

Der Widerstand

Dissent and Resistance in the Third Reich

THE SECRET WAR AGAINST HITLER



FABIAN VON SCHLABRENDORFF

THE SECRET WAR AGAINST HITLER



THE SECRET WAR

TRANSLATED BY HILDA SIMON

NEW INTRODUCTION BY
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WITH A FOREWORD BY
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AGAINST HITLER

by Fabian von Schlabrendorff

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“A ship may sink, but does not have to strike the flag.”

Nikolaus von Halem,
on being sentenced to death
by the “People’s Court.”



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Introduction

When news of an attempt to kill Hitler reached London in the afternoon of the 20th of July 1944, it came as a surprise and caused amazement. I still remember my excitement at the first fragments of information coming on the ticker tape with British intercepts of German news agency material. (I was working for the British Foreign Office in something called Political Intelligence.) I also remember hearing Hitler's midnight speech in which he assured his people that he was alive and that his survival was an omen from Providence that he must carry on his work.

But I also remember what filtered down as expert and official British reaction on the next day: There was relief at the failure of the plot. Two reasons were given for it: one reasonable, the other less so and, so it seemed to me, excessively cold-blooded. Success would have meant another German "stab-in-the-back" legend and would have bedevilled a new German regime just as the legend that Germany was robbed of victory after the first world war had

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bedevilled the Weimar Republic. That made some sense. The other, to my mind less respectable, reason was that these plotters were not the kind of people the Allies could work with, that they came from the very class that had let Hitler in: too many counts and barons.

The American President had no fondness for the “East-Elbian Junkers” either. The would-be assassin, Colonel Count Claus Schenk von Stauffenberg, came from west of the Elbe and was a Catholic Württemberger—and he was dead—but the other names that surfaced reeked of Prussia: and Prussia was widely taken to be the cause of German perdition and a peril to the world. A year later the Allies abolished the state at their Potsdam Conference. That Hitler could not by any stretch of the imagination be seen as a Prussian, that he was a stateless Austrian until naturalized in Germany less than a year before assuming power, that his cast of mind and speech—his way of being—was the very opposite of Prussian—such facts were rarely considered by those who saw the second world war as a reenactment and continuation of the first.

On 2 August 1944, in a parliamentary speech on the state of the war, Churchill had this to say about the affair:

In Germany tremendous events have occurred which must shake to their foundations the confidence of the people and the loyalty of the troops. The highest personalities in the German Reich are murdering one another, or trying to, while the avenging Armies of the Allies close upon the doomed and ever-narrowing circle of their power. We have never based ourselves on the weakness of our enemy but only on the righteousness of our cause. Therefore, potent as may be these manifestations of internal disease, decisive as they may be one of these days, it is not in them that we

should put our trust, but in our own strong arms and the justice of our cause.¹

It is worth noting that there was consistency in the British view of the German opposition to the Nazi regime as “internal disease,” not as healthy antibodies.

There is a later, apocryphal Churchill quotation haunting some of the literature about the German resistance to Hitler. No source is given beyond “Churchill in the House of Commons 1946.” That is quite a haystack; and it has never been possible to find this needle in it, despite diligent use of an adequate index appended to the Parliamentary Reports:

In Germany there lived an opposition which grew weaker and weaker through its sacrifices and an unnerving international policy, but which belonged to the noblest and greatest that has ever been produced in the political history of any people. These men fought without help from within or without—driven only by the restlessness of their consciences. As long as they lived they were invisible and unrecognisable to us because they had to hide. But in their dead the resistance became visible. These dead do not have it in their power to justify everything that happened in Germany. But their deeds and sacrifices are the foundation of the reconstruction. We hope for the time when this heroic chapter of German domestic history will find its just valuation.²

These are sentiments that the magnanimous wartime leader of Britain may well have held after the war. But they need a proper source to be accepted by history.

This, however, is Fabian von Schlabrendorff’s recollection.

