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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.

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J. Fest: Plotting Hitler's Death

From the former East Germany to the countries of the former Soviet Union, a paramount challenge in the 1990s for democracy generally – and for German unification specifically – is the growth of individual courage and sense of social responsibility which provide the backbone of civil society. Despite a chorus of western voices calling for the growth of civil society within eastern Europe since the fall of the Berlin Wall, Germany continues to commemorate an attempted "coup d'etat" by an elitist institution as "The Resistance" to the Nazi dictatorship, even though other cases of opposition better exemplify the civilian courage of healthy democracies.

Joachim Fest, the famed German journalist and moderate conservative who has written one of the best biographies of Adolf Hitler (1973) and a book portraying Hitler's closest henchmen (1963), has now written a history of the German conspiracy to kill Hitler. The attempted assassination on July 20, 1944 by groups of the elite led by an element of the German military, had been "largely suppressed" in Allied countries and "never sufficiently appreciated" by the German public, Fest writes. All the numerous accounts to date have lacked a "comprehensive view" and thus have "eroded the legacy of the German resistance." Scholars, writing to "the limited number of experts in the field," have tended to write narrow accounts, lacking proper context and thus a proper rendering. Fest acknowledges that "most readers" are "quite familiar" with the July 20, 1944 plot, but he wants to bring attention to the fact that well before then, "a substantial number of Germans had come to despise Hitler and his policies" (2-6). Thus on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the conspiracy, Mr. Fest published "Staatsstreich: der lange Weg zum 20. Juli" (translated and published in English in 1996) in order "to provide a full understanding of the conspirators and their actions."

This is certainly a worthy goal, for as the historian Fritz Stern has written, "despite all the objections we could possibly raise, we cannot and should not withhold our admiration from these men and women [of July 20]." Fritz Stern, "Dreams and Delusions: The Drama of German History" (New York: Knopf, 1987), p. 191. The failure of internal German resistance was a tragedy, especially for those caught in that hideous predicament, and Mr. Fest, a respected public interpreter of Germany's past, provides a masterful synthesis of what we know. Keeping a focus on the characters of resistance as much as on events, he places the history of the conspirators within a conventional narrative of political and military history of the Third Reich, but begins the story of German resistance with the rise to power of Hitler and the Nazi Party.

Mr. Fest has succeeded admirably in reaching out to a broad audience, and in shining more light on a major event in Nazi and postwar history. Whether he has added anything to our overall understanding of the murder plot and its significance is more questionable, however. For it is not a larger context Mr. Fest gives to the story so much as a context chosen for a specific purpose – to cast the conspirators and their motives in the best light possible. In doing so, Mr. Fest eclipses or even eliminates other perspectives on German resistance, sweeping aside the "many [German resistance] organizations" and "all the various [German] resistance groups" in order to focus exclusively on the July 20 conspiracy. In seeking to raise high these "martyrs," Fest belittles other efforts, referring to some as "events like the idealistic and reckless actions of the White Rose" (3). This brings to mind a paraphrase of the comment by the American

statesman Charles Pinckney to French Foreign Minister de Talleyrand-Perigord in 1797: "millions for defense, but not one cent for tribute," i.e., millions for the story of July 20, but none for histories that record and compare other opposition efforts. Relative to the support for Hitler, of course, there was not that much resistance. But the excluson of other important acts of opposition in order to focus on just one, the better to make it stand out as illustrious and alone, hardly makes for the best history.

The problems related to eulogizing the July 20 conspiracy in this exclusive way at this point in time are the most interesting ones Mr. Fest's book raises, although the book is also subject to the usual types of criticism. Can an author who claims to present a "comprehensive view" of such complex events remain uncriticized for not citing a single archive? Mr. Fest sometimes cites no sources – or no relevant ones – in making debatable statements, many of which aim to portray the military conspirators in the best possible light. For example, he denies that Count von Stauffenberg led the parade at Bamberg celebrating Hitler in January 1933, although this contradicts the accounts of leading historians. He also states that all senior officers "more or less felt" that Hitler was "ordinaer" – "vulgar, hucksterish" (37). Then there is the matter of secondary literature. Mr. Fest draws well on the "eulogistic" or "monumentalist" strand of scholarship. With these conclusions he has no quarrel. Yet he does not refute, or even acknowledge, the revisionist challenges to this scholarship. He omits reference even to Martin Broszat, not to mention other relevant German historians such as Detlev Peukert, Peter Steinbach, Michael Krueger-Charle, and Christof Mauch (the majority of whom appear in a collection Fest cites repeatedly, Steinbach and Schmaedeke's "Der Widerstand gegen den Nationalsozialismus"). Is Fest primarily interested in putting these events in their proper light, or in a particular, exclusive political light?

