

While unquestionably influential for its size, the organized Jewish community cannot match the clout of such lobbying powerhouses as the American Association of Retired Persons or the American Medical Association. When organized Jewry challenges the business community (as AIPAC did in the fight over the sale of AWACS aircraft to Saudi Arabia), or runs up against an American President (as AIPAC and other organizations did with George Bush in the battle over loan guarantees for Israel), it has failed at least as often as it has succeeded.

GOLDBERG'S SECOND idea is that American Jews, for all their political strength, are ill-served by the organizations that speak and act in their name. In particular, Goldberg faults what he describes as the new Jewish leadership which rose to prominence in the 1980's; it is not, he contends, truly representative of American Jews, and, to make matters worse, it has given up "high-minded principle" and the pursuit of "equality, tolerance, and social justice" for a far less attractive, "neo-conservative" set of values, namely, the self-interest of Jews and Jews alone.

In criticizing the supposedly unrepresentative nature of American Jewish leadership, Goldberg echoes a traditional populist plaint, one that goes back at least to Rabbi Stephen Wise's attack in the second decade of this century on the self-styled "Our Crowd" elitism of the German Jews who had formed the American Jewish Committee. Whatever its relevance then, the critique has long been rendered moot by the welter of groups that have sprung up to fill the Jewish public square and to represent virtually every point of view that wishes to be represented.

But the other plank in Goldberg's indictment is the one he is truly passionate about. Thus, he writes caustically that American Jewish leaders not only are tied too closely to the present government in Israel, but ex-

hibit excessive "loyalty to the Jewish people, commitment to its survival, and hostility toward its enemies." In short, American Jewish leadership cares too much about Jews.

Would that it were so. With respect to Israel, Jewish organizations in the United States tend to treat new Israeli governments (be they Labor or Likud) according to the precept long sanctioned by the British: the king is dead, long live the king. Admittedly, there are exceptions to this rule, but if anything, the major Jewish organizations favor Labor governments over Likud; they have certainly not forged close links with Benjamin Netanyahu's new administration in Jerusalem.

As for Goldberg's tirade on the organized community's supposed abandonment of its pursuit of "the public interest" for the crabbed terrain of "parochial" Jewish concerns, it is so far from the truth as to border on the ludicrous. An inventory of policy statements and resolutions issued by major Jewish organizations would reveal a very different picture. On matters ranging from abortion to "comparable worth" to saving the whales, Jewish agencies have engaged in an activism that often has little to do with Jewish concerns, and everything to do with promoting the agenda of contemporary liberalism.

Goldberg is not satisfied by any of this. The interests of American Jewry would be served, he believes, only if Jewish organizations redoubled their efforts to advance "a traditional American Jewish message of compassion," and did so in conjunction with the New Deal coalition of blacks, trade unionists, intellectuals, and Protestant church groups. To judge by what has happened in American politics in recent years—the New Deal coalition has drifted sharply to the Left and faded in strength while the center has shifted to the Right—Goldberg's is a formula not for Jewish power but for political irrelevancy. With all the other currents causing Jewish influ-

ence in the United States to dwindle, this is one formula the community could do without.

### If Only . . .

#### Plotting Hitler's Death: The Story of the German Resistance

by Joachim Fest

translated by Bruce Little

*Metropolitan Books. 419 pp. \$30.00*

Reviewed by  
Josef Joffe

GERMANS HAVE long harbored a strange ambivalence toward those of their countrymen who tried to kill Hitler. The Left never forgave the plotters their aristocratic background; the Right could never stomach the fact that saving the Fatherland also required acts of high treason.

Never mind that most of the names of those involved—Tresckow, Kleist, Moltke, Stauffenberg—read like a "Who's Who" of Germany's finest. Never mind that these were martyrs who "cleansed our German name of some of the shame Hitler has cast on it," as Theodor Heuss, the first president of the postwar Federal Republic, would put it. The Left saw them as reactionaries who at first had happily sided with Hitler and later fought not for a pure liberal democracy but for their own class privilege; allegedly, they tried to get rid of Hitler not for noble moral reasons but in order to gain a last-minute deal with the Allies. On the

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Right, as late as 1986 the revisionist historian Andreas Hillgruber was asking how anybody could "contemplate a *putsch* in the face of catastrophe—while East Prussia was about to fall to the Red Army?"