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tion of what Churchill said to him in 1949, ten years after their first meeting: "Reviewing the years that lay between our two meetings, he told me that he realized afterwards that during the war he had been misled by his assistants about the considerable strength and size of the German anti-Hitler resistance."³

Churchill's Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden, in a memorandum of 23 February 1943 on "Morale in Germany" wrote, just days after the Stalingrad surrender, "There is still no evidence of organised opposition to the regime or of conscious and deliberate obstruction of the war effort."⁴ In mid-June 1942 George Bell, the Anglican Bishop of Chichester, had asked Eden for an audience. He wanted to tell him about his meeting with Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Sweden, where he had learned of the opposition to Hitler inside Germany and its hope for British understanding and support. Eden had received him on 30 June, told him of his suspicion that such emissaries could unwittingly serve the Nazis' aim to put out "peace feelers" but promised to study the documents. On 17 July he wrote: "Without casting any reflections on the bona fides of your informants, I am satisfied that it would not be in the national interest for any reply whatever to be sent to them. I realise that this decision may cause you some disappointment, but in view of the delicacy of the issues involved I feel that I must ask you to accept it."⁵

The "delicacy" may in part have been the inability of the Western Allies to mount the Second Front for which Stalin was agitating and the desire, the need, to hold the Coalition together. This, of course, became even more delicate as time passed and the Russians continued to bear the chief burden of the war on land. The Anglo-Americans cleared North Africa, started their campaign in Italy, and

eventually prevailed in the war at sea and in the air. George Bell continued not only to try to convince his government that there was “another Germany” plotting to overthrow Hitler but also that carpet bombing (the destruction of cities from the air) was both immoral and counterproductive. Inside the Foreign Office Eden was less polite about him than in public. There is a marginal note by Eden in an internal Foreign Office document in which he calls Bell “this pestilent priest.”

Another adviser, John Wheeler-Bennett, was a historian who knew a lot about Germany, especially its Weimar and Nazi periods, and Churchill may have seen no reason not to trust him—though he may have been chilled by Wheeler-Bennett’s comments on the trials and executions, Hitler’s revenge after the miscarriage of the coup. On 25 July Wheeler-Bennett wrote:

It may be said with some definiteness that we are better off with things as they are today than if the plot of July 20th had succeeded and Hitler had been assassinated. In this event the “Old Army” Generals would have taken over and, as may be deduced from the recent statement from the Vatican as to the Pope’s readiness to mediate, would have put into operation through Baron von Weizsäcker a peace move, already prepared, in which Germany would admit herself defeated and would sue for terms other than those of Unconditional Surrender. By the failure of the plot we have been spared the embarrassments, both at home and in the United States, which might have resulted from such a move and, moreover, the present purge is presumably removing from the scene numerous individuals who might have caused us difficulty, not only had the plot succeeded, but also after the defeat of Nazi Germany.⁶

It is worth quoting this opinion verbatim, because it en-

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capsulates most of the factors being weighed. The loss of lives was hardly a consideration, indeed the loss of plotters' lives evidently had its positive aspect. The subsequent enormous loss of Allied—and Jewish—lives in the eight and one-half months the war in Europe continued may have been regarded as a necessary price to pay for the elimination of the German menace. Continued Soviet cooperation was considered a necessity and brought the Russian army to Berlin and to the Elbe and resulted in the division of Europe. Among the Americans, as among the British, there were doubters of the policy of Unconditional Surrender, but they did not prevail.

American press comment on the plot and the punishment of the people involved in it indulged in bloodthirsty rejoicings. The *New York Times* instantly fell in with the assumption or suggestion that it was a “generals’ plot” and headlined its comment on the first of the ghastly People’s Court trials: “Hitler Hangs His Generals.”⁷ The *New York Herald Tribune* on the same day, 9 August 1944, opined: “Let the generals kill the corporal or vice-versa, preferably both.”⁸

That first trial, of Field Marshal Erwin von Witzleben, three generals, and four other officers—all expelled from the Wehrmacht by a dishonorable “Court of Honor” and thereby surrendered to the jurisdiction of the “People’s Court”—was a show trial. Subsequent trials were transacted more discreetly. It seemed inadvisable to allow public disproof of Hitler’s claim that the plot had been the doing of a “tiny clique.” Publicity of the trials would have revealed the wide ramifications of the plot and the true character of the accused. Access to them was severely restricted, and they were not reported on, though photographic and sound recordings were made, fragments of

which can still be seen and heard, for example in Hava Kohav Beller's film *The Restless Conscience*.

