterday I watched a video of another German film about these youth titled "The White Rose," which I first saw over twenty years ago. I strongly recommend both films, especially since they approach the event from different angles. The first film, directed by Michael Verhoeven and starring Lena Stolze as Sophie Scholl, dwells mostly on events leading up to their arrest while the second starts with their arrest and ends with their martyrdom. Basically, they can be seen almost as part one and two of the same drama.

Most of the action in "Sophie Scholl" takes place in the office of Robert Mohr, a Nazi cop played by Gerald Alexander Held, who begins by using conventional interrogation techniques. He is determined to extract a confession from Sophie (Julia Jentsch) by confronting her with contradictions in her alibi, while she continues to insist on her innocence. Eventually she is overwhelmed by the mass of evidence seized from the apartment she shares with her brother and confesses without acknowledging that what she did was a crime.

Mohr is not satisfied with her confession. He wants her to see herself as a criminal. The dialogue between the two characters at this point turns into a memorable clash of ideas about the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. The cop, who has climbed the Nazi hierarchy from a meager rural background, resents this woman who strikes him as relatively privileged and refined. He cannot understand why these students, who are only attending college through state funds provided by the Nazi party, are such ingrates. He also challenges their patriotism. Why would they want to undermine the fighting will of German troops who are only trying to defend their way of life? Although clearly addressing German history, the film will certainly remind Americans of the conflicts between authority and rebellion that take place here during wartime, especially Vietnam and Iraq.

During their trial, Sophie, her brother, and Christoph Probst answer the lunatic Nazi judge with dignity and courage. The final scenes of the film amount to a kind of Passion Play as the three activists await their execution. In contrast to the older film, "Sophie Scholl" makes their Christian convictions quite clear. For them, resistance to Nazism is obedience to Christ. Sophie repeatedly prays to God in her cell, like a latter-day Joan of Arc.

In an article at <http://www.movienet.com/sscholfinaldays.html>, first-time director Marc Rothmund acknowledges the influence of Michael Verhoeven's 1982 film and the importance of historical accuracy:

When I was growing up in Munich, I remember seeing director Michael Verhoeven's 1982 film The White Rose in school. The movie tells the story of the anti-Nazi group of the same name, and devotes only a few minutes at the end to the arrest, interrogation and execution of White Rose members Sophie and Hans Scholl.

This sparked my interest on the final days of Sophie Scholl and I found out much from researching and reading

newspapers from the period. This 21-year-old woman spent four days in Gestapo headquarters and I learned that there were supposed to be actual transcripts?unpublished documents?of her time there.

Sophie Scholl spent three days in a room being interrogated by a tough 44-year-old Gestapo interrogation officer. Sophie and her brother were so mentally strong that after five hours of intensive interrogations they made the Nazis believe that they were innocent. Unfortunately, Hans Scholl forgot a handwritten note in his pocket that incriminated himself, Sophie and their friend Christoph Probst.

We were extremely gratified to find that not only was it still possible to shoot on original locations such as the University, the Palace of Justice and the Scholl's original house, but we also found Sophie Scholl's sister, who told us many intimate details of their family.

Even more amazing was that we found the son of the Gestapo interrogation officer. He was very generous in helping us to get at the character of his father. We also located the sister of executed White Rose member Willi Graf, who was interrogated by the same officer in the same room and on the same chair as Sophie Scholl. Many other White Rose members, all of them in their eighties, helped us tremendously.

Many aspects of Sophie's story obsessed me. There was the psychological make-up of the Nazi who believed in Hitler but had not murdered anyone personally. There were the executioners?Sophie Scholl's executioner was an eighth-generation German hangman. He killed 3,000 people, but was quoted as saying that he had never seen people going to their death as free and upright as Sophie Scholl and the other members of the White Rose had done. Then there was the life-affirming, positive-minded Sophie Scholl, an extremely courageous young woman who had to come to terms with her death in a very short time.

Watching ?The White Rose? for the first time in nearly 25 years was a deeply moving experience, especially with the cumulative impact of having just watched Rothmund's very fine film. I was far more aware of the relationships between the various characters and how they decided to take action against the Nazi behemoth.

The film makes clear that these were politically na?ve activists who only began to turn decisively against Nazism when it was clear that the system was a failure. Specifically, they and other Germans were becoming traumatized by the huge defeat in Stalingrad and the obvious failure of the Nazi party chiefs to acknowledge their impending doom.