Today, the Stauffenbergs and Schlabrendorffs, the "Men of the 20th of July" as they are known in the German vernacular after their attempt to assassinate Hitler on that date in 1944, are safely ensconced in the pantheon of postwar German democracy. Schools and army barracks have been named after them; the Plötzensee prison in Berlin, where many of them were butchered in 1944, has become something of a national shrine. We also know a great deal about the plotters themselves—from the diaries both of those who died and of those who survived, from accounts written by family members, and from dozens of scholarly and journalistic treatises.

So why read yet another book about the German resistance? The answer comes in three parts. First, anything by Joachim Fest is required reading, especially when he is ranging across the twelve years of the "Thousand Year Reich." His *Hitler* (1973, English translation 1974), a magisterial biography, is still the best single volume on the man who came out of nowhere to pervert the course of 20th-century history. And Fest's earlier book, *The Face of the Third Reich* (1963, English translation 1969), is an indelible portrait of the personalities who gave form to the entire Nazi period.

Second, Fest—the long-time co-editor of the conservative *Frankfurter Allgemeine* newspaper—is a writer of extraordinary breadth and talent. He has something to say, and he knows how to say it. To Clio's craft, he brings a fine eye for atmosphere, personality, and nuance, and a pen that extracts engrossing drama from the barren facts that are but the historian's raw material. So it is with *Plotting Hitler's Death*. Over time, the conspirators have become remote, statue-like figures; Fest (aid-

ed here by the felicitous translation of Bruce Little), returns them to life in an almost literary manner, confronting us not only with their heroism but also with their strange diffidence. We meet men who withstand endless torture—and others who willingly betray their comrades. We learn about their ideals and ideologies, their agony and their confusion. To my knowledge, no other author has rendered such a finely etched portrait of the men who tried and tried—and failed and failed.

Third, the drama of the German Resistance still has no real denouement; there are many unresolved issues, especially today, when the old questions about German history have resurfaced with a vengeance. Take Daniel Jonah Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners* (1996), a book that has suddenly reverted to the old answers of the 1940's and 1950's. The Holocaust, Goldhagen argues, could only have happened in Germany because the Germans were the way they were—infected, alone among the nations, by an "eliminationist anti-Semitism" that turned annihilationist when the time was ripe.

What, then, of the men who died so that history would have more to report about Nazi Germany than million-fold murder? Did they embody a different, a better Germany? Do they deserve their place in the German pantheon—or were they just a bunch of hapless amateurs retroactively beatified by a nation searching for even the tiniest morsels of moral worth?

JOACHIM FEST is not one to grind axes. Above all, he is dispassionate and subtle, as critical of the heroes of his tale as he is impatient with their detractors on the Left and on the Right. *Did* these representatives of the Prussian upper classes, as the Left has charged, only start priming their bombs in the summer of 1944, when anybody could see that the war was already lost? Not so. Fest's story begins in 1934, when, even as the

Wehrmacht as a whole was succumbing to *Der Führer*, three leading figures of the resistance-to-be—Franz Halder, Henning von Tresckow, and Hans Oster—moved into opposition.\* By 1938, at the height of Hitler's prestige and power, they were ready to strike—as they would be again in 1939.

But they did not strike—and this is where Fest's plot begins to thicken. If the conspirators represented the "better Germany," why were they so inept? Unlike Hans and Sophie Scholl, the heroic naïfs who led the Munich student-resistance circle known as the "White Rose," these men were trained warriors, part of an elite network with access to intelligence, arms, and secure communications. And yet, as Fest's narrative unfolds, the reader develops the sinking feeling that he is up against the Keystone Kops as filmed by Claude Chabrol.

Fest puts it more politely. The plotters were forever "impeded by their notions of tradition, morality, and good upper-class manners"; they were, therefore, "never really able to match the ruthlessness of the regime." Instead of single-mindedly focusing their energies on chopping off the head of the Nazi monster, they would debate, philosophize, and waver. Had they not sworn an oath of loyalty to the Fuehrer? Would they not betray the Fatherland even as they were trying to save it? Their story, one of idealism and self-sacrifice, is also one of incompetence and irresolution.

