

Fred Breinersdorfer, writer of *Sophie Scholl—The Final Days*, speaks with the WSWS

Richard Phillips
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Sophie Scholl—*The Final Days* is currently screening at Australian cinemas. Directed by Marc Rothemund and written by Fred Breinersdorfer, the film powerfully dramatises the activities of the White Rose student group in Germany, an anti-Nazi organisation formed in 1942. Sophie Scholl, her brother Hans and another member of the group were arrested in early 1943, after distributing leaflets at the University of Munich.

The White Rose leaflet called on students to rise up against the fascist regime, following Germany's defeat at Stalingrad, and denounced Hitler as "the most contemptible tyrant our people has ever endured". They were put on trial four days later, found guilty and executed by guillotine a few hours after the verdict. (See review "Sophie Scholl: The last days in the life of a German anti-fascist").

Scriptwriter Fred Breinersdorfer, who is a lawyer, crime fiction writer and playwright, recently visited Australia where he spoke with the World Socialist Web Site about the award-winning movie.

Richard Phillips: There have already been several films about Sophie Scholl. Why did you decide to make another?

Fred Breinersdorfer: This is the third film about Sophie Scholl but it is such a classic German story and one that is thrilling and very emotional that we thought it would be possible to do another version. At the same time, a new space opened up for us after we discovered the Nazi interrogation protocols in the former DDR [Deutsche Demokratische Republik, former East Germany]. This gave us the opportunity to look in depth at what happened to Sophie. I think the success of the film in Germany and internationally has confirmed that our decision was a good one.

I'm a friend of Michael Verhoeven [director of *The White Rose* (1982)] and so I talked with him about the project. He explained that in the 80s, when he was making his film, it was not possible to shoot this sort of political film in such an emotional way.

RP: What sort of restrictions existed in the 1980s?

FB: There were no restrictions on directors but after the war in the early 1950s, a lot of German people regarded the Resistance as traitors. I remember my parents thought this way. They believed that all Germans should have loyally followed Hitler and those that didn't must have been traitors. This was the older generation.

The second generation after the war, and I belong to this group because I was born in 1946, had a different attitude. We believed that people had to understand that the Resistance was a very good thing and that German history without this opposition movement would have been even crueler than it was. So we fought for monuments to be erected and for streets and schools to be named after Sophie and Hans Scholl and others who opposed the Nazis.

Now there is a new generation and although they might know about Sophie Scholl and the White Rose students they don't have an emotional connection with them. They tend to look at this history as something set in marble, so our idea was to revive this history and show Sophie, her

brother and the students in a more emotional way.

RP: At the Q & A after the screening in Sydney one audience member disagreed with your suggestion that the anti-Hitler Resistance had been frowned upon immediately after the war. Can you comment?

FB: Of course there were some who fought for recognition of the Resistance at this time, especially the parents of those who were captured and killed by the Nazis. But I looked at a wide range of public opinion from those days.

It's important to understand the thinking at this time. The war and the bombing had seriously damaged Germany—the nation had been defeated and many people were suffering—and so lots of people didn't want to look at the past.

When I was growing up I used to ask questions about what had happened and was told, by teachers as well as my parents, that, "Yes, Germany had been through a tragedy but we had to look forward to the future." There were those who claimed that Hitler was a good guy and the problem was that he had bad advisors. These sorts of arguments were put forward and so it was a difficult situation.

RP: How much of the film's dialogue is taken from the transcripts and how did you discover these documents?

FB: There are only a few sections but they gave us a much clearer picture of what happened during the four days in the Gestapo prison.

The documents were not transcripts but a résumé or summary and so I only took a few sentences, not more than ten, for the film. I also developed a lot of dialogue from the White Rose leaflets, so the script is a mixture. The main thing is the documents allowed us to reconstruct exactly what happened.

The original material came from the Nazis' so-called Peoples Court. This was seized by the Soviet troops when they came to Munich and taken to Moscow. Then, after the DDR was established, they were moved to East Berlin where the Stasi [former East German Ministry for State Security] had a special division for historical documentation. But the DDR was not interested in releasing any material about the student resistance because it regarded it as some kind of bourgeois movement. They preferred to only promote the communist and socialist opposition to Hitler.

These archives became accessible after the fall of the Berlin Wall but nobody seemed to care very much. First we heard rumours that there were transcriptions somewhere and then discovered that they were not difficult to find at all. These have now been put in a book that I published as part of the film production. Those who want to read the originals can also go to the archives.

RP: Does this mean that the White Rose movement did not receive any recognition in the Eastern bloc?

FB: There was no recognition. They just ignored it.

RP: One of the movie's strong elements was how it revealed that Sophie Scholl's courage was based on her recognition that Hitler's regime was weak and isolated. As she said to the interrogator, "If you're so powerful

why do you feel so threatened by a few students?" Can you elaborate?"

FB: Yes, Hitler's regime was very paranoid and they were particularly concerned following their defeat at Stalingrad. This was the first time the regime had to publicly accept that they had lost a whole army in the East. This was when Goebbels made his speech about total war.