Such, then, were some of the international circumstances and sentiments in which those opposed to the Nazi regime in Germany and willing to do something about it had to act. The internal conditions were no more propitious. The SS was immensely powerful, and despite the shock of Stalingrad most of the people remained loyal to Hitler. Any reappraisal after Stalingrad was hampered by the almost simultaneous Casablanca formula of Unconditional Surrender, which meant surrender not only to the Anglo-Americans but to Stalin.

Nevertheless, a determined man like Henning von Tresckow persevered in his efforts to eliminate Hitler. His faithful lieutenant, Fabian von Schlabrendorff, managed to convey explosives disguised as a package of two bottles of Cointreau onto Hitler's plane when the commander-in-chief had at last been lured to the headquarters of Army Group Center in Russia; he even managed to retrieve the package when it had failed to go off and to cover all traces of the attempt. That was in March 1943. A few days later, another attempt, this time in Berlin, by Colonel Baron Rudolf von Gersdorff failed because Hitler's sixth sense made him abridge the ceremony at which that officer was going to blow himself up with his commander-in-chief.

But it is time to say something about Schlabrendorff and his book. The first version of his account of the secret war against Hitler was entitled *Offiziere gegen Hitler*⁹—officers, not generals, against Hitler. The difficulties he and his friend and superior, Major General von Tresckow, had with their efforts to enlist generals in the enterprise of overturning the regime were recorded in that book. It was short and appeared under the name of the OSS officer

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who had discovered him among a group of prominent prisoners liberated by the Americans. It was published in 1946, in Switzerland, as were the other early books on the German opposition to the Nazis. The first publication of the letters Helmuth James von Moltke wrote to his wife, during and after his trial, took place in England. The Germans had to wait. But people who wanted to learn something about that secret war were deeply impressed by the early Schlabrendorff book when copies reached England; an English translation was published in London in 1948 under the title *Revolt Against Hitler*.¹⁰ It was as short as the original German version and as moving in its immediacy.

That immediacy was lost in the later and much longer American version, which is republished here. In his Preface Schlabrendorff himself described what drove him to it: chiefly Wheeler-Bennett's interpretation in his *Nemesis of Power*¹¹ and the best-selling book by the American journalist William Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*.¹² Readers must judge for themselves what has been gained and what may have been lost. They should make the imaginative effort to restore the spare original account by mentally subtracting later additions on the British attitude to the German resistance; the disappointment at the Munich Agreement; resistance activities on the Eastern front; and more about the military head of the conspiracy, Ludwig Beck. Lively criticism of the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg is among other additions, and there is an interesting case of a German court foiling the knavish tricks of some Nazis in the early days of the regime. Later, of course, Special Courts and the infamous People's Court were added to carry out the intentions of the regime more faithfully.

Indeed Hitler appreciatively referred to the President of

the People's Court, Roland Freisler, as "our Vishinsky." Otherwise, with very few exceptions, Hitler hated the legal profession, and he probably had cause. It was Freisler who hurried to Munich in February 1943 to see to the swift beheading of the rebellious students of the White Rose and who presided over the trials after July 1944 until, in February 1945, he was killed in an Allied air raid—clutching the dossier of the accused—while Schlabrendorff's trial was in progress. It was one of the series of miracles that saved the life of the most persistent and intrepid enemy of the regime.

Schlabrendorff had not been arrested until the middle of August 1944. Tresckow's last service to the cause had been to disguise his suicide as a case of death in action. The police commissar later told the prisoner that four factors had pointed to his probable involvement in the plot: There was, first, theological literature in his luggage—a book on Catholic moral theology, a book on Protestant ethics, publications on the rapprochement between Catholics and Protestants, and a Bible. Second, he was a lawyer in civilian life, and the Third Reich had little use for lawyers. Third, he was an officer; in recent years the most troublesome opposition had come from officers, and the Gestapo was unable to suppress it. Fourth, he was a member of the nobility; that caste was by nature inimical to Adolf Hitler and National Socialism.¹³

It is worth examining these points—and interesting that the evidence of serious Christian convictions and concerns ranked first. The regime tried to hide its antagonism to the churches, especially during the war, most especially in the war against Bolshevism and the "atheistic" Soviet Union. The struggle continued, however, and indeed intensified. The secret morale and "public opinion" reports

