

A letter on Sophie Scholl: The Final Days

29 April 2006

The following letter was received on the WSWs review “Sophie Scholl: The last days in the life of a German anti-fascist”

As most critics have reported, *Sophie Scholl: The Final Days*, has strengths and weaknesses as a film. At its best, the film shows some of the consciousness and political growth of a famous heroine and an anti-fascist movement, the intellectual and political intensity, sophistication and confusion of the late fascist period, and the cruel realities of a fascist regime and war. At its worst, the film can be said to be at times grandiose, mystified or overblown.

There is a repeated reference to religious analogy or symbolism in the film that rises to an almost beatification, sanctification or mythologization of Scholl. We see Sophie looking for something she cannot find. At its most obvious, this mystification takes the form of a visual moment of her observation of the sun’s light from the prison cell window. Also, we see a repeated reference to an interior glass architectural dome, which, along with a corresponding increase in the intensity of the accompanying musical score, serves to mystify or symbolize a religiosity or holiness. Given the references to the “white rose” already in the film, and the discussions with her cellmate and later communion scene, the additional, Baroque or Expressionistic-like visual references seem an artistic attempt to sanctify and mystify her life and rebellion. This film could be a contemporary attempt to send people in need of a new political start down a road of Christian salvation or Christian socialism, or simply a religious and mentally idealistic historical view, coming at a time of new hardships and class conflict in Germany.

As far as strengths go, the main strength of this film is its use of the actual interrogation transcript, which shows the detail and sophistication of the investigation and questioning, while providing a glimpse into the political and intellectual climate of the time. The

transcript provides a realistic connection to the actual social and personal perspectives and events of the time, including the philosophical and social outlooks of the Gestapo interrogator and Scholl. In both, there is an intellectual curiosity and intensity, but a lack of physical and social science beneath their philosophies and value concepts. They seem to beg for a more dialectical, Marxist and less metaphysical view. A question seems to form out of the interpersonal and intellectual conflict within the interrogator’s office and beneath the backdrop of the great destruction of the war: this is the unfinished question of the working class itself.

Scholl’s background is notable. She grew up the daughter of the mayor of Forchtenberg am Kocher during the Third Reich, spent time in the Hitler Youth, worked as a kindergarten teacher and later a nursery teacher in the Labor Service. She enrolled in the University of Munich as a student of biology and philosophy. She also served in a metallurgical plant in the summer of 1942. She, and many of her circle, gradually became critical of fascist regimentation and the regime itself.

The film captures best the desperate reaction by the regime as the war passes its political turning point. This quick and hurried acceleration, the film captures as no other. Expressed is a psychology of desperation and doubt in state form: the claustrophobic feeling of a government, philosophy and war gone mad. The interrogation, and short escapes from it, takes place in a shady, dark office and a prison cell, as bombs fall around and fascist radio is piped in between. The film reflects this direction and increased tempo uniquely, using the actual audio recording of the February 18, 1943, “Sportspalast” speech by the Nazi propaganda minister, Dr. Joseph Goebbels. Within the prison where Scholl is questioned and held, prisoners and guards are able to hear Goebbels’s speech as a radio broadcast. Goebbels boasts that the regime will now “take the

gloves off,” as if he and his friends had been behaving like gentlemen all along. His audience responds madly.

In fact, the regime must have known the weak position it was in with the surrender at Stalingrad on February 2, 1943, and well knew the cruel methods being taken on and behind the front lines, even while the news was kept from the German people. Of course, the Freicorps and Nazi movements had specialized in racism and murder back to the days of the old Bolsheviks. Soon, however, the loss at Stalingrad would be followed by the disaster at Kursk and the invasion and uprising in Italy. But, for now, economic pace is stepped up to a “total war” footing in an attempt to match or exceed production by the allies. There is an economic intensification and speed-up of production. The entire economy and population is to be utilized for the war effort.

Goebbels, now also aware of growing rebellion against the regime, seems to want to motivate or control the revolutionary instinct and rebellion present, but suppressed, in the German working class, and funnel it into the war effort, instead of against Hitler’s regime, when he promises haltingly, with revolutionary rhetoric, “we will even try to reduce some of the bourgeoisie.” The contradiction between his rhetoric and reality is extreme and absurd, given the capitalistic and imperialistic evolution of his regime, the war and the international capital chain. At the same time, Sophie Scholl is pushed and pulled faster into interrogation and trial phases and quickly sentenced and put to death on February 22.

Following the executions by the top hats of the death chamber guillotine, the film gives us an ironic twist. Sophie Scholl’s final leaflet has been smuggled out of Germany and provided to the allied forces. The leaflet, which the Third Reich took such extreme measures to track down, suppress and destroy, is duplicated and dropped over Germany from allied bombers. I found myself thinking that even a better choice of text to drop would have been [Leon Trotsky’s] *Permanent Revolution*, or a product of the Fourth International, however impossible and incongruous that would have been. Although depicting a heroic and courageous life, given the limitations of the situation, this movie takes the viewer in a theological and mystified direction. In this film, “rational socialism” is left somewhere in the dust and confusion of religion, warfare and history,

perhaps to a greater extent than even Sophie Scholl would have liked or approved of, if the text of the fifth leaflet is to be taken into account. In addition, I would be interested in seeing a similar movie based on historical documents that is a realistic portrayal of a Marxist hero or heroine of the time, if one could be found.

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