CONSIDER A noble figure like Claus von Stauffenberg, chief of staff to the commander of the Reserve Army and the key figure in the attempted assassination. Stauffenberg was sup-

\* Halder was Army chief of staff from 1938 to 1942; he was freed shortly before his scheduled execution at the end of the war. Tresckow rose to chief of staff of the Second Army; he killed himself after the failure of the July 1944 plot. Oster, eventually a brigadier-general, ran the central division of military intelligence; he was hanged one month before V-E Day.

posed to detonate two bombs in the "Wolf's Lair" at Rastenburg in East Prussia where Hitler was meeting with his generals. But he armed only one of them. "Nobody knows," writes Fest, "why Stauffenberg did not place the second bomb in his briefcase," adding:

What is clear, according to all experts, is that the inclusion of the second charge . . . would have magnified the power of the blast not twofold but many times, killing everyone in the room outright.

And thus Hitler, barely scorched, could claim that once more he had been saved by "divine providence."

Or consider Ludwig Beck, who had been Army chief of staff until 1938 and who was slated by the plotters to succeed Hitler after their coup. Trying to commit suicide when the plot failed, he fired his pistol twice but merely mangled himself, and had to be put out of his death throes by a sergeant of the detail that had come to arrest him. As Admiral Canaris, chief of military intelligence who would be hanged by the Nazis in April 1945, put it two days later to a friend: "That, my dear fellow, was not the way to go about it."

Could they have done better? Somberly, Fest notes that they *should* have. Had the plotters succeeded in killing Hitler in the summer of 1944 and somehow wrested an armistice from the Allies, the lives of almost five million German soldiers would have been spared over the next nine months—not to speak of millions of Allied and Jewish lives saved. Sympathetic to the plotters, rendering their disparate lives and motives in subtle detail, Fest ultimately offers a grim diagnosis.

Ironically, it mimics Goldhagen. There was, Fest implies, something

irreducibly "German" about the would-be saviors—"deeply ingrained attitudes and behaviors that inhibited any kind of revolt." When one of the plotters, Ernst von Weizsäcker, was asked whether, if worst came to worst, he had a pistol, he replied: "I am sorry, but I was not brought up to kill anyone." As Fest writes:

Virtually all the opposition groups . . . liked to think of themselves as above the concerns of the grimy everyday world, and that attitude seriously compromised their ability to accomplish anything.

FEST'S IS a melancholy tale, rendered sadder still by the failure of the West to understand, let alone help, the conspirators. As early as 1938, various emissaries of the resistance embarked on a "curious pilgrimage" to Paris and London. But the "French did not know what to make of a German who would warn a foreign power about the designs of his own government," and in England, Ewald von Kleist (whose son would later make an attempt on Hitler's life) met in vain with Chamberlain's diplomatic adviser Sir Robert Vansittart and also with Winston Churchill. The British, notes Fest, "could never free themselves of the suspicion that they were dealing with a bunch of traitors, or Nazis in disguise." The Americans were just as unreceptive.

Was it all in vain, then? Ironically, we have Hitler himself to tell us no. After the July 20 debacle, he wanted to stage a Stalinesque show-trial, with a few carefully chosen victims who would be crushed in front of the cameras and radio microphones. But then the hundreds of arrestees turned into thousands, and the key figures would not break. In-

stead of remorse and supplication, Count Schulenburg offered sheer defiance, telling the court:

We resolved to take this deed upon ourselves in order to save Germany from indescribable misery. I realize that I shall be hanged, but I do not regret what I did and only hope that someone else will succeed in luckier circumstances.

Startled and frightened by the depth of the opposition, Hitler forbade any further reporting of the trials; not even the executions were to be publicly announced.

Nevertheless, Fest ends on a harsh note. In retrospect, he writes, the plotters' "inaction" weighs more heavily than their heroism—and makes them look like "nothing more than a passionate debating society." But is that all? In his introductory chapter, Fest himself offers a very different judgment. Their failure, he states there, "does not in any way detract from their memory or from the example they set."

And so the ambivalence Germans have always felt toward their would-be saviors turns out to be the most enduring part of the story, with Fest merely adding a new dimension to it. In his book, the plotters are neither traitors nor towering idols, neither lily-pure democrats nor retrograde Junkers. They are strange and tormented souls, spurred to act by the moral law even as they are reined in by a culture that exacts duty and obedience *über alles*. Fest would like us to like them, but he is too formidable a historian to succumb to easy typecasting. In the end, he offers only more ambiguity. Heroes? Yes. But quixotic ones, bumbling and indecisive. He might have added that history reserves its cruelest verdict for those who lack the competence of their convictions.