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of the Security Service regularly included sections on opposition to the regime on the part of churches and their following or sympathizers. These might have even included a communist like Georg Elser, the man who planted the first bomb against Hitler in 1939 and who in the weeks of solitary and careful preparation often sought solace and strength by visiting churches. And it is altogether striking how many of the active opponents of the regime and particularly how many of the men involved in the successive conspiracies were serious and committed Christians who objected to the neo-paganism of the Nazis. Gestapo reports show this clearly and even show that Catholic objections to “neo-paganism” were objections to the idolatry of race and to anti-Semitic policies and that the ideological watchdogs of the regime understood this.

As for Schlabrendorff himself, he rarely travelled without theological reading matter, even after the war. It was probably the conflict with Hitler and National Socialism that had provoked this abiding interest. He once told me that German Protestantism had been somnolent and possibly moribund until the Nazi challenge roused it—or at least part of it. The wartime and postwar religious revival in Germany bore him out—even in communist East Germany. Martyrs like Dietrich Bonhoeffer may have helped, though his own official church disowned him for being “political.” Catholics were less hamstrung by Romans 13 and its Lutheran interpretation.

That Schlabrendorff was a lawyer in peacetime was the second suspicious circumstance. In this book he may, by his account of an example of recalcitrance in the legal profession, give the impression that he was satisfied with its overall performance. He was not. He saw clearly that it had, to a large extent, gone along with the administration

of iniquitous laws and regulations. He deplored this slavish obedience to Positive Law; he had his doubts about Natural Law, but his interest in moral theology and ethics shows his concern with ethical and theological underpinnings of any system of law, however “historically” evolved. That Hitler loathed the legal profession—despite its weaknesses and shortcomings—is made quite clear in public and private utterances, in his speeches and *Table Talk*. That speaks *for* the profession.

Third, there was a prima facie case for suspicion in Schlabrendorff’s status as officer, albeit a very junior one. The title of his first book was no accident. Neither was the Allied decision to treat the conspiracy as a “generals’ plot.” It should be obvious that one cannot hope to overturn a government in wartime without an involvement of generals. But both the first book and this one show clearly how hard it was to enlist generals in the cause, how weak and vacillating some possible candidates were, and how morally obtuse most of them showed themselves to be in their failure to respond to Hitler’s revelations about the mode of warfare to be adopted in the East. It was the junior officers who carried the main burden. Tresckow, Witzleben, Beck, Stülpnagel, and a few others were exceptions. But colonels, captains, and lieutenants were willing to stake their lives and lost them in large numbers in the relentless proceedings after the failure of the coup. Yet it is a noteworthy fact that even those not involved but who knew something about the plotting did not denounce their colleagues until it was all over and the tortures and trials started.

The same goes for the aristocracy, the fourth “suspicious” category. There was enough solidarity in that caste for denunciations to have been exceedingly rare, even

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among those who had been approached about cooperation and had declined. This does not mean that there were no Nazis in the aristocracy; indeed, many of the plotters had been early supporters of National Socialism. But there was a feeling of noblesse oblige among those who were not Nazi careerists.

There were, of course, connections between the suspicious categories that led to the assumption of guilt in Schlabrendorff's case. For instance, a divisional press on the Eastern front printed copies of Bishop Galen's sermons against the "euthanasia" campaign to kill the inmates of institutions and disseminated them in the army. Bishop Preysing of Berlin, the most consistent and determined opponent of the regime in the German hierarchy, had studied law and was perfectly able to discuss the maximal exploitation of the very narrow margin of manoeuvre within legal limits of resistance with the lawyer Helmuth James von Moltke.¹⁴

After the war Schlabrendorff went back to the practice of law and especially concerned himself with looking after the cases of the next of kin of the plotters. He was still doing it in 1960, when he turned up in Alexandria, Virginia, to look for documentation among the captured German records to substantiate the claims of these widows and orphans. He also fought for compensation for Ernst Niekisch, a man of consistently Left and pro-Russian orientation, who had lost his health and eyesight during years of Nazi incarceration and was for many years denied compensation by the Berlin and Bonn authorities because after his liberation he had joined the Communist Party and worked for the East German government while living in West Berlin. Schlabrendorff went as far as Strasbourg to invoke the European human rights convention against the

decisions of the German courts. He won, just in time, as he said, to provide for Niekisch's widow.¹⁵

