

Count von Stauffenberg and the Twentieth of July

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CLAUS VON STAUFFENBERG, the leader and hero of the conspiracy against Hitler which culminated in the explosion in the *Führer* headquarters at Rastenburg in East Prussia on July 20, 1944, was an aristocrat who believed that the moral and intellectual elite should lead and bear responsibility for the welfare of the multitude. Stauffenberg answered the description of the hero sought in the literature of the interwar period in Europe. Specifically he reflected the poetic image of the elect as sung by Stefan George, the "Master" to a select group which included Stauffenberg, his brothers, and several close friends. Stauffenberg's attack was an act of outrage and defiance against a man who, as demagogue, was seen to have perverted the true principle of leadership and insanely misled his people.

The events and the personalities surrounding the attempted assassination of Hitler and abortive coup of July 20, 1944 in Germany have received considerable attention from historians, especially from German historians. The bibliography is already impressive and this is surprising in view of the dearth of documents and sources. None of the major actors in the drama of July 20 left a full statement of purpose or a log of events. The nature of

the conspiracy and of the pursuit by the Gestapo after the attempt account for the dearth. The longest and most complete document, the Kaltenbrunner Report made for Bormann and Hitler, is partisan and suspect. Nevertheless the twentieth of July and its leading figure, Count Stauffenberg, have become part of the German national literature and national consciousness. One need think only of the shrine near Berlin's Stauffenberg Street and of the ceremonies, publications, and commemorative postage stamps of the Federal Government in Bonn.

There are several reasons for the importance, particularly to Germans in the post-war era, of the history of July 20. The story is dramatic and heroic, containing great pathos, and so is intrinsically attractive. A more important reason is that the "revolt of conscience" of July 20 saves something of German pride and dignity when one reads the story of Hitler's empire. For many it eases a bad conscience. A bold and resolute effort was made by great men to destroy Hitler's power, and they failed. What could one have expected of lesser men? But in the broader sweep of memory the example of a human and moral act of defiance against the totalitarian state of a twentieth-century dictator compels atten-

tion and respect. "Had there been no Resistance," wrote John J. McCloy in his foreword to a book written by one of the survivors, "had there not been the outright, dangerous and determined revolt, there would have been little for the new German nation to draw from the Nazi years . . ." ¹ Friedrich Meinecke, writing shortly after the event, said that the men of July 20 proved to the world that there were still forces in the German army and people that did not want to subjugate themselves "like dumb dogs," that possessed the courage of martyrs. ²

The twentieth of July was the last on a list of failures of the internal German opposition to remove Hitler from power. Most noteworthy of those failures were the military plots of 1938 and of the winter of 1939-1940. ³ Certainly most gripping of the emotions was the attempt made in 1943 to explode a bomb in Hitler's airplane during a flight from the Russian front. If the list of failures serves no other purpose, surely it provides raw material for a commentary on the nature of the totalitarian state.

It is an awful truth that the existence of the internal opposition which aimed at removing Hitler, the opposition that culminated in the attempt of July 20, 1944, did not alter the course of events. That opposition did not even influence the public opinion of Germany at the time as did, for example, the less dramatic and still unsung opposition of the Christian churches. With reference to confessional synods, sermons, pamphlets, and pastoral letters, Gerhard Ritter has written: "The resistance of the two Churches was the only resistance which had any real success." ⁴

There is a cogent argument that the future of Germany would have been heavily mortgaged if Hitler had been removed or killed in a coup during the war. That might have given rise to a new "stab-in-the-back" myth. In the eyes of many Germans Hitler would have become a martyr. The issues would have remained confused, and National Socialism might not have been blamed for the defeat and ruin of Germany.

This appears to have been the thought of Moltke and of some of his confreres in the Kreisau group. Moltke may be credited with the argument that Hitler's regime could only disappear in defeat and would have to be borne to the end. ⁵ If one adopts this argument then the several attempts to remove Hitler become a failure of conception and as such appear pathetic.

Nevertheless, the attempt on Hitler's life and on the power of his state does merit attention by historians. It may be remembered just because it was a failure and the last on a list of failures. The attempt of the twentieth of July has symbolic value; it has the value of example; it serves to dramatize the reality of European life in the first half of the twentieth century. It was the failure of men—particularly of one man—with a conception of human existence and society which twentieth-century Europe generally has not tolerated. It epitomized the failure of those with the aristocratic conception of man.

