

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Otto Friedrich. *Blood & Iron: From Bismarck to Hitler: The von Moltke Family's Impact on German History*. New York: HarperCollins, 1995. xiii + 434 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-06-016866-7.

Peter Hoffmann. *Stauffenberg: A Family History, 1905-1944*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1995. xvii + 424 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-45307-3.

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Reading these volumes in tandem, one is reminded of the plots of two staples of the American college German drama course. The first is Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Egmont*, the second Friedrich Schiller's *Maria Stuart*. In both pieces the hero/heroine is portrayed as having attained the apex of human development. Clearly both Lamoral, the Duke of Egmont, and Mary Stuart, aka Mary Queen of Scots, are superior individuals. Both combine the physical perfection we associate with contemporary stars of the silver screen with the intellectual attainments of persons singled out by the MacArthur Foundation for "genius grants." They are pure of heart, cleansed of soul, and naive to the point of utter credulity. So superior are they that when confronted with evil, their primary reaction consists of confusion and indecision, which inevitably bring them to tragic ends.

That loss, however, does not mean that the forces of evil necessarily win a permanent victory. Indeed, in both pieces the place of the hero/heroine is quickly assumed by personages who, although far more prosaic in background and outlook, know what they want and are shrewd enough to attain it. In the case of the books at hand, the ultimate beneficiary would be Konrad Adenauer, whose disdainful reaction to military plots against the Nazi regime was to ask, "Have you ever seen a general with an intelligent face?" (Henning Koehler, *Adenauer: Eine politische Biographie*. Berlin, 1994, p. 312).

This is a significant point for both authors, but especially for Otto Friedrich. Both demonstrate considerable sympathy for their protagonists' highmindedness at the expense of the nasty realities under which they lived and ultimately died. Both ignore the now thirty-year-old work of the political scientist George Romoser, whose short studies of the German Resistance to Hitler demonstrated that the assorted plans for a Hitlerless Germany concocted by the generally privileged Prussian nobles

who attempted to overthrow the Fuehrer were recipes for political disaster. Similarly, neither author exhibits much appreciation for Gordon Craig's compelling argument in his *Oxford History of Germany* that much of twentieth-century Germany's political tragedy is rooted in the tendency of Germany's creative intellectuals—and the protagonists of both the works under review thought of themselves as such—to divorce their art from the world around them, all the while seeking norms of political behavior from a literary tradition, alternately mesmerized by and repelled from the exercise of political power. And, as will be seen below in the case of the brothers Stauffenberg, their participation in that world of creative literature made them particularly tragic participants in this conundrum.

To read these two volumes is to confront very different levels of quality. The first, by the late Otto Friedrich, a former editor of *Time* magazine and the author of many popularized histories, tells the specialist reader little that is new. The style is entertaining but the substance consists essentially of gleanings from the works of others, most notably Gordon Craig's military histories, as well as the works of Barbara Tuchman, Sir Michael Howard, Peter Paret, and James Joll. Accordingly, his protagonists, several generations of Moltkes, frequently disappear from the text for many pages at a time as Friedrich narrates more about their times than their lives.

This tendency is especially pronounced in the book's longest section, that on the dynasty's most successful member, Field Marshal Helmuth Carl Bernhard von Moltke, the victor of Bismarck's wars of unification and the book's only consummate realist. The third of five sons of an impecunious Mecklenburg noble and gentleman farmer who would become a Danish subject, the young man found a purpose early in his life. At the age of six he witnessed the sack of Luebeck at the hands

of Napoleon's army, an event that imbued him with a lifelong francophobia. Trained in the Danish army, the young Moltke transferred to the Prussian Army at the age of twenty-one because the latter offered more career opportunities. Married at forty-two to a woman twenty-six years his junior, Moltke would die childless at the age of 91.