On the one hand, I suppose you could say the regime was isolated but they still had quite a few supporters. On the other hand, these students were deeply political and their opinions very intense. If you read the diaries and letters of Sophie Scholl and her brother you find very literary writing and, even in their very private letters, serious political issues are always raised. Their resistance probably started as a result of political agitation at home because the university at Munich was as "brown" as you can imagine.

RP: As the film shows, Sophie is able to confront her accusers because she had confidence that the Nazi regime was not going to survive for very long.

FB: You can also read in her diary that she felt that the Nazi terror would end at some point and after the fall of Stalingrad they thought this was very near.

They sincerely believed that there would only be another six or eight weeks of war and that's why they came out very strongly in their sixth leaflet, hoping that their agitation would turn around history and stop the terrible human sacrifice. The tragedy was that the Nazi regime was still strong internally and able to force more sacrifices from the population for another two years.

Years ago I was told by my mother-in-law, who was a friend of Hans Scholl and went to Munich University, that on February 22 [the day of the execution] the university was like a refrigerator. It was icy cold, with no uprising or movement against the Nazis.

It was a tragedy that there was no actual uprising and that they sacrificed their lives. But eventually their ideas were victorious. In my eyes this long-term victory is much more important than short-term successes.

RP: The most significant reason for this tragedy was because the German working class had been split in the early 30s by the policies of the Soviet Stalinist bureaucracy and the KPD [German Communist Party], which allowed Hitler's regime to come to power without a fight. It was then able to crush the organised working class.

FB: Most Germans were convinced that Hitler was the right leader and the majority followed him up to the last days. At the same time the terror of the Gestapo was very powerful and the regime was determined to stay in power and crush all internal critics. Everything was forbidden and those that disagreed were put in concentration camps and killed there, so the working-class organisations were destroyed systematically in the 1930s. It had been crushed as a political movement.

RP: The exchanges between Sophie Scholl and the KPD member imprisoned with her are interesting. The KPD member comes across as a rather defeated individual. Could you comment on this?

FB: When I started working on this the name of Sophie's interrogator, Robert Mohr, and her cellmate, Else Gebel, were known but little more than that. We had no biographies and so we had to do a lot of research to find some traces.

Else Gebel had been in prison one year and four days, as we show in the film. She was secretary to the owner of a big warehouse in Munich and came from a good family, but not a political family. She was strongly influenced by her brother, who was a high-ranking manager in a company in Leipzig. He was not a working class man but in spite of that he joined the communist resistance, convinced that they could do something.

I think Else also felt this way too but her opposition was more or less a spontaneous and emotional one. Her brother was executed in 1944 in Berlin, just before the end of the war.

Else argues with Sophie in my script, but of course Sophie is from a much more political and religious background and is stronger.

The political dialogue between Mohr, the Gestapo interrogator, and Sophie is my invention because I felt it was necessary to have one scene in the middle of the film so the audience can watch both opinions fighting each other.

A lot of Sophie's arguments I developed from her letters, the leaflets and things that were published by her sister after the war, and that's why her argument is very strong against the bullshit of the Nazi interrogator.

RP: The fourth White Rose leaflet is particularly powerful, especially where it declares the necessity to educate the next generation to prevent the Nazi crimes being repeated and so that the regime's petty scoundrels don't go unpunished. Some of these scoundrels, however, were able to maintain their positions in the post-war state apparatus.

FB: Unfortunately that's true. Roland Freisler, the chief judge of the so-called People's Court, was killed in an Allied bomb attack on Munich in 1945, but a lot of them survived. Two-thirds of those from the Peoples Court, which was not a court but a terror instrument and consisted of 276 lawyers in different ranks and positions, went directly into the new state administrations and law courts—in the West and in the East—after the war. And the first law passed in West Germany after the war was amnesty for low-rank Nazi officials.

I even had a school director at my school who was a real Nazi. We fought his ideas and there were also other teachers who fought him. He kept saying, "No, no I had nothing to do with that." It took a long time before these things could be properly discussed in my country

RP: What do you think is precipitating the resurgence of interest in figures like Sophie Scholl and related issues?

A: That's a good question and I don't have a clear answer. When we started working on the film we had various individuals telling us that it would only attract the older generation. People said that the younger generation already knew this story from their schools and therefore won't be interested. In fact, we found out after the film was released that more than 50 percent of those coming were under-25 years.

Some people speculate that this was because it's a very emotional film, but I think the younger generation wants to know what the real truth was about the Nazi regime. These were the basic questions I had when I was young. I wanted to know who supported the Nazis and why.

RP: The film also resonates because it connects with concerns about the attacks on democratic rights taking place under the so-called "war against terror". Watching those interrogations must make people think about what is going on in Guantánamo. Did you have that in mind when writing the script?

FB: Yes, that was part of it. It's interesting because we have received offers from groups who want to use my script and stage it as a theatre production. One stage director who wrote to me a few days ago wants to have the actors dressed in the orange Guantánamo Bay jail uniforms.

When we began this project we felt that the Sophie Scholl story was valuable because it would allow us to educate people about how the Nazis operated. It's very important to learn from this film—not just simply to know the historical dates and things like that—but to understand how the terrorist Nazi state system worked. I also wanted to show Sophie's determination, and that of the Resistance, and in this way provide an example for others.



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