In this light, the White Rose activists are simply the grass roots equivalent of the abortive coup attempt by elements of the German high command that would soon take place. Indeed, some of the White Rose activists who had military connections, including Sophie's boyfriend Willi Graf, a German soldier himself, were striving to coordinate their activities with the broader movement.

One of the key participants in the White Rose movement was Prof. Kurt Huber, a philosophy professor played by Martin Benrath. Huber, who would be found guilty in another show trial and executed, is someone who hates Nazism because it degrades honorable German traditions, including the military. When he proposes that the Germany army be characterized as the savior of the German people in a White Rose leaflet, the students vote him down. They feel that the army has disgraced itself and openly call for its defeat. When Sophie finds herself conscripted into a munitions factory work brigade alongside Russian female prisoners, she stuffs wads of bread in bombshells to sabotage them. Later, her Russian workmate beings wadding bread herself, while smiling at Sophie in solidarity.

Although the White Rose activists were not Marxists by any stretch of the imagination, they had least broken with the anti-Communism that festered at the heart of state-sanctioned ideology. In her introduction to ?The White Rose,? a 1970

collection of relevant material, including a remembrance by Inge Scholl, Sophie's younger sister, Dorothee Scholl observes:

The White Rose clearly and justly stated that "the first concern for any German should not be the military victory over Bolshevism, but the defeat of National Socialism." Most good Germans in 1943 did not agree with that statement. Some were blind enough to hope that after a military victory over the Bolsheviks the decent forces in Germany, both military and civil, would oust the Nazi party. Germans had thoroughly assimilated Nazi propaganda on the threat of Bolshevism. Yet the White Rose persisted: "Do not believe in the National Socialist propaganda that chased the terror of Bolshevism into your bones . . ."

For information on the White Rose, I strongly recommend the website at: <http://www.jlrweb.com/whiterose/>. It includes pictures of Sophie Scholl and others, as well as all of the leaflets they wrote, including the last which starts:

Fellow Fighters in the Resistance!

Shaken and broken, our people behold the loss of the men of Stalingrad. Three hundred and thirty thousand German men have been senselessly and irresponsibly driven to death and destruction by the inspired strategy of our World War I Private First Class. Fuhrer, we thank you!

The German people are in ferment. Will we continue to entrust the fate of our armies to a dilettante? Do we want to sacrifice the rest of German youth to the base ambitions of a Party clique? No, never! The day of reckoning has come - the reckoning of German youth with the most abominable tyrant our people have ever been forced to endure. In the name of German youth we demand restitution by Adolf Hitler's state of our personal freedom, the most precious treasure we have, out of which he has swindled us in the most miserable way.

As inspiring as these two films are, one can only hope that other films are in the offing that document the resistance to Nazism within Germany, especially among the youth. Detlev J.K. Peukert's "Inside Nazi Germany" would be a good place to start for research on future film projects. Peukert describes the activities of the "Edelweiss Pirates," who were working class youth who went on camping trips when they weren't fighting with Nazi youth. By no means ideological, the Pirates were simply sick of being regimented as this song they favored would indicate:

We all sat in the tavern
With a pipe and a glass of wine
A goodly drop of malt and hop,
And the devil calls the tune.

Hark the hearty fellows sing!
Strum that banjo, pluck that string!
And the lasses all join in.
We're going to get rid of Hitler,
And he can't do a thing.

The Hamburg sirens sound,
Time for Navajos to go.
A tavern's just the place
To kiss a girl good-bye.
Rio de Janeiro, caballero, ahoy!

An Edelweiss Pirate is faithful and true.

Hitler's power may lay us low,
And keep us locked in chains,
But we will smash the chains one day,
We'll be free again.
We've got fists and we can fight,
We've got knives and we'll get them out.
We want freedom, don't we, boys?
We're the fighting Navajos.

Out on the high road, down in the ditch
There're some Hitler Youth patrolmen, and they're getting black as pitch.
Sorry if it hurts, mates, sorry we can't stay,
We're Edelweiss Pirates, and we're on our way.
We march by banks of Ruhr and Rhine
And smash the Hitler Youth in twain.
Our song is freedom, love and life,
We're Pirates of the Edelweiss.

Polar Bear, listen, we're talking to you,
Our land isn't free, we're telling you true.
Get out your cudgels and come into town
And smash in the skulls of the bosses in brown.

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