For some years he served as judge on the Federal Constitutional Court, then went back to his law practice when his term was up. I only saw him in court once, in a case against a neo-Nazi who had maligned the memory of Dietrich Bonhoeffer by publicly accusing him of treason from base motives. Defamation of the dead is an indictable offense in Germany. The young prosecutor and judge were helpless against the insolence of the accused, who called in question the legitimacy of the Federal Republic and its right to try him. Schlabrendorff, appearing as counsel for the two surviving sisters of Bonhoeffer, reasserted the majesty of the law. For a moment he seemed to be its embodiment. The courtroom in Heilbronn was packed with the defendant's sympathizers. When it was over, there was a little demonstration by more neo-Nazis outside the court house, carrying placards denouncing the "Traitors' Republic." But they kept a respectful distance. Nonetheless it was an ugly scene and sad for the survivor, who had been Bonhoeffer's cell-neighbour in the Gestapo prison. The melancholy of the survivor never quite left him, and loyalty to his dead companions was a strong motive in all his post-war activities. It informed the first account he gave of their story and is still noticeable in the later version—which, however, lacks the "Totenliste," a first list of 126 names of people who perished after the failure of the attempt.

Anti-aristocratic resentment has been as harmful to a clear focus on the German resistance to the Nazis as pro-aristocratic snobbery, both in Germany and abroad. Naturally, sociological factors played their part in those catastrophic twelve years and in the history that led up to them. But the stark problems confronting Germans once

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Hitler and his cohorts were in power and were supported or at least tolerated by the majority transcendent class.

Men and women had to make individual decisions or made them by default by allowing themselves to be carried along. Resistance could take many forms, one of them being help to the persecuted and endangered. Protests could make such help harder to render by attracting attention and inviting punishment and prevention of further assistance. Even discreet help, such as that given by Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Hans von Dohnanyi to a group of Jews they managed to get to safety in Switzerland by having them declared agents of the intelligence service, led not only to the arrest of the helpers—and Dohnanyi had been a very active player in the conspiracy—but to the severe reduction in the radius of activity of Hans Oster and Wilhelm Canaris, the head of the Abwehr who had until then been able to support many resistance undertakings; and eventually it led to the execution of those four, just days before the end of the war.

This is another part of the context in which the story told here must be seen. The story concerns the endeavor to overturn an evil regime, first in order to prevent Hitler's war, then in order to end it. When Schlabrendorff spoke to Churchill, the conservative backbencher, in 1939 and pleaded for British firmness, he told him that he was not a Nazi but a patriot. The plotters were patriots—especially a man like Oster, who kept telling the Dutch and Belgians the dates fixed for the German offensive in the West.

Tresckow summed up the reason why the coup must be attempted even at a late stage when the chances of success were minimal. He said: "The assassination must be undertaken at any cost. Even should that fail, the coup d'état must be attempted. For it is no longer its practical purpose

that matters, but the proof to the world and to history that the men of the German resistance movement dared to stake their lives and take the decisive step. Compared with this object nothing else matters.”¹⁶ On the 21st of July, before killing himself, Tresckow added: “Just as God once promised Abraham that he would spare Sodom if only ten just men could be found in the city, I hope that for our sake he will not destroy Germany.”¹⁷

Fabian von Schlabrendorff died on the 3rd of September 1980, forty-one years after the beginning of Hitler’s war.

Beate Ruhm von Oppen

Notes

1. Martin Gilbert, *Road to Victory: Winston S. Churchill 1941–1945* (London, 1986), p. 868.
2. Erich Zimmermann and Hans-Adolf Jacobsen, eds., *Germans Against Hitler: July 20, 1944* (Bonn, 1964), p. 64.
3. See p. 98 in this volume.
4. Armin Boyens, *Kirchenkampf und Oekumene 1939–1945* (Munich, 1973), p. 213.
5. Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Man of Vision, Man of Courage* (London and New York, 1970), p. 670.
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7. Klemens von Klemperer, *German Resistance Against Hitler: The Search for Allies Abroad 1938–1945* (Oxford, 1992), p. 386.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Gero v.S. Gaevernitz, ed., *Offiziere gegen Hitler. Nach einem Erlebnisbericht von Fabian von Schlabrendorff.*
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11. John W. Wheeler-Bennett, *The Nemesis of Power: The German Army in Politics 1918–1945* (London and New York, 1954).