If this is the case, it would hardly be new. The search for a "usable past" – selective memory for didactic purpose – has beset the history of the resistance. Used first to legitimize the West German armed forces in the 1950s, the July 20 conspiracy representing "The German Resistance" has proven useful ever since to represent a thread of anti-fascism that has blossomed into robust democracy throughout the country. July 20 was the act most easily understood as resistance, a warlike act which through massive destructive power intended to reverse overnight the political leadership, rooted though it was in social and economic processes that had been establishing themselves for years.

Notably, the incident which Hitler's followers used to represent the greatest challenge to his power from within does not reflect the fundamental principle which Hitler used to gain and maintain power. Scrupulous attention to domestic popular support – or the appearance of it – coinciding with the rejection of a military coup was essential to Hitler's successes. This consideration did not permit Hitler (at least since the mid-1920s) to think he could reverse the political direction of Germany overnight. It was the fact that the July conspiracy had been unsuccessful even in killing Hitler, however, that helped to shape a postwar definition of resistance emphasizing motivations, a slippery if critical element of human history that soon proved to be as useful in questioning as in supporting the conspirators' pedestaled position as "The German Resistance".

Especially with the rise of "Alltagsgeschichte" during the 1970s, historians challenged the eulogistic treatment of the July 20 resistance, and the definition of resistance constructed around it. Martin Broszat, a leading German critic of eulogizers, characterized the motives of the military conspirators as somewhat self-interested rather than ideologically pure, while others who did not criticize their motives as harshly did characterize their political judgment as poor. Most if not all of the conspirators of 1944, like most Germans, at first supported Hitler without protest. Military leaders largely shared Hitler's hatred of bolshevism and domestic trade unions and, in any case, had been no friends of Weimar. They embraced his plans to violate the Treaty of Versailles and quickly rebuild the military. But as Hitler's desperate ventures turned to shocking crimes and military defeats, the conspirators plotted his death, even though by 1944 it was virtually impossible to overthrow the regime from the inside. After indicating that the July 20 conspirators also had mixed motives, Broszat argued that Resistance should be defined more by the social and political impact of actions than by the motivations behind them. This opened the way to his effort to document a wide range of actions of nonconformism and dissidence identified as resistance.

More recently, the eulogizing and revisionist treatments of the July conspiracy have led to syntheses of these earlier schools. At the same time, eulogizers have mounted a retort, spurred on by social and political changes that have been associated primarily with German unification, which is seen as raising obstacles to Mr. Fest's aim of getting Germans generally to appreciate the July 20 conspiracy more fully. This effort has raised important insights from scholars, including the

historian Hans Mommsen, who has argued that resistance as indicated by the July conspiracy entailed a "Lernprozess", a developing awareness that led painfully and courageously from support to opposition, and that political resistance required political compromise, represented by an image of the military conspirators supporting the regime on one shoulder while preparing for its demise on the other. Hans Mommsen, comment for panel titled "The German Resistance Against Hitler: New Perspectives," 1997 German Studies Association Annual Meeting, Washington, D.C., September 28, 1997. See also Mommsen's essay "Widerstand und Politische Kultur in Deutschland und Oestereich" (Vienna: Picus Verlag, 1994).

