

German Resistance to the Nazi State

Category: World War II

written by newpolitics | March 26, 2012

THE BOOK'S TITLE TRANSLATES A TERM, "*Rote Kapelle*," that the Gestapo applied to a relatively small circle of men and women in Berlin, active in seeking to weaken the political authority of the Hitler regime during the 1930s and early 1940s. The term, however, was meant to convey the notion that the group was involved in a Soviet conspiracy — a notion that survived the war and was perpetuated in the ensuing climate of a public opinion shaped by the cold war and hostility to the Soviet Union. The group's "historical legacy" was diminished and "distorted," not least by its former adversaries in Germany (as was that of the German resistance to Hitler generally whose acts, such as their attempt to assassinate the "Fuehrer" in July 1944, were held to be treasonable for many postwar years).

This reviewer has no knowledge of any of the vast number of German sources the author cites; nevertheless the book reads like a powerful argument in telling the story of untiring resistance to Nazi tyranny by the Red Orchestra — a resistance in which the group's retaliation to Soviet agents was but one of the means.

Some of the Orchestra's members had been active in the German Communist Party and were in sympathy with its views. Information thought useful to the Soviet Union, such as warnings about its planned invasion (in June 1941), was transmitted by those of the group's members in a position to do so. But at the core of the Orchestra's actions was the uncompromising moral impulse to fight the evil of the Hitler regime. It was an impulse motivated also by a passion to exonerate the German people from the atrocities committed in Eastern Europe in its name, and from an aggressive, unjustifiable war. It was that impulse and passion which also moved the participants of the conspiracy to assassinate Hitler on July 20, 1944, even at the risk of failure (which, fatefully, ensued). What mattered indeed was not so much failure or success of that conspiracy but the testimonial to the will of the German resistance to challenge Hitler's rule — a testimonial the world would not, could not ignore.

The Orchestra was not part of the high-placed network of political and military leaders to which the July 20th conspirators were more or less loosely linked nor did it share their broader political or social horizons. The author does not probe these matters. But the group was evidently driven by the same moral force as the July 20th conspirators.

A leading member of the Orchestra was a German air force First Lieutenant, Marro Schulze-Boysen, "scion of a prominent military family" with close ties to the German navy. Schulze-Boysen worked in the air force's intelligence division, and thus had access to foreign publications (whose circulation was otherwise strictly limited) — hence to much information damaging to the Nazi regime. In collaboration with fellow members of the Orchestra, Schulze-Boysen detailed such information in pamphlets, and had them hectographed. The pamphlets were then underhandedly distributed in the dark of night, either let go in the city's streets or pushed into residential mail boxes. Even obtaining the paper for the pamphlets was risky since the purchase of large amounts of it aroused suspicion (the Gestapo counted 40,000 officers and could rely on many willing informers). Being caught distributing the pamphlets meant incarceration in a concentration camp and, in the later phases of the war years, death.

Another key member of the Orchestra was Arvid Marnack who had in time attained high office in the economics ministry. He too came from a prominent family (he was a cousin of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a dissident Protestant clergyman, and one of the July 20th conspirators). Marnack had

attended the University of Wisconsin as a Rockefeller fellow in the 1920s. He and his wife (an American) eventually moved to Germany and became close to the Social Democratic Party. They had also partaken in a Soviet Union study group, and, like others of their family, "had been openly critical of the Nazis' rise to power" — hence vulnerable to the scrutiny of the new power holders. Yet, Arvid's abhorrence of the regime led him to sporadic and later closer contact with Soviet agents.

The book presents much interesting detail concerning these contacts as well as about the wide ranging sources of information upon which Marnack as well as Schulze-Boysen drew. Here an example must suffice. Thus, Marnack reported what he had heard from an army staff officer at the high command that in preparing for the war against the Soviet Union the following year (i.e., 1941), Romania would be occupied, and the planned invasion of England would be postponed. It is of course well known today that Stalin at the time was skeptical about this and subsequent similar reports about Hitler's interventions, leaving the Soviet Union initially unprepared for the invasion by Germany. Hitler in fact had earlier sent a message to Stalin, assuring him that warnings about a coming invasion were unfounded rumors — a message that reassured the recipient.

Soviet agents, and here the author cites surviving records, did not consider Marnack (and perhaps other members of the Orchestra) as "ideal" espionage agents. The best amateur agents were the most easily controlled, usually motivated by greed or blackmail.... The perfect spy was dedicated to the single narrow function of espionage, and rejected any political activity ... that could attract attention. ...But Arvid Marnack made it clear ... that he would not allow his intelligence work to extinguish his resistance work." [2] Be it noted, however, that ideological fervor such as Marnack's was a powerful motivation of espionage during much of the earlier 20th century — the cases of the Rosenbergs and some high officials of Great Britain being only the more prominent ones.