In the meantime his mastery of geography, map-making, languages, Carl von Clausewitz's doctrines, and the application of railways to warfare would make him a legend in his own lifetime. It was an amazing career for a soldier who never commanded a regiment in combat before 1866 (p. 119). More important for Friedrich's purposes, success in war would lead in 1867 to a government gift of 200,000 thalers, a token of gratitude to the victor of Koeniggraetz. Those funds, plus the interest earned on them, would enable Moltke to purchase and maintain a Silesian estate, Kreisau, which would remain the Moltke family seat until 1945.

On the Field Marshal's death in 1891, the estate passed to a nephew, the older brother of the hapless General Helmuth Johannes Ludwig von Moltke, of World War I. The younger Moltke was well aware of his unfitness for the post his great-uncle and namesake had occupied; that he held the job had more to do with a dilettante Kaiser than it did with his abilities. With a penchant for falling off his horse during maneuvers, this younger, fatter Moltke was at best a caricature and at worst a laughing-stock.

The remainder of the book deals with the old Field Marshal's descendent, Helmuth James von Moltke, whose claim to fame was martyrdom for openly discussing a Hitlerless postwar Germany with similarly high-minded Junker noble types. Not that the discussions led anywhere; they could and did resemble the dullest sort of meetings that make up the life of virtually any academic enterprise. Nonetheless, these debates would color this Moltke as one of the better angels in the Third Reich's evil nature. Unhappily, this angelic quality was rooted in concepts such as a highly idealized Christianity that had little practical relevance. (I write this because the vast majority of the Reich's Christians were either indifferent to the fundamentally anti-Christian tenants of Nazism, or, in the case of the majority of the clergy, reluctant to bite the hand that fed them very well).

Indeed, as even Friedrich ultimately admits, the end result of the discussions held at Kreisau, the Moltke family estate, was inaction. As Moltke saw matters, the prospects for popular rebellion against the regime were

hopeless, while the prospects for a military coup against Hitler were equally dim. Accordingly, the best for which one could hope was military defeat and an Allied occupation that might be interested in what Moltke and his fellow discussants had to say. (The Allies, of course, were not.) Arrested in mid-January 1944, that is, six months before the attempt on Hitler's life, an action that Moltke disapproved, he would nonetheless be tried and condemned in early 1945 by the "People's Court" for knowing about the plot and failing to disclose it to the authorities. He would go to the gallows a martyr whose sacrifices and faith would be kept in the public eye by his articulate widow, Freya von Deichmann, whose postwar adventures from Silesia to South Africa to Vermont and back to Kreisau form some of the book's most interesting passages.

What ultimately made Moltke the Martyr act the way he did, Friedrich leaves open to speculation. Possibly that behavior was rooted in the eccentricities of a father who was an ardent Christian Scientist; possibly it derived from the values of his Anglo-South African mother, Dorothy Rose Innes; possibly some of it came from his interaction with a 1920s Bukovinian do-gooder with a psychology Ph.D. named Eugenia Schwarzwald who dabbled in soup kitchens. In the end the reader is left to guess.

Such is not the case with Peter Hoffmann's carefully researched and scrupulously documented biography of the three Stauffenberg brothers, Moltke the Martyr's fellow lawyer Berthold, Hitler's would-be assassin Claus, and Alexander, who would end his days as a Professor of Classics at the University of Munich. Born into substantial privilege, the two eldest brothers would drift into the circle around the poet Stefan George. There they would be exposed to the modern German equivalent of the Roman Empire's mystery religions, complete with membership in a "secret Germany." Such cultishness brought with it a high degree of homoeroticism and, of course, anti-Semitism. Hoffmann is too honest a scholar and too good a historian not to admit that, although there were Jewish members in the George circle—most notably the medievalist Ernst Kantorowicz and the writer Karl Wolfskehl—anti-Semitism "was part of George's mental furniture" (p. 66).