If Mr. Fest's "comprehensive" treatment of the July 20 conspiracy adds something to the work of other scholars, it also detracts. He writes, for example, that "a substantial number of Germans had come to despise Hitler and his policies, even as the Fuehrer racked up impressive victories at the ballot box...." Yet he admits historian Ian Kershaw's well-documented conclusion that Hitler's popularity reached its peak around the time of the Anschluss, when only a very small minority of Germans could not identify positively with any part of Nazism. Ian Kershaw, " 'Widerstand ohne Volk': Dissens und Widerstand im Dritten Reich," in "Der Widerstand gegen den Nationalsozialismus" ed., Juergen Schmaedeke und Peter Steinbach (Munich: Piper, l985), p. 794. See also Kershaw, "The Hitler Myth: Image and Reality in the Third Reich" (New York: Oxford University Press, l987), p. 80. How substantial and rapidly rising could the number of unhappy Germans have been, if Hitler's popularity continued to rise until just a small minority of them felt that Nazism did not reward them in some way? Mr. Fest empathizes well with British refusals of propositions from the German opposition in 1938. Yet he is quite harsh with General Ludwig Beck, an opposition leader, for resigning from Hitler's military. Ironically, although the eulogistic school rejects Broszat's effort to define resistance primarily by its impact rather than by its purity of motive, it derides General Beck's action in resigning from the military as a principled rather than effective response, reducing him, in Mr. Fest's words, to "merely an outraged, and later despairing, observer without position or influence" (82).

Mr. Fest lauds men of "action" in contrast with the "inaction" of resignation. His rationale for turning a blind eye to opposition other than July 20, and the illumination that comparisons with it could bring, is that none of the other incidents had the slightest chance of upending the regime. The July 20 conspiracy is "The German Resistance" because it was the "branch of resistance whose motives were the clearest and whose efforts came closest to succeeding" (5). Yet to continue in this vein of "what if" history: if the July 20 conspirators "did" come the closest to succeeding, does this make their "symbolic act," and their martyrdom, less futile than the act of General Beck's resignation? Can we be sure that a collective resignation of officers in support of Beck by those who would later participate in the conspiracy would not have been as effective, and also honorable (especially had they occurred together in public – a spectacle we know Hitler would have feared)?

More fundamentally – how can a coup attempt which Fest admits was a "symbolic act ...[of] manifest futility" also be an effort that failed only "miraculously...to maim or kill Hitler? " At this point in the historiography, the best scholars agree that even if the conspirators had killed Hitler they could not have either "look[ed] to anything differently structured thereafter" (Gerhard Weinberg), or to different terms of peace (Peter Hoffmann). Gerhard L. Weinberg, "Germany, Hitler and World War II: Essays in Modern German and World History" (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 248; Peter Hoffmann "Stauffenberg: A Family History" (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). While Fest acknowledges that the conspirators had very little chance of overthrowing Nazism, he eulogizes them for intending to overthrow the system in its entirety. But this is certainly a dubious model for responsible action, then or now. What value is there in a stated intention if there is no strong logical relationship between that intention and the actions taken to requite the intention?

Questions regarding the general implications of Mr. Fest's model aside, why should we accept his statement of comparison – which identifies July 20 as most clearly motivated act of resistance and most likely to succeed – without any comparative considerations in support of that statement? In fact, no act of opposition was purely motivated or perfectly successful, a point which comparison would serve well. How can the motives of such a widely diverse group be as clear as Mr. Fest claims? Where is his refutation of Broszat and others who do not agree even with his characterization of the motives of specific individuals? As for the other leg of Fest's model (the conspirators came "closest to success"), the case of Johann Georg Elser raises the best empirical criticism. This redoubtable German came about as close to killing Hitler single-handedly as did the July conspiracy. Moreover, Elser exploded his bomb already

in November 1939, when Hitler appeared to be anything but a loser, when the consequences of killing him would have been incalculably greater, and when Stauffenberg, as insider, was still jubilant about Germany's smashing defeat of Poland. Interview statement of Charlotte von der Schulenburg concerning Stauffenberg in the documentary film, "The Restless Conscience," by Hava Beller, released l991. Except for the very different dates of their assassination efforts (which redound to Elser's benefit on question of motives), the near-success of Elser and Stauffenberg's bomb attacks are strikingly similar, and both men were indeed executed. Why are there hundreds of books and continuous official commemorations on Stauffenberg and July 20, and just several on Elser, which arise primarily from private, not official, initiatives?