The Europe of the interwar period, that is to say, Stauffenberg's Europe, was characterized by many observers as Europe of the masses. That was the period in which Europe's intellectuals first became fully aware that Ortega's "assemblage of persons not specially qualified," ⁶ the multitude, had acceded to power, and the awareness for most was painful. Ortega y Gasset is, of course, one of the best examples. A later and very perceptive observer of Europe of the masses is Friedrich Dürrenmatt, who claimed that even the patrons of the theater are now an extension of the mass: "They have become anonymous, now only the public, and only that . . ." ⁷ This was obvious in the political institutions of interwar Europe which gained or claimed legitimacy from acts of the people. It had also become a social and a political myth: it was the age of the common man who, said Ortega, felt himself "just like everybody." The economic doctrine of socialism, proclaiming an equitable distribution—which meant an equal distribution—of goods, did much to

hasten the fruition of a process begun much earlier—as early as the French Revolution.

Many critics and historians of literature have noted an alienation of the artists and intellectuals of interwar Europe. That alienation, or divorce from the masses, was an obvious result of the discovery, by the artists and intellectuals, of Europe of the masses, and it was also, in a manner, evidence of the existence of that Europe. Priestley wrote of the “esoteric,” “the intelligent few,” and “the elite”; “this feeling that they and their standards and values were being besieged by the mass . . .”⁸ A result was the development among Europe’s men of letters of the cult of action, the cult of the hero, of Nietzsche’s “*Mensch der Tat*.” The hero was he who went all the way and who was completely honest, the man who sought to dominate the world in risking his life.⁹ The hero was found in literature, but some men of letters sought to act the role: Ernst Jünger, Malraux, Saint-Exupéry, T. E. Lawrence, all are examples of the literary activists and would-be heroes. Obviously no heroes were found in the reality of European mass existence. The tragedy was that those artists and intellectuals who should have been leading, reflecting, and inspiring Europe, despised it, and remained prisoners in their “ghetto.”¹⁰

The alienation was mutual: it was bilateral. The masses did not wish to be led by their betters. The masses were done not only with the aristocrats of emblazoned escutcheon but equally with the aristocrats of art and science. The mass man, said Ortega, “accustoms himself not to appeal from his own to any authority outside him. He is satisfied with himself exactly as he is.”¹¹ There was thus a crisis of leadership.

All over Europe leaders were the great simplifiers who publicly shunned reason and the qualified answers in favor of responses consonant with the emotions and comprehension of the mass. The most effective were those leaders whose purpose was as nonrational, as emotional, as simple as their words—the demagogues. The masses, in a crisis of leadership, turned to those

who reflected the mass, and who did so either out of simplicity or guile. In either case the masses were poorly led. Regarding fascist leadership in Europe, Nolte wrote of the “resistance to transcendence,” transcendence being man’s ability and will to rise above himself, above the mass.¹² Hermann Mau, in analyzing National Socialism, spoke of “the bleak totalitarian ideal of an amorphous mass without a will of its own.”¹³ The age of the masses in Europe was the age of the dictators.

Germany, the Germany of Versailles, of Weimar, of the Dawes Plan, and of President Hindenburg, was a part of this Europe and shared its general characteristics. The use of the word “masses” to describe Europe of the interwar period is also valid for Germany. Perhaps what has just been said regarding Europe was true to a greater degree in Germany because the advent of the masses was more recent and more abrupt. The theme is obvious in German literature of the period.

Germany, however, was only a part of Europe and not identical with Europe. There was one aspect of the attitude of Germans which was peculiar, and it might be described as dismay or despair. There was something even slightly hysterical in the attitude of Germans. That was true because of the special problems of defeat and political and economic collapse. National pride was stronger and militarism more acceptable in Germany than elsewhere. A result was that the German masses were even more impatient with traditional sources of leadership and yet more willing to be led.

