

The 55th Berlin Film Festival—Part 3

An increasingly complex portrayal of German anti-fascism

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This is the third in a series of articles written in response to the recent 55th Berlinale—the Berlin film festival—February 10-20.

The Downfall: Hitler and the End of the Third Reich (Der Untergang), which depicts the last days of the Third Reich, represented a fresh attempt by German filmmaking to overcome cinematic cliché in the representation of fascism. The film contradicted the widespread conception of the Germans as a “*Tätervolk*”—i.e., that the entire German population share responsibility for the rise of Nazism. Two new films, *Sophie Scholl—The Final Days* and *Edelweiss Pirates*, continue this welcome trend.

Sophie Scholl—The Final Days, directed by Marc Rothemund, reconstructs the last six days in the life of anti-fascist student Sophie Scholl. She was arrested in February 1943 for distributing leaflets at the University of Munich and, together with other members of the student resistance movement *Weißer Rose* (White Rose), was executed shortly after.

The film is based on transcripts of Scholl’s police interrogation as well as those of her show trial by the Nazis’ so-called “People’s Court.” These documents remained inaccessible to the public for decades, buried in the archives of the German Democratic Republic (former East Germany). The filmmakers conducted interviews with witnesses, including Scholl’s younger sister and a son of one of the trial’s participants.

The film centres on the trial and Scholl’s questioning, during which she stuck to her principles and defended herself admirably and honestly. No longer limiting herself to attempts to prove her innocence, she begins to take up questions of freedom, conscience and responsibility. Apparently, even Gestapo officials were impressed by the tenacity of the young woman.

Scholl was a Christian, but the film makes clear it was not simply her religious beliefs that fuelled her resistance to the Nazis. After all, a considerable number of church representatives supported the fascists, and many others simply kept their mouths shut. Her resistance was also based on growing popular opposition to the war and its consequences. The White Rose was not a handful of idealists swimming against the stream of mass support by the German people for Hitler.

Scholl herself declares that at one point she had hoped that Hitler would intervene to solve social problems and establish conditions in which everyone could be free and happy. But her hopes had

been dashed, and now she was active in producing and distributing leaflets that would articulate ideas shared by many.

At the start of the school year, students had protested a speech given by a Munich Nazi leader who declared that female students should concentrate on bearing children rather than studying. In February 1943, the Nazis were forced to concede that the German army had suffered a devastating defeat at the battle of Stalingrad and ordered a period of mourning for fallen troops. A former member of the White Rose group, Susanne Zeller-Hirzel, recalls that in 1943, “everyone realised that the war had been lost.”

Zeller-Hirzel also recalls the inspirational and emotional effect of the sixth leaflet to be distributed by *Weißer Rose* a short time later—how overwhelming it was that people were now saying things, that thousands were now reading the call to put an end to it all and that Hitler was a swindler.

Sophie Scholl and her friends were convinced that Hitler could not survive much longer in office. Their actions were intended to pave the way for a mass movement that would lead to the downfall of Hitler. While the group’s first leaflets had only a small circulation of about 100, they later reached thousands with their views. The state reacted with a show trial, death sentences, and abrupt and immediate executions as a public deterrent.

A movement from below in Germany against Hitler was in the interests of neither the Allies nor the foreign policy of the Soviet Union. The Stalinist faction had usurped power in the USSR and the leadership of the Communist International in the mid-1920s, leading to defeat in China in 1926-1927 and Germany in 1933. The disastrous policies of the German Communist Party (KPD), its refusal to organise a united working class struggle against fascism, helped Hitler come to power. This shattering defeat, complemented later by the signing of the Hitler-Stalin pact, led to the moral and political disintegration of many KPD members.

The relationship between Scholl and Else Gebel that develops during Sophie’s brief spell in prison highlights the demoralised state of many ordinary members of the Communist Party. The elderly Gebel, originally detained for her connections to the Communist Party and ordered to supervise Scholl during her last days, is amazed by Scholl’s courage and idealism. In the film, Gebel justifies her service to the Nazis, arguing that nothing can be done aside from merely surviving. Scholl vehemently rejects Gebel’s proposal that she cooperate with the Gestapo.

The current interest in films about the Nazi period is by no means accidental. On the one hand, it reflects a widespread concern and consternation over the emergence of ultra-right-wing groups such as the neo-fascist NPD (National Democratic Party of Germany). There is also growing disgust over the current promotion of egoism, high flyers and the marginalising of the socially disadvantaged. Whereas Sophie Scholl is viewed as fighting for social justice, the present is dominated by unjust and anti-social policies.