Fest argues well that the July 20 conspirators acted on the basis of their character and not on that of their class (325-27). Yet the disparity in recognition among the acts of opposition leads one to wonder whether the commemoration of resistance is somewhat dependent on class, and on the possibilities of political mobilizaton that attends the actions of elite persons within elite institutions. The German Resistance Memorial Center, seated in Nazi Berlin's wartime headquarters and commissioned in 1983 to document the entire extent of German resistance, has published over forty essays from eyewitnesses and scholars on various aspects and personages of resistance, and none are on Johann Georg Elser. The July 20 conspirators, the centerpiece of the Memorial's commemorations, have had powerful family and political sponsors. When the Memorial Center, which exists to increase understanding of all possible incidents of resistance, decided to honor communist actions as resistance, it did so over the opposition of many, including surviving family members of the truly heroic military conspirators. Even so, the Memorial Center does honor a range of resistors and their organizations that Fest does not. How is it possible that Mr. Fest can consider a history of the July 20 conspiracy finally "comprehensive," without the context of other acts of opposition in relation to the ideal of resistance (politically motivated, centrally organized efforts to overthrow the regime in its entirety) which no act of opposition fully realized?

An accepted adage of comparative history claims that "to know one, is to know none," and the example of Elser serves as well as any to suggest the pitfalls of writing the history of the July 20 conspiracy without a comparative context. One of the possible misjudgments arising from too narrow a focus on July 20 as "The German Resistance" is the notion that Stauffenberg's heroic case proves that political resistance presupposes political compromises. The case of Elser, for example, would be just as effective in indicating the opposite. It seems clear that the history of resistance in Nazi Germany is determined by political constituencies as well as by rational, objective discourse.

One of the mechanisms of politics Mr. Fest's own evidence discloses, but does not analyze well, is that of popular opinion and popular protest. This force, increasingly influential in history, is relevant for Mr. Fest's particular analysis because by his own evidence, Hitler – and indeed the military itself – were constrained by German popular opinion. "Any plan [for removing Hitler] would have to come to grips with the fact that this was a popular regime, headed by a man who had proved successful [and] was widely admired," Fest writes (69). Captain Fredrich Wilhelm Heinz argued persuasively that [the conspirators] could not imprison Hitler since "even from a prisoner's dock, Hitler would prove more powerful than all of them" (91). "What can the troops possibly do against a leader this victorious? " reckoned General Witzleben at the time of the Munich Agreement. In 1940, General Franz Halder said he would "spearhead" opposition only if it were "backed by a broad-based political movement" (136). There was no sign of this, nor any that General Halder could build a broad-based movement, and Halder, leaving the military opposition bereft of hope, abandoned his position in September 1942 (187).

Hitler's popular support was, after all, the fundamental condition which caused the German conservatives to hand him the chancellery in 1933. The conservatives thought they could control the new Chancellor through the military and Franz von Papen, the vice-chancellor. Papen "boasted that he would 'soon have Hitler pushed so far into a corner he would squeak' " and was instead "blindsided by the new chancellor, who toured the country making triumphant appearances, a performance that the vice-chancellor could hardly hope to match" (27). For their own part, officers and enlisted men swore an oath of personal allegiance to Hitler in August 1934. When General Beck resigned four years later, Hitler asked him not to do it publicly "lest it provoke an unfavorable reaction" (84). In military expansion, Hitler had garnered prestige by scorning the overly cautious advice of his military officers. But when the public looked on in disinterest at a military display by the Second Motorized Division in Berlin on September 27, 1938, Hitler's demeanor changed from a jaunty "War next week¡' to a chastened mood in which he wrote a conciliatory letter to the British Prime Minister. Reports on the Berlin response to the Second Division and its impact on Hitler are in William

Shirer "Berlin Diary: The Journal of a Foreign Correspondent" (New York: Popular Library Edition, 1961), pp. 109-10; Paul Schmidt, "Hitler's Interpreter" (New York: Macmillan, 1951), p. 105; Max Domarus, ed., " Hitler: Reden und Proklamationen, 1932-1945" (Munich: Sueddeutscher Verlag Muenchen, 1991), pp. 923-38.