The NSDAP, or Nazi Party, which in many respects was merely a reflection of Hitler, the leader, appeared to solve Germany’s problems, and it did so simply, obviously, and expeditiously. It did so brutally. Certainly the NSDAP did not possess Ortega’s “historic conscience,” and certainly it trampled on “everything that appeared to be above the common level.”¹⁴ But the NSDAP gave Germans unity and assured all Germans conformity to mass standards, and the goal of the masses was fulfilled.

"Comradeship, unity, national solidarity, appeared to be the chief catchwords of young National Socialism, and millions joined the movement under this impression."¹⁵ And after five years of National Socialism one could observe ". . . the dull obedience of the masses disciplined by terror into blind mechanical loyalty and also bewildered and bewitched by a militant propaganda . . ."¹⁶ This was the apogee of Europe of the masses and the stage on which the German Resistance played its role.

The men of the twentieth of July were men of action who divorced themselves from the masses in order to save the masses and to provide them with a new leadership. That they were men of action must be emphasized. Although only one placed the bomb, each had consulted with the others, had accepted a role to be played when the moment should arrive, and each had taken a stand against Hitler, and so each could be certain of ruin if there were an untimely discovery of the plot. That was what Europe's men of letters of the interwar period meant by the words "action," "engagement," and "hero."

From the few acquaintances, friends, and relatives of the men of the twentieth of July who survived and from the few documents that have survived we have received a strong impression of the character and motives of those men.¹⁷ There is unanimous agreement on the importance of Christian moral principles to the men of the twentieth of July. They were outraged by the cynicism, the mendacity, and the cruelty of Hitler's regime. Knowledge of the atrocities committed against the East European populations was mentioned particularly often as a determinant.

It is also clear that the men of the twentieth of July were imbued with a strong sense of responsibility. They felt personally involved and called upon to answer for the crimes of Germany. They felt this responsibility even though they knew themselves to be a very small group with no mandate from the public or from any segment of the

public.¹⁸ Indeed, they knew that many, perhaps most Germans believed in Hitler and supported him and would look upon any resistance as treason. This knowledge was used by some, whom the Resistance approached, as a reason to refuse complicity in any plot against Hitler. It was also the principal reason, given by Stauffenberg, for killing Hitler, and not simply arresting him. A coup, leaving Hitler alive, would have meant civil war.¹⁹

Henning von Tresckow, one of the leaders of the conspiracy, expressed the feeling of responsibility most poignantly in the following words, which have several times been quoted: "As God once promised Abraham, that He would not destroy Sodom if even no more than ten righteous men were in the city, so I hope that God also will not destroy Germany because of us."²⁰ It is for this overwhelming sense of responsibility that one might use the term "aristocratic," but von Klemperer certainly misled his reader in saying of July 20, 1944 that ". . . German aristocrats rallied, as they had never done before in German history, to represent the German nation."²¹ The names Goerdeler, Leber, and Beck alone would nullify such as interpretation of the twentieth of July. The memory of Julius Leber, in particular, deserves better than that the Resistance be looked upon as a rally of Germany's titled aristocrats. Leber, a leader of the Social Democrats when Hitler came to power, had spent several years in a concentration camp. Stauffenberg certainly admired him and might have supported him for the office of chancellor in the government that was to succeed Hitler. As it was, Leber's name appeared on a list as minister of interior affairs in the provisional government.

Finally, all witnesses and compilers are in agreement that the men of the twentieth of July were capable. They were morally, intellectually, and physically leaders. Goerdeler and von Tresckow, in particular, astonish us. But the one whose name has become synonymous with the attempt, Count Claus von Stauffenberg, was the man

most often cited, by those who remembered him, as capable of leading men.²²

Stauffenberg was 36 years old at the end of his life on July 20, 1944. He was handsome, with great power to attract and charm others. He was a man with goals and perseverance coupled with warm conviviality. Many remembered his laugh. A little more than a year before the twentieth of July he was frightfully wounded in North Africa and lost his right hand, two fingers of his left hand, and one eye.

