

Sophie Scholl: The last days in the life of a German anti-fascist

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13 April 2006

Sophie Scholl—The Final Days, directed by Marc Rothemund, written by Fred Breinersdorfer

Sophie Scholl—The Final Days is currently running at cinemas in North America. We are reposting below a comment on the film that was included as part of coverage of the Berlin film festival in March 2005 (The 55th Berlin Film Festival—Part 3: An increasingly complex portrayal of German anti-fascism)

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 *Weiße 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 *Weiße 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 1926-27 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 in Germany 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!



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