The military conspirators Fest eulogizes felt their own power restricted by Hitler's massive popularity. Thus the capacity (or lack of it) to influence German popular opinion is a relevant factor in assessing the viability of any action intended to overthrow the regime. Yet Fest writes that following the Nazi "Gleischaltung" of 1933 the military was the "one institution [which] had managed to preserve most of its traditional autonomy and internal cohesion" and thus the only entity positioned to raise a successful resistance. In fact, the only acts of resistance with any success were those mounted collectively by ordinary citizens, some with the help of church prelates. These partial successes include the Catholic struggles against Nazi decrees which removed crucifixes from schools; the increasing unrest – brought to a head by Bishop von Galen – to the murder of handicapped and insane Germans; and the noncompliance and public protest of intermarried Germans which saved the lives of thousands of German Jews. Mr. Fest mentions none of them. In his lexicon, "events like" the White Rose were "idealistic and reckless," and important protest actions are "nicht mal ignoriert".

Despite the theories and actions of Nazi leaders and despite his own evidence, Mr. Fest's overall representation of resistance suggests that he does not recognize a significant role for ordinary persons in the establishment and exercise of Nazi political power. Yet a comprehensive model of resistance should take account of protests that achieved their smaller, more realistic demands, along with the truly heroic conspirators. This is especially important since the successful, limited demands of partial resisters mirror the fact that Hitler accrued power bit by bit. No single sector of Germans was responsible alone for the rise and maintenance of Nazism, and following the July 20 attempt on Hitler's life there was an outpouring of support for Hitler by Germans in general as well as by leaders of their major institutions, including the churches.

The elite military leaders dealt with weapons of destruction and were unaccustomed to paying attention to popular support. The elite Kreisau group which Fest does count among the resisters spent its time contemplating the ideal government in case Hitler were to fall. Fearing the inevitable trend of egalitarianism in the new mass age, this group proposed to stop the trend by maintaining an "elite" through government intervention and traditional values. While other Germans forced the regime to give in by threatening its popularity, the Kreisauers associated resistance with assassination of Hitler, and then rejected resistance because they associated it with drastic violence (159, 160). One disadvantage of focusing overwhelmingly on the elite and military leaders for a definition of resistance is that it shifts attention from the basic National Socialist theory that the regime's power and legitimacy derived primarily from the "racial" people. Such a focus also ignores histories which show that the regime relented when it felt this base of its power was threatened. [7]

Mr. Fest faults Germany's deeply rooted "authoritarian heritage" for a continuing ambiguity among Germans as to whether the July 20 conspirators were traitors or resisters (3). But if popular mentality has been the problem, is it not logical to critique the popular aspects of Hitler's rise to and maintenance of power as a key problem in the study of resistance, instead of shifting power and responsibility for resistance onto the shoulders of just one segment of the population, namely the elite? Mr. Fest gives no definition of resistance, and the reader is left wondering what he means in stating that, following the Concordat, "only gradually did the Catholic Church find its way back to a firmer brand of resistance in the efforts of individual clerics such as Cardinal Preysing of Berlin, Bishop Galen of Muenster, and Bishop Grueber of Freiburg" (32).

Theodore Hamerow, in an article which focuses on the church in relation to the persecution of Jews, has infered that discussions about such a "brand" of church resistance, or how little the churches could do to resist, is premature since such discussions assume that the churches wanted to do this in the first place.[8] Hamerow demonstrates that Church leaders, Catholic and especially Protestant, did not lack the courage to protest. Rather, they remained silent due to their sympathy – and that of their lay members – toward at least some of the teachings of National Socialism. Hamerow writes that since the war, interpretations of German opposition have changed, leaving "soldiers and bureaucrats" as the "big winners," while "churches and churchmen" are the big losers. In this piece he discusses only the losing end of this spectrum, concluding that "the great majority of clergymen failed to oppose the Nazi regime, not only out of fear of reprisal but out of expediency or even conviction."