Stauffenberg belonged to a family which enjoyed prominence and influence under the monarchical regime before 1918. His father was Lord Chamberlain in the Court of Württemberg, and thus home for Stauffenberg in his early years was a suite in a royal palace. Through his mother Stauffenberg was descended from Gneisenau, the great Prussian field marshal and organizer of victory against Napoleon. Stauffenberg prized this relationship, and in mature years he cultivated the friendship of a biographer of Gneisenau and so came to know intimately the ideas and purpose of that great leader.²³ Kramarz contends that this aristocratic background gave Stauffenberg no sense of rank but rather a strong sense of duty.²⁴

Stauffenberg early determined to study music; his instrument was the cello. But later he decided to become an architect. He attended an elite secondary school (*Gymnasium*) where he received a traditionally classical, humanistic education. Upon graduation he decided to become an officer. This decision is generally noted with surprise. The young Stauffenberg, it seems, recorded no explanation, yet one suspects that von Klemperer's words, concerning Ernst Jünger and the German "Youth Movement" after the Great War, might provide a key: "... war . . . the grand alternative to bourgeois existence . . . a sophisticated militarism for a generation . . . on which the war had left a strong imprint."²⁵ As a boy, Stauffenberg was, in fact, part of the Youth Movement (*Jugendbewegung*), being a member of the Boy Scouts (*Pfadfinder*).

Patriotism, comradeship, and romantic militarism created the tenor of the organization.²⁶

The mature man, the officer, was able, confident, demanding of himself and of others, independent in his conceptions and ideas, moral, well-read, and always a leader. Some few witnesses remember an occasional touch of arrogance, or perhaps only presumption, and one gathers from numerous comments that Stauffenberg easily became didactic. Strangely, he seldom seemed to offend. Perhaps it was his famous smile and easy laughter. It is of interest and worthy of note that Count Stauffenberg's favorite pastime, in which he was thoroughly proficient, was riding.

Stefan George, the great German lyric and mystical poet who died in 1933, exercised a profound influence over Stauffenberg: one might even say that George's influence was decisive in Stauffenberg's life. One of the vivid memories of several witnesses who knew Stauffenberg is of him reciting poetry of Stefan George.

George was the master and artistic focal point of a group of younger men, who themselves were artistic and intellectual leaders and who admired George and loved his poetry. Albérès observes that George's circle was welded together by a desire for an aristocracy of art and that George inspired in it a spirit of the clique, the taste for esoterism.²⁷ We first hear of Stauffenberg in this circle when he was only seventeen.²⁸ His older twin brothers seem to have joined the circle first. In particular, his brother Berthold was close to George. One of the poems in George's collection, *Das Neue Reich*, bears Berthold von Stauffenberg's name as its title.²⁹ The Stauffenberg brothers were with George at his death bed in Minusio, Switzerland, in December 1933, and Claus arranged the order of the death watch.³⁰ It appears that Claus Stauffenberg, alone among the disciples in George's circle, received no special appellation. George liked to bestow a name, to be used within the circle, which defined or em-

phasized a particular characteristic. But Claus remained just "Claus." Stefan George was fond of him, there is no doubt, but he discovered no need to patronize him in that fashion.³¹

"That feeling of regal loneliness and unapproachable pride . . ."; with such words one critic described Stefan George's poetry.³² "An aristocracy of inner awareness," are words used by another critic.³³ George wrote with discipline, against the background of vast erudition, for an elite, who through trial and awareness and dignity would save German, and thus European, man from the pettiness and decay of contemporary capitalist and democratic Europe. The best example of this poetic call is found in "*Neuen Adel den Ihr Suchet*" from the collection, *Der Stern des Bundes*. The new nobility comes neither from old families nor from social classes: it is passion, seen in the eye.³⁴ Another related theme is the hero, the one selected out by his ability and sensitivity, in particular, by his willingness to act. An example is the poem "*Der Erkorene*" in the collection, *Der Teppich des Lebens*.³⁵

The spirit of Stefan George contributed heavily to the decisions and events of the twentieth of July. The Stauffenberg brothers, among them occasionally Claus, continued to meet with friends of George after the poet's death. Another leading conspirator, Count Fritz von der Schulenburg, was fond of George's poetry and at times read it aloud to others.³⁶ It has been reported, on good authority, that the conspirators called their movement "*Geheimes Deutschland*" after the title of a poem by George from his collection, *Das Neue Reich*.³⁷ In this poem the wandering hero returns to the rocky shore of his homeland to walk quietly among his people, as a sacrifice, to warn them that awareness of the inner spirit alone will save them from present pomp, which the autumn wind will carry away as dead leaves to the realm of death.

