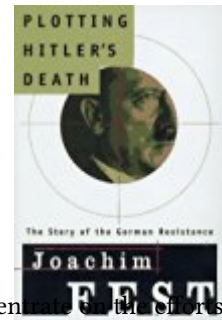


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Joachim C. Fest. *Plotting Hitler's Death: The Story of German Resistance*. New York: Metropolitan Books., 1996. ix + 419 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8050-4213-9.

Reviewed by Glenn R. Wilksinson (Mount Royal College, Calgary)
Published on H-PCAACA (August, 1997)



Resistance and collaboration during the Second World War are issues which are still discussed and debated at length. Indeed, the line is often blurred by the necessity to survive and feed one's family, rather than clearly delineated by moral and ethical concerns. Resistance workers and supporters are clearly praised in countries such as France, Scandinavia, the Netherlands, and Belgium as resistance was perhaps the primary method of overcoming the guilt of defeat and occupation. The German resistance movement, however, is seen rather differently, both within and without the country.

Joachim Fest, the German journalist who wrote *Hitler* in the 1970s (the book is still in print), has penned another fascinating work on Hitler and the Third Reich, this time concentrating on those who resisted the Nazis and conspired to kill Adolph Hitler. While the book focuses on the more famous assassination attempt of July 20, 1944, it also delves into many of the lesser known and less spectacular failures to remove Hitler and end the regime, such as the September Plot of 1938. The 420 page book, sprinkled with 76 striking and useful black and white photographs of prominent players and dramatic scenes, begins with a lengthy and stimulating examination of 'The Resistance that Never Was.' Here, Fest describes how many groups within Nazi Germany were either intimidated, manipulated, or threatened into supporting the regime, while others, such as the civil service, with its natural anti-democratic tendencies, compared the aimlessness and indecisiveness of the Weimar years to the direction and confidence of the Nazis, and gave their support willingly. He then goes on to describe how the German Army, itself a political player in the Weimar Republic, divided into younger officers who supported Hitler, and older, more conservative officers who hoped to maintain the prestige they traditionally enjoyed. The remain-

ing eight chapters of the book concern the efforts to assassinate Hitler, and center around military circles.

The story, filled as it is with conspirators both minor and major, is made easier to follow by the inclusion of a 'Short Biographies' section at the end. It includes important resisters, such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer (but not Martin Niemoller), who Fest discusses quite tangentially. Other main characters include the dashing Claus Schenk von Stauffenberg, who planted the bomb in Hitler's Wolf's Lair in the July 20th attempt. Fest does well to place his conspirators within their historical context, looking at resistance and the motivation for it—along with the dilemma most felt in committing 'treason.' These issues, Fest rightly argues, are complex and crucial to our understanding of the German resistance and to the failure of the British, in particular, to take advantage of those who opposed Hitler within Germany in the years immediately before and during the war. While one might like to know more about sources (the book does not have a bibliography, so readers are forced to troll through the many endnotes) and how they are used, the book is well researched, and on the whole does well to convey the heroism and nerve of the resisters.

Yet, the book's subtitle is rather disingenuous. While famous resisters, such as Bonhoeffer and Niemoller, are glossed over, so are non-military resistance organizations. The 'Red Orchestra,' the Solf Circle, Socialist Front, 'Beginning Anew,' 'White Rose,' and, perhaps one of the more interesting popular resistance groups, the working class 'Edelweiss Pirates.' Fest concentrates on the Generals and, later, the Colonels in their attempts to gain either self-respect for themselves or the German Army. He notes how many groups, particularly those centered around the Goerdeler Group, the Kriesau Circle (though

less so) and primarily those associated with Stauffenberg's attempt, struggled with planning (some aspects seemingly Pythonesque in their internal rivalries and competing concerns), conceiving the organization post-Hitler Germany (whether, for example, the Allies would accept an offer for an end to the war without demanding unconditional surrender), and were at times paralyzed with indecision (rather ironic for military men of action). There is little concern for ordinary people, except with regard to the degree to which 'the people' would support and accept a coup, given concerns for legitimacy and the overwhelming popular support for Hitler. This gives the book an imbalance which mars an otherwise excellent overview of what was later called 'the resistance' in Germany. If the book had been concerned with elite resistance to Hitler, rather than 'the German' resistance, one could overlook this blemish.

However, while there is no new research here, this is a very good summary of secondary works available both in German and in English. Fest writes in a way that strikes

up and maintains interest for a popular audience, while never seeming to be 'unacademic' or overly speculative, a difficult and praiseworthy talent. He allows us to understand the pressures and concerns of the conspirators, and they are never judged harshly for their hesitancy or their dysfunctional interaction. Fest's message is that resistance to despotism should always be the goal of people wishing to be free and that no matter how futile, it is always redemptive both on a personal and a national level. This is a message perhaps lost on non-German readers, but one with quite a resonance in a country which still debates whether the resisters should be praised as German patriots or condemned as traitors and oath-breakers.

This review is copyrighted (c) 1997 by H-Net and the Popular Culture and the American Culture Associations. It may be reproduced electronically for educational or scholarly use. The Associations reserve print rights and permissions. (Contact: P.C.Rollins at the following electronic address: Rollins@osuunx.ucc.okstate.edu)

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-pcaaca>

Citation: Glenn R. Wilksinson. Review of Fest, Joachim C., *Plotting Hitler's Death: The Story of German Resistance*. H-PCAACA, H-Net Reviews. August, 1997.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1183>

Copyright © 1997 by H-Net and the Popular Culture and the American Culture Associations, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact P.C. Rollins at Rollins@osuunx.ucc.okstate.edu or the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.