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12. William L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: A History of Nazi Germany* (New York, 1960).

13. Gaevernitz, *Offiziere*, pp. 168f. and Gaevernitz, *Revolt*, p. 157.

14. Beate Ruhm von Oppen, ed., *Helmuth James von Moltke: Letters to Freya 1939–1945* (New York, 1990), pp. 16, 23, 184f., 287, 334.

15. Joseph E. Drexel, ed., *Der Fall Niekisch: eine Dokumentation* (Cologne and Berlin, 1964). This book affords fascinating glimpses into the intricacies of the status of Berlin under Allied occupation and the legal consequences of the Cold War.

16. See p. 277 in this volume.

17. See p. 295 in this volume.

Foreword

It has been said that the character of a people is revealed in its heroes. During the Nazi period in Germany, heroism was largely obscured by the excesses of the regime. But on July 20, 1944, a culminating event took place at Rastenburg, East Prussia, which, though tragic in its outcome, gives the Germans, as it would any people, a noble and heroic standard. Slowly perhaps the German people are beginning to comprehend the full significance of the events of that day and the Resistance Movement which led to it.

Not only within Germany but without, an ever-widening circle of people is obtaining a deeper insight into the causes, the inspiration, and the extent of the Resistance. As more information becomes available it is apparent that the word "plot" is scarcely adequate to cover the urge on the part of a small but inspired group of Germans to restore decency to their nation by ridding it of the

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leadership of Adolf Hitler. To be sure, there was a plot to kill Hitler, and the Resistance could not have had the significance it has attained without the attempt and the elements of destruction and martyrdom which flowed from it. But the Resistance was more than a plot. Just as Hitler's wrath after July 20 reached beyond the men directly involved, so the compelling urge to to defy Hitler and his regime reached far beyond the actual planning that placed Stauffenberg's bomb under Hitler's map table at Rastenburg.

I have attempted, since the first reports came in of the nature and extent of the Resistance Movement in Germany, to keep abreast of the materials and literature related to it. I have become increasingly impressed by the quality and faith of many of the small band of men and women who had the courage to undertake this effort against what was probably the most repressive police state of modern times. The Resistance was more than mere dissent; it was a solid determination, though not well-organized, to destroy the central authority of the Nazi state. It was, as Stauffenberg called it, a revolt against the "Evil Incarnate." Being human and therefore uneven in temperament and character, the men and women involved in the movement against Hitler were not all endowed with the same degree of spiritual and moral strength. They were not all cast in a heroic mold but many were; they were not all self-effacing martyrs but it is difficult to point to one among them whose motivation was personal advancement. They all had in common a determination to replace Hitler and what he stood for at the risk of their lives and fortunes.

The more I have learned of the *Widerstand*, the more

I have become convinced that the late President Heuss of Germany made the prophetic comment when he said of the July 20 attempt on Hitler's life that it was "the gift to Germany's future." Had there been no Resistance, had there not been the outright, dangerous and determined revolt, there would have been little for the new German nation to draw from the Nazi years and from World War II other than the memory of the aggression and madness of Hitler, the frightful persecutions, and the defeat—a dismal tradition for the future of Germany and mankind. The determined, even though unsuccessful, attempt gave the Germans an example of the high courage and purpose of a remarkable group of men and women who were prepared to go to the bitter end of their convictions. The courage and moral stature of men like Bonhoeffer, Tresckow, Leber, Dohnanyi, Kleist, Oster—how difficult it is to name any without naming a dozen more!—represent a pattern on which posterity can base its appraisal.

I venture to prophesy that in spite of attempts within and without Germany to disparage the importance of their sacrifice, those who did speak out and did act out their parts in the tragedy will be accepted, as time goes on, as national heroes and heroines. Inefficient, poorly organized as they were, they put their full personal responsibility on the line. They showed that there were men and women in Nazi Germany who, despite the organized pressure of a brutal police state, had the capacity to act, and in so many cases, to die, as moral human beings.