Soviet agents also attempted to discourage Orchestra members' effort to enlarge their circle of opponents, which Marnack and others declined to do. But this effort was at any rate undermined by the Munich 4-power "settlement" (September 1938) by Great Britain, France, and Italy, in addition to Germany. The agreement in effect ceded the Sudetenland, an integral part of Czechoslovakia, to the Germans, greatly enhancing Hitler's prestige. Another outcome of Munich was the occupation of Czechoslovakia in March 1939. Politically still more disorienting for the opposition was the German-Soviet nonaggression pact, concluded in late August 1939, ten days prior to the outbreak of World War II. The pact also divided Poland between the two powers.

The reaction to those events in particular by those of the Orchestra's members who had been associated with the Communist Party or had been sympathetic to its views was deeply demoralizing. The pessimism of Orchestra members became more pronounced as German troops invaded France, The Netherlands, and the Nordic countries (other than Sweden, which, however granted transit rights). The withdrawal of British troops via Dunkirk finally led the Orchestra people to believe that Hitler's political stature would not be weakened in the near future.

In his *Germany, 1866-1945*, Gordon A. Craig writes that "The German resistance movement, in contrast to the French, had a narrow social base. Despite its Socialist and trade union component, it never extended, as the French movement did, to the masses of the working class or even to the 'Mittelstand.' It was in a real sense, a movement of officers without soldiers...." (p. 667) Craig counts the Orchestra as a part of the German resistance although without links to the July 20th conspirators, and notes that the German Communist Party in effect withdrew from resistance activities after the German-Soviet nonaggression pact.

Among 26 of the "Cast of Characters" listed by the book's author, tied in one way or other to the Orchestra, only one is identified as a blue-collar worker; another had worked in factories but had in

time become a journalist and then a well-placed railroad official. Many of the others were artists, playwrights, film writers. All sought to widen their circle by carefully contacting others about whom they had reason to believe were opponents of the regime — but such contacts were necessarily limited to persons of similar or social or occupational background.

In reaction perhaps to Hitler's victorious campaigns in Western Europe, some of the Orchestra's members began to feel that the risks to their lives by their illicit antifascist work was not worth the "modest return." Some of them distanced themselves from Narro Schulze-Boysen who had a way of tempestuously giving vent to his animosity to the Nazis. A lesson, if such it was, was brought home to the group after a Jewish Communist, Herbert Baum, and his associates exploded a bomb at a Nazi-sponsored exhibit of the "Soviet Paradise," injuring several persons (in 1942). Baum's group was rounded up by the Gestapo, 22 of them being executed; in addition 250 Jews were arrested, with 100 of them shot at the Sachsenhausen concentration camp.

Orchestra members strongly opposed anti-Semitism, and aided individual Jews when feasible. Schulze-Boysen may have had access to a copy of the Wannsee documents, which outlined the planning of the destruction of European Jewry, 300 copies of which had been made available to other Nazi officials. But there is no evidence that he had in fact seen one, let alone sent it abroad. His wife Libertas, an employee of the UFA film studio, however, established a secret archive of photographs, taken by German soldiers in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, of atrocities committed against Jews and other civilians. Taking such photographs was forbidden, but this was usually ignored. Libertas, an employee of the UFA film studio, had ways to obtain such photographs which she copied for her archive so as to aid any indictment of the Nazis after the war.

In his magisterial work, *Die Deutsche Diktatur*,^[3] Karl Dietrich Bracher writes that underlying all the descriptions of the Nazis' rise to power was the question, "How was it possible that a dictatorial regime of such vast scope in a country so rich in traditions and culture such as Germany, could gain victory so rapidly, and virtually without resistance?" This question is not touched on in this book nor raised by any of the people we meet here. Possibly the author lacked the sources to probe this matter or the inclination to do so, given the uncounted number of works that have been dealing with it. As noted, members of the Orchestra were driven to act, at times recklessly, to weaken the regime, their hope of its destruction being fulfilled in the spring of 1945 — some three years after most of them had been executed under a German court (*Kriegsgericht*) verdict.

The political views of the Orchestra's members are not detailed in this book. Their actions are of course in themselves an expression, a demonstration of their politics, and parallel those of the Staufenberg-Laber wing of the July 20th conspirators — "...getting rid of Hitler, ending the war, restoration of law and freedom."^[4] This was also Dietrich Bonhoeffer's position. He held that the guilt of the German people ruled out any autonomous foreign policy (which some of the leading July 20th conspirators assumed possible after Hitler's disappearance). Unconditional surrender, Bonhoeffer believed, (prior to its pronouncement by the Allies in 1943 at Casablanca) was unavoidable, and the military defeat of Germany and its occupation "necessary for moral and political reasons," the resistance "an act of atonement." (Bracher, *ibid.*)

During the first two decades of the postwar years, the struggle and message of the German resistance were widely treated with disdain, its activists and spokespersons held guilty of high treason. A disturbing example, cited by Bracher, was the rejection of renaming a number of schools after some of the July 20th participants by groups of parents, with close to one-half of those surveyed in opposition, one-third "undecided," and only 18 percent in favor.^[5]

Succeeding generations will undoubtedly rethink the tainted past of their country and will remember that those of the Orchestra and of the July 20th conspiracy who were hanged or

guillotined sacrificed their lives in a just cause.