Wer denn—wer von euch brüdern
Zweifelt—schrickt nicht beim mahnwort

Dass was meist ihr emporhebt
Dass was meist heut euch wert dünkt
Faules laub ist im herbstwind
Endes—und todesbereich:³⁸

It was Claus von Stauffenberg who made George's poetry an inspiration for the conspirators. Kramarz wrote that Stauffenberg recited the poem "*Der Widerchrist*" from the collection, *Der Siebente Ring*, in order to influence and arouse his friends. It was, said Kramarz, a password.³⁹ In the poem the false saviour and leader, the Antichrist, who "turns water into wine and talks with the dead," is condemned and the people are admonished. "You shout with joy, delighted with the satanic pretense . . . then your tongues hang out over the empty trough, you wander helplessly around the burning court-yard."

Ihr jauchzet—entzückt von dem teuflischen schein—
Verprasset was blieb von dem früheren seim
Und fühlt erst die not vor dem ende.
Dann hängt ihr die zunge am trocknen-den trog—
Irrt ratlos wie vieh durch den brennen-den hof . .
Und schrecklich erschallt die posaune.

Here we see the aristocrat seeking to save the masses from their own creation and doom, the demagogue and dictator who, in the poem, is the "Prince of vermin."⁴⁰

Stauffenberg's role in the twentieth of July plot against Hitler was that of leader. His determination was complete and convincing. Much of the plan was his own conception. He had personally recruited a number of the conspirators. He constantly maintained a presence of mind. He knew how to be silent. His function within the plans for the coup alone gave him leadership. Stauffenberg, as chief of staff to General Fromm, had the right to issue orders to the home army over his own signature. Also, Stauffenberg was the only one among the conspirators finally who had the right of access to Hitler. Thus, Stauffenberg had

to place the bomb. It may be said that Stauffenberg's very importance to the plans was the cause of their ultimate failure. He had to be in Rastenburg and in Berlin simultaneously. He almost succeeded. Here truly was the hero, the man of action, sought by Europe's literati in the interwar period.

Stauffenberg played this role out of a sense of responsibility. Almost every witness has testified to this fact. It appears that the attempt on Hitler's life and regime was the only purpose in Stauffenberg's life after he was wounded. He refused the offer of the famous physician, Sauerbruch, to complete the process of physical rehabilitation with these words: "I don't have very much time, I have an urgent mission to complete."⁴¹ Furthermore, Stauffenberg, along with the others, planned for the post-Hitlerian Germany. We know that a list of cabinet appointments in a provisional government under Beck was drawn up. It was to have been a pacific government, concerned with social welfare, under the guidance of Germany's elite.

We want a new order which makes all Germans responsible for the state and guarantees them law and justice; but we despise the lie that all are equal and submit to rank ordained by nature. . . . We want men of leadership, who, coming

from all strata of the people, in league with the divine powers, by eminent intelligence, breeding, and sacrifice, point the way for the others.

These words were in an oath prepared for the conspirators by Stauffenberg.⁴² Here truly was a disciple of Stefan George.

The men of the twentieth of July failed: they were destroyed. They had no support from the masses of Germans, and when the Germans were told, they remained unmoved. The apparatus of the state, based on the support, or at least the acquiescence, of the masses, was overwhelming. Dürrenmatt has said that one finds no more heroes: "Creon's secretaries take care of the case of Antigone."⁴³ So, indeed, they did.

The aristocratic conception of man and of life—that the fit should bear responsibility for the others—was already under attack by nineteenth-century egalitarianism. It was overwhelmed by the claim of the masses of the twentieth century. It was kept alive by the nostalgia of intellectual and artistic leaders in Europe after the Great War, but only by them. Stauffenberg and his friends were heroic and surely romantic; they were aristocrats, and as such they failed. Hitler's power, both prior to and following July 20, 1944, was the measure and the symbol of their failure.

⁴¹Fabian von Schlabrendorff, *The Secret War against Hitler* (New York, 1965), p. 3.