One of the authentic and persistent heroes of the *Widerstand* is Fabian von Schlabrendorff, the author of this book. He has written before of his part in the Resistance. He was in it from the beginning to the end. Owing his

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own escape from death to a succession of miracles, he saw and communed with most of the leaders of the Revolt, witnessing the last moments of many and sharing their tortures.

Fabian von Schlabrendorff now gives us a series of vignettes of the main participants, many of which shed new light on various aspects of the Resistance. Again there comes through with unmistakable emphasis the moral imperative which impelled so many of his band. It is a poignant story and it loses nothing in the retelling by this unassuming citizen and jurist who, when the challenge came, accepted every risk and endured every agony for the cause.

It is impossible today for serious students to contend that the Resistance was merely the move of a few ambitious, scheming officers and aristocrats seeking to save themselves and their country from the consequences of defeat. It may take a long time for the Germans to place the men and women of the Resistance in the shrines of their national heroes. Many of them deserve a place not only in a German shrine, but in all places devoted to the memory of those of whatever nationality or creed who have been prepared to perform their individual and personal responsibility to the furtherance of the right—even unto death.

John J. McCloy

Preface

The building was nothing but a bombed-out, burned-out, blackened shell. With some difficulty, my companion and I picked our way through the ruins, finally locating the entrance to the stairway that led to the cellars. At the bottom of the stairs, a long row of cells opened onto a corridor. The floor was strewn with rubble, the cells were empty, but on the doors the numbers were still clearly legible. Slowly I walked along, reading the numbers, until I finally came to a stop in front of cell No. 25.

A flood of memories assailed me as I stood looking at the small bare room in which I had been imprisoned for many interminable months. I thought of the desolate nights on the prison cot, when I had lain chained hand and foot and unable to move, at times exhausted after lengthy interrogations by the Gestapo. For the bombed-out building which my companion and I were exploring

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on that summer day in 1945 had been the most infamous Gestapo prison in Berlin, and within that long row of now empty cells had been confined, less than a year before, a very special group of prisoners: all members of the German anti-Hitler resistance who were apprehended after the abortive coup d'état of July 20, 1944.

As we walked from cell to cell, reading the numbers, name after name came to my lips—all friends and companions who had since died at the hands of the Gestapo and SS. Many of them had met their end in one of the numerous concentration camps through which I, too, had been dragged after we prisoners who had survived the first few months after July 20 were evacuated from Berlin early in 1945. During the following months, when I had to brace myself each morning anew for the end that seemed inevitable, the death that was always so close at hand, freedom and safety were a remote and unreal dream.

On that August day in 1945, the fact that I was exploring the ruins of my former prison still held a quality of unreality. It was only three months since I, together with a group of other political prisoners, had been liberated from the clutches of the SS by the American army. In the course of events following that liberation, I had become acquainted with Gero von Gaevernitz, special assistant to the regional chief of the OSS, Allan Dulles. It was Gaevernitz who had made possible, among other things, the trip to Berlin and our inspection of what was left of the Gestapo headquarters. The most important result of our association, however, was the book which forms the cornerstone of the present volume, and which was written during the summer months of 1945.

It all started in Capri where the liberated prisoners of

the group to which I belonged were quartered, by the American military authorities, in the Hotel Paradiso. Gaevernitz, who had been sent to Capri by General Lyman Lemnitzer with orders to investigate the background of the individual prisoners, became engaged in conversations with me, and finally suggested that I accompany him to Switzerland, where he wanted me to give an account of my activities in the German resistance movement.

I agreed to his proposal, and spent the following weeks dictating to his secretary some of my experiences as an active member of the anti-Hitler resistance in Germany. Gaevernitz, after editing the manuscript, published it under the title: *Offiziere gegen Hitler* (Officers Against Hitler). At that time the occupation authorities in Germany did not permit any publications by Germans, and therefore my story had to appear as one of the "based-upon-the-account-of" type of books. A number of other restrictions were also imposed upon the contents so that the scope of the book was severely limited and much of importance had to be left unsaid. The value of the original book lies mainly in the fact that some of my personal experiences—especially those dealing with details of my imprisonment and trial—were written down while they were still fresh and vivid in my mind, and before they became dulled by the passage of time and new impressions. To Gero von Gaevernitz must go the credit of having realized the importance of this, and of having made possible publication of an account of this kind at so early a date. I would like to take this opportunity to express my appreciation of his efforts in getting the original book published.