Producer Sven Burgemeister has remarked: “Our film is not primarily about the Third Reich, but rather civil courage: a theme that is always relevant. I can imagine that people even today would long for a figure like Sophie Scholl, someone who, without thinking about her own fate, relentlessly fought for society—and who has therefore given us an example that has earned a place in our consciousness.” Director Marc Rothemund explained that films such as this one are important, because “it is about human dignity, about compassion and sympathy, which one has to retain in life.”

The fifth leaflet distributed by the White Rose group deals with the perspective for a united Europe after Hitler. It reads: “The working classes must be freed from their state of ignoble slavery through rational socialism. The delusion of an autarkic society must disappear from Europe. Every person, each individual has a right to the best things in this world!” What a sharp contrast to the realities of life in today’s Europe!

Similar themes arise in the highly recommended *Edelweiss Pirates*, directed by Niko von Glasow, which sheds light on a little-known chapter of German anti-fascism.

The Edelweiss pirates were mostly non-political youth, primarily from a working class milieu, who wanted to avoid the organised drills of the Hitler youth movement, the *Hitler Jugend (HJ)*. In place of the *HJ* emblem, they wore their own Edelweiss pirate badges and sang their own irreverent songs, often parodies of official *HJ* songs, German pop tunes or patriotic hymns like “*Die Wacht am Rhein*” (“*The Watch on the Rhine*”). In the latter, for example, the lines “Beloved fatherland, have no fear, Beloved fatherland, have no fear” are replaced by “Beloved fatherland, have no fear, Nazi pigs still stink here.”

The film, which treats the last years of the war in Cologne, is introduced by former Edelweiss pirate Jean Jülich, upon whose recollections the film is based. None of his former youthful comrades survived the war. Jülich’s father was a member of the Communist Party, dragged off by the Nazis in 1936.

In *Edelweiss Pirates*, with Cologne under constant bombardment, scores of young people, among them Karl, fight their own war against the Nazis. They save the life of a concentration camp prisoner, Hans, whom the Nazis have forced to defuse bombs; they conduct brawls with Hitler youth; scrawl slogans on walls; and steal a wagonload of butter.

They also carry pistols taken from dead soldiers or obtained by other means and go hunting for Nazis. Among their victims is a member of the SA (the Nazi paramilitary organisation), an “angel of death,” who informs women of husbands killed in action—“dead heroes”—only then to initiate affairs with them. The youth are also no strangers to alcohol and listen to the swing of Django

Reinhardt, the founder of jazz in France, where the war is nearly at an end thanks to the American army.

It is a time when painful decisions have to be made quickly. To save the life of his younger brother, Karl betrays Hans. Later the group of youth plan to blow up the Gestapo headquarters. Before the plan can be carried out, they are arrested and many of them hanged in public. Miraculously, Karl manages to survive.

The film is about how ordinary people under extreme conditions—the pressure of a dictatorship, the constant fear for relatives at the front, life in terrible, half-destroyed basements—retain their humanity and dignity. The extreme circumstances give rise to deeply-held human feelings and desires—and, above all, solidarity.

Sophie Scholl—The Final Days and *Edelweiss Pirates* are both impressive films, but they have experienced quite different fates at the box office. *Sophie Scholl* is currently screening in every major cinema across Germany. A book on the film has also recently been published. In contrast, the filmmakers of *Edelweiss Pirates* are still fighting to get a release. Up to this point no distributor has been prepared to show the film in Germany, although it received an enthusiastic response from its Berlinale audience and has also screened at various international film festivals, leading to its distribution in other countries.

While *Sophie Scholl* depicts a more idealistic form of resistance, “We fight with the word,” *Edelweiss Pirates* portrays an intuitive and elementary resistance from the grass roots, raw and uncultivated, which developed in a spontaneous and essentially unrestrained manner. The Edelweiss Pirates were not humanists attached to a pacifist resistance movement. They procured weapons and used them. Their existence and their actions were a measure of how powerful social divisions remained in Germany under Hitler, as did the spirit and the will to fight, particularly among the youth. Under today’s conditions where social tensions are increasing, such a film is undoubtedly a source of disquiet for certain influential circles.

Even today the Edelweiss Pirates are still struggling to gain some type of official recognition in Germany. In a discussion with the cinema audience, Jean Jülich said, “We are the street urchins of the resistance”; he explained that his executed comrades have still not been rehabilitated and to this day remain recorded in the files of the Cologne government administration as criminals.

Both these films deserve to reach the widest audience possible.



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