⁴²Friedrich Meinecke, *Die Deutsche Katastrophe* (Wiesbaden, 1965), p. 150.

⁴³See especially Harold C. Deutsch, *The Conspiracy against Hitler in the Twilight War* (Minneapolis, 1968).

⁴⁴Gerhard Ritter, *The German Resistance* (London, 1958), p. 49.

⁴⁵Hans Rothfels, *The German Opposition to Hitler* (London, 1961), p. 113. See also Eberhard Zeller, *The Flame of Freedom* (Coral Gables, Florida, 1969), p. 95.

⁴⁶José Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses* (New York, 1957), p. 13.

⁴⁷Friedrich Dürrenmatt, *Theaterprobleme* (Zurich, 1955), p. 21.

⁴⁸J. B. Priestley, *Literature and Modern Man* (New York, 1960), p. 330.

⁴⁹R.-M. Albères, *Bilan littéraire du xxe siècle* (1962), pp. 73f.

⁵⁰Jean Duvingnaud, *Pour entrer dans le xxème siècle* (Paris, 1960), p. 82.

⁵¹Ortega, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

⁵²Ernst Nolte, *Three Faces of Facism* (New York, 1966), pp. 420f.

⁵³Hermann Mau and Helmut Krausnick, *German History 1933-45* (New York, 1963), p. 40.

⁵⁴Ortega, *op. cit.*, p. 188.

⁵⁵Nolte, *op. cit.*, p. 410.

⁵⁶Ritter, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

⁵⁷Outstanding works in this literature are the following: Annedore Leber, *Den Toten, immer lebendigen Freunden* (Berlin, 1948); Rudolf Pechel, *Deutscher Widerstand* (Zurich, 1947); Ritter, *op. cit.*; Schlabrendorff, *op. cit.*

⁵⁸This is the interpretation especially of Rothfels, *op. cit.*, and of Zeller, *op. cit.*

¹⁹Christian Müller, *Oberst i. G. Stauffenberg* (Düsseldorf, n.d.), pp. 217-218.

²⁰Pechel, *op. cit.*, p. 245.

²¹Klemens von Klemperer, *Mandate for Resistance* (Smith College, 1969), p. 26.

²²There are three biographies of Stauffenberg. Bodo Scheurig's little work, *Claus Graf Schenk von Stauffenberg* (Berlin, 1964), can be ignored. Joachim Kramarz, *Claus Graf Stauffenberg* (Frankfurt/Main, 1965), is concise, sober in spite of occasional panegyric, and reliable. Christian Müller, *op. cit.*, is a recent work which is exhaustive and perhaps overly ambitious. Kramarz and Müller rely in part on unpublished testimony by Stauffenberg's widow, Countess Nina von Stauffenberg.

²³Müller, *op. cit.*, pp. 149f.

²⁴Kramarz, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

²⁵Klemens von Klemperer, *Germany's New Conservatism* (Princeton, 1957), p. 51.

²⁶Müller, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

²⁷R.-M. Albérès, *L'Aventure intellectuelle du xxe siècle* (Paris, 1959), p. 82.

²⁸Ludwig Thormaehlen, *Erinnerungen an Stefan George* (Hamburg, 1962), p. 221.

²⁹Stefan George, *Werke* (Munich, 1958), vol. I, p. 451.

³⁰Thormaehlen, *op. cit.*, p. 289.

³¹*Ibid.*, p. 221.

³²Jethro Bithell, *Modern German Literature 1880-1950* (London, 1959), p. 124.

³³Georg Lukacs, *Deutsche Literatur im Zeitalter des Imperialismus* (Berlin, 1947), p. 32.

³⁴George, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 383.

³⁵*Ibid.*, vol. I, p. 198.

³⁶Zeller, *op. cit.*, p. 128.

³⁷Edgar Salin, *Um Stefan George* (Munich, 1954), p. 324.

³⁸George, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 428.

³⁹Kramarz, *op. cit.*, p. 169.

⁴⁰George, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 258.

⁴¹Ferdinand Sauerbruch, *Das War Mein Leben* (Bad Wörishofen, 1951), p. 551.

⁴²Zeller, *op. cit.*, p. 395.

⁴³Dürrenmatt, *op. cit.*, p. 44.