Drawing largely on the documents of Cardinal Faul-

haber, along with those of Bishop Galen and relevant secondary sources, Hamerow has further concluded that Catholic as well as Protestant leaders were entrenched within mainstream German society in proportion to their level of authority: "the higher [the clergymen's] position…the more reluctant they were to challenge the authority of the state." [9] Individual protests, such as in private letters, were not an effective form of opposition to the Nazi dictatorship, as Galen's public acts indicate in stark contrast to those of Preysing and Grueber. The categorization of the acts of these three as the same "brand" of "resistance" then, is as helpful as arguing that German propaganda on forthcoming 'wonder weapons' belongs to the same brand of action as Blitzkrieg offensives. Bishop von Galen's impact in overturning the regime's attempts to ban crucifixes from schools and in denouncing Euthanasia from the pulpit indicate that he knew how to challenge specific policies effectively by mass circulation of sermons among the members and by speaking out publicly.

Any disregard today by conservative elites of the increasing importance of mass protest may reflect the same feckless sentiments of the Kreisau group. Mr. Fest rightly honors the July 20 conspiracy. But doing so by excluding other events of opposition undermines good history. "Plotting Hitler's Death" presents German resistance without a single important role for women or ordinary people. Fest approaches history by focusing on "big men" and big guns, stressing ruthlessness – along with an overwhelming tide of propaganda and wily machinations – as the key for understanding the mismatch between Hitler and his would-be assassins. Far from dealing with protests from the areas of everyday history, Mr. Fest does not even take account of Ian Kershaw's findings that the Nazi dictatorship made numerous concessions in order to maintain popular support and to avoid social unrest, thus trying, in the words of Armaments Minister Albert Speer "to keep the morale of the people in the best possible state by concessions." [10] Kershaw concludes that there was no general resistance because very few non-persecuted Germans were unhappy with the dictatorship – a conclusion about resistance that appears logical, when taking into account Hitler's successful decision to win and exercise power through building a mass movement.

While the history of "big men" has its place, should it be allowed to hide other important actors from view? The portrayal of resistance only as heroics and a hopeless effort to overthrow the regime is an all-or-nothing picture of reality that may easily fall prey to broad black-and-white brush strokes which paint a few men against a backdrop of hapless masses. Too exclusive a focus on the role of big institutions and their leaders tends to bracket off society's role, and thus the notable role of ordinary persons and the potential victims they protected, as the historian Robert Gellately's work well illustrates.

This is not to suggest that resistance was widespread – it certainly was not – but rather that resistance, like collaboration, was diffuse. As Vaclev Havel has observed, and as the historian Klemens von Klemperer has emphasized, the line between collaboration and resistance does not run between individuals, but within them. [11] This allows for ambiguity. At issue is not just equal coverage for equally eserving parties, but a proper understanding of history itself. The July 20 conspirators were not motivated purely by political ideals but also by matters of personal conscience. Fest notes that Justus Delbruck, on the day after the attempted coup, "captured the pathos and paradox of the resistance" with his statement: "I think it was good that it happened, and good too, perhaps, that it did not succeed" (343). The actions of intermarried Germans, to take a very different example of opposition, illustrates a mere partial opposition, but one exercised consistently and openly throughout the entire period of the Reich. Unlike the idealized heroism of the July conspirators, credited for acting on political ideals, intermarried Germans risked their lives to rescue those they were connected to most deeply. Yet they did not risk their lives to protect their partners purely out of self-interest (which, as it seemed at the time, would have been divorce). Most of these marriage partners of Jews did act out of personal reasons, but some remained married only for the duration of the Third Reich, thus indicating that they perhaps acted in order to protect a life.

An accurate, if more ambiguous, historical picture returns responsibility for resistance to the people and their institutions in direct proportion to their responsibilty for bringing Hitler to power and keeping him there. If as Fest writes, hundreds of books have been written on the July 20 conspiracy without getting it right, how can we be sure that the other elements which he dismisses as unworthy have been properly accounted for, given the far smaller effort given to writing about them? Why have acts of resistance by the White Rose, Socialists, Communists, Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, intermarried Germans, and others also not been properly contextualized? Why – to pose one outstanding question – were the (successful) protests for crucifixes in schools as well as for the lives of intermarried Germans overwhelmingly comprised of women rather than men? Has

Mr. Fest constructed a history of "The German Resistance" or has he made an effort, decades later, to shore up "The German Resistance" as it was defined following the war? Mr. Fest has formidable talents, and one wishes he could write about other actors within Nazi Germany as well – particularly about, say, ordinary people and mass protest.

ENDNOTES

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