Although many of George's followers joined the Nazi party as a fulfillment of the "Master's" vision, the brothers Stauffenberg never did. Nonetheless, they initially welcomed the Nazi takeover and ardently approved its ideals of a "racial state" and its "stress on a healthy system of rank" (p. 68). More, Claus "was a nationalist on the political right...supporting a union of all Germans in

a greater European Reich” (p. 69). Whether the Brothers Stauffenberg turned against National Socialism because or in spite of membership in the George group, the author wisely leaves his reader to speculate because he can find no definitive answer. Instead, Hoffmann posits that over time, the Stauffenbergs came to an understandable aristocratically disdainful conclusion that “Nazi ideals” were being “perverted into their opposite” (p. 68).

That dialectic, as Hoffmann takes great pains to demonstrate, was not without its twists and turns. The first Stauffenberg to break with the regime’s spirit was the least significant member of the fraternal trio, the medievalist Alexander. In a paper read before the 1937 meeting of the German Historical Association, he “defied” Nazi attempts to portray Theoderic the Ostrogoth as the hero of an earlier German unification movement (p. 94). While that act received a certain amount of press coverage, it hardly constituted the sort of defiance that might bring the Gestapo knocking on one’s door. Moreover, this Stauffenberg would marry a woman whose grandfather had been a Jewish convert to Lutheranism. Nonetheless, her importance to the Luftwaffe as a test pilot (the number of her test diving missions was exceeded only by one male compatriot) would place *her* in the best position to protect her relatives by marriage after Claus’s botched attempt on Hitler’s life (p. 95).

Still, Hoffmann uses this anecdote to make a significant point: resistance to the regime of the Third Reich was both difficult and dangerous. Hitler was a popular dictator against whom open protest was an exercise in futility. Through the Russian campaign of 1941 even those like the Stauffenbergs who might have been aesthetically offended by the regime’s brutality and the coarseness of its paladins could not argue with its manifest successes. As Claus put it to his bookseller following the *Wehrmacht*’s triumph in France, “Whatever he might have said about Hitler in the past, ‘this man’s father was not a petit-bourgeois. This man’s father is war’” (p. 132).

Recent discoveries of the popularity of “extermination tourism” among *Wehrmacht* members notwithstanding, Hoffmann makes Claus Stauffenberg’s discovery of the mistreatment of Russian POWs and the mass

extermination of the Jews in May 1942 the defining event in this officer’s decision to rid Germany of Adolf Hitler. Of course, he would find few supporters in this endeavor: his superiors, the Generals, would be afraid to move unless guaranteed success in advance; his co-conspirators would lack the authority to command the support of others; and none of Germany’s military enemies would demonstrate the slightest desire to treat with a rebel regime on a basis other than the unconditional surrender that had been demanded of the Nazis.

Under such circumstances, Claus von Stauffenberg’s attempt to assassinate the Fuehrer on July 20, 1944, became a heroic act of conscience with little prospect of success. Indeed, Stauffenberg almost had to be in two places at once to succeed: in Rastenburg, East Prussia, to kill Hitler, and in Berlin to lead the troops who would support the insurrection and to convince the Generals to come over to its side. If anything, Stauffenberg acted against all odds and was well aware of it. As he told a friend on July 1, 1944, “overthrowing the regime could not change the military position which was hopeless, but ‘to sit idly by, and abandon oneself to disgrace and paralyzing duress’ was worse than failure” (p. 223).

In short, Hoffmann, also the author of the acclaimed *History of the German Resistance*, has written a book about a heroic act by an individual that would have little historic consequence. The failed attempt to kill Hitler did not shorten World War II by a day, nor did it save a single life. Indeed it would cost both Claus and Berthold von Stauffenberg theirs. Nonetheless, for all of our historical wisdom concerning the superiority of impersonal forces to individual action, Hoffmann has presented us with an erudite tome demonstrating the significance of conscience and its importance to history. In times when popular cant informs us that character does not matter, Peter Hoffmann’s book should be welcomed as a worthy reminder that, in fact, it does.

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