In the years that followed many changes took place. Occupation in the West ended, and the zones of Germany

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that had been occupied by the Western Powers became the Federal Republic of Germany. All restrictions on publications by Germans were dropped. It was then that many people urged me to revise and enlarge my original book and add all the parts that had never been published before, thus giving a more complete picture of the development and activities of the resistance so far as I had been involved in it.

Even though I realized that such a revision was called for, I could not bring myself to undertake the task, partly because, by that time, my career as a jurist was taking up an increasing amount of my time. The chief reason, however, was that I shied away from reopening old wounds that had never really healed. In addition, the post-war years had brought so bountiful a crop of books about the Nazi era, both by German and non-German authors, that it seemed to me the subject was being dealt with to saturation.

On reading some of these books, however, I began to realize that post-war appraisal of the Third Reich and of the role played by the German anti-Hitler resistance contained many errors and erroneous conclusions. This became especially clear when William L. Shirer's *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* was published, quickly made the best-seller lists, and was acclaimed as the authoritative source of information about the entire Hitler era. I then decided that, in the interests of historical accuracy, I must publish the facts which I knew from my own experience, and which in many cases shed a different light on the events of those years. It seemed all the more important because I am one of the handful of surviving active and early members of the German resistance, and probably

the only one who knows from his own experience certain details of resistance activity within the military group.

I therefore dug out my old notes, added some new ones, and began the task of rewriting the story of the twelve years during which I was one of those who, opposed to the Nazi regime from the very beginning, became actively involved in the plans to assassinate Hitler.

This story is still basically a personal account, and does not at all pretend to be a complete history of the German resistance. I do, however, begin by offering a short historical analysis of the reasons and circumstances that led to the rise of Adolf Hitler in 1933. This seems important for a better understanding by the non-German reader of both the phenomenon of the Hitler rule and the growth of the resistance.

Of necessity I must take issue with some of Shirer's contentions and statements in the course of my book, although it is not my aim to criticize his impressive tome. Such a task is best left to the historians, and indeed has already been admirably dealt with by Professor Klaus Epstein, of Brown University, in his brilliant review of *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* (April 1961). Whenever I contradict Shirer it is done either because I find it impossible to agree with his interpretation of German history, or because the facts as I know them do not agree with his version. Personal knowledge and information often supply information that cannot be gained by the most diligent perusal of documents and statistics.

If my story contributes to a better understanding of the phenomenon of the Nazi era, and most especially to an appreciation of the reasons that compelled the members of the German resistance to risk and sacrifice their lives,

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their families, friends, and fortunes in the fight against Nazism, I shall feel that the purpose of this book has been accomplished.

I want to express my heartfelt appreciation to Hilda Simon, of New York City, without whom this book would not have been possible. In the first place, a translation of this kind of book calls for intimate personal knowledge of the conditions and atmosphere existing in the Third Reich as well as in the anti-Nazi circles of that time. Miss Simon has this knowledge. In the second place, it was not a question of simply translating an existing book or manuscript. My German book constitutes only part of this present volume; the other part is made up of numerous notes and records—all of them so far unpublished—which I had jotted down some time ago in an effort to complete my account of the years of anti-Nazi resistance activity. These notes were all in longhand, and Miss Simon had to decipher them—an achievement in itself—translate them, and insert them in the right places, tying them in with the rest of the book. She has handled this difficult job with great sensitivity and understanding. In addition, I am very much pleased with the fine portrait drawings she did for this book.

I also want to thank Jerome S. Ozer of Pitman Publishing Corporation for his great cooperation and assistance in getting this book published, and Stefan Salter for his dignified design and invaluable suggestions.

Fabian von Schlabrendorff

*Wiesbaden
Spring, 1965*

THE SECRET WAR AGAINST HITLER



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