

*From Assassinating Hitler: Ethics and Resistance in Nazi Germany*  
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## Prologue: Resistance and Civic Virtue

This is a book about what Edmund Burke called the “moral imagination,” that “wardrobe” which contains all the “decent drapery of life,” the “superadded ideas ... which the heart owns and the understanding ratifies, as necessary to cover the defects of our naked shivering nature, and to raise it to dignity.”<sup>1</sup> Its focus is the moral imagination of those soldiers and civilians who, in July 1944, attempted, in what they called “Operation Valkyrie,” to kill Adolf Hitler, seize power, and end the Second World War. This book is essentially not a definitive study, but a raid, a reconnaissance, an exploration.

The aim of this book is not to introduce new sources, but to ask new questions of old sources. The historian’s first task is to unearth unknown materials, but the historian’s work does not end there. As H. Stuart Hughes remarks in another context:

Historians in this country [the United States] seem to have forgotten—if they ever learned properly—the simple truth that what one may call progress in their endeavors comes not merely through the discovery of new materials but at least as much through a new reading of materials already available.<sup>2</sup>

This book attempts such a new reading of old materials in an effort to reexamine an old question: When love of country and love of virtue collide, how shall we know what to do, and even when we know what to do, how do we muster the courage to do what we must?

That virtue and politics are, or should be, related, no one disputes. Just how virtue and politics are related is however, a point of considerable confusion. In 1984, for example, a West German general was implicated in a sordid sex and spy scandal. He gave his “word of honor” that he was innocent. *Die Zeit* felt obliged to explain to its

readers just what in the world a “word of honor” was—the article, by Theodor Eschenberg, was appropriately entitled, “The Obsolete ‘Word of Honor.’”<sup>3</sup> “Whatever Happened to Ethics?” asked the cover of *Time* magazine plaintively in May 1987; *Time* then devoted some fifteen pages to an examination of the United State’s troubled search for its “moral bearings.”<sup>4</sup> Robert Bellah and his colleagues in *Habits of the Heart* write that at least among Americans, questions of virtue are very important, but that “concern about moral questions is often relegated to the realm of private anxiety, as if it would be awkward or embarrassing to make them public.”<sup>5</sup> In our “naked public square,”<sup>6</sup> in our ironic age of “anti-heroes,”<sup>7</sup> in a “narcissistic”<sup>8</sup> era in which private urges overwhelm public imperatives,<sup>9</sup> we find it hard not only to talk about politics and virtue, but to talk about talking about politics and virtue; in our time, Virginia Woolf writes, “we have no ceremonies, only private dirges and no conclusions, only violent sensations, each separate.”<sup>10</sup> It is well in an age obsessed with survival,<sup>11</sup> however, to remember that mere survival is not really the ultimate issue. “You are mistaken,” Socrates argues,

... if you think that someone who is worth anything ought to spend time weighing up the prospects of life and death. One ought to consider one thing only ... whether one is acting rightly or wrongly, like a good citizen or a bad one ... the difficulty is not so much to escape death; the real difficulty is to escape from doing wrong.<sup>12</sup>

Trying understand politics and virtue is an old task. It was, after all, Cicero, in 49 B.C., who asked the question that haunted the July 20 Conspirators:

Should one stay in one’s country even if it is under totalitarian rule? Is it justifiable to use any means to end such rule, if those means endanger the whole fabric of the state? Is it statesmanlike, when one’s country is under a tyrant, to return to some other place and remain inactive there, or ought one to brave any danger in order to liberate it?<sup>13</sup>

History can help us answer Cicero's questions. Memory, as the ancient historians knew, is a powerful teacher, and what historical memory should teach, they thought, is civic virtue. "This above all makes history useful and valuable," according to Livy. "It unfolds before our eyes the illustrious record of exemplary action." And Tacitus writes: "To me, the chief duty of the historian is this: to see that virtue is placed on record, that evil people and evil deeds may have cause to fear the judgment of posterity."<sup>14</sup> Karl Jaspers reminds us: "What and how we remember ... will help determine what we become."<sup>15</sup>

Studying the July 20 Conspiracy can help too. It is, to be sure, an exception, a "border situation," an occasion of "shipwreck," but it is precisely the incandescence of the extreme that can enlighten the routines of the mundane.

Hans Rothfels, in one of the first studies of the July 20 Conspiracy, insisted on its essentially moral dimension:

No examination of the German opposition to Hitler will succeed which limits itself to the narrow sphere of political opinions and possibilities, which limits itself to sociological or psychoanalytical investigation of "class" motives of the "old elite," or to the "nationalist" goals of the resistance ... such a so-called "realist" approach may be useful in certain cases. But to see the essence of the thing, one must probe to principles, to the moral issues.<sup>16</sup>

Three decades after Rothfel's study, Peter Hoffman, the conspiracy's most expert student, made precisely the same point: "[The conspiracy] can only be understood from the inside: the drive to opposition, provoked by conscience, is the kernel of and key to the entire event; if this is not recognized, nothing about the conspiracy can be understood."<sup>17</sup>

Virtually everyone who has studied the conspiracy has agreed that moral imperatives

were at the heart of the affair, and yet, there still is no systematic investigation of the conspirators' moral universe.<sup>18</sup>

This book attempts to excavate the conspirators' moral world, but also to embed it in the density of their own experience. The historian's most elementary task is to recreate imaginatively his or her subject's world, but many of the studies of 20 July obscure or ignore the peculiar dynamics and tensions of the conspirators' world. In 1984, for example, the Historical Commission of the City of Berlin sponsored an international conference on the July 20 Conspiracy. Scholars discussed every dimension of the conspiracy, including "political and moral motivations," and the published papers and comments add up to some 1,185 pages. Yet something was missing. Marianne Meyer-Krahmer, Carl Goerdeler's daughter, remarked that the "cold, analytical discussions" gave her, as one who had lived through the conspiracy, the odd sense of "having her back against the wall." Because no one seemed to understand the passions and values of the conspirators, there seemed little effort to recapture the context of the conspirator's lives.<sup>19</sup> This book will try to represent those passions and values earlier studies have missed.

Exploring the moral imagination of the July 20 Conspirators is no easy task. The 20 July plotters deceived and were deceived; they compromised their honor, and killed to regain it. The July 20 Conspiracy encourages and yet provokes. Protean, it not only changes with the perspective of the observer, but it also changes the perspectives of the observer. In the summer of 1944, just after the coup, Missie Vassiltchikov, a young secretary in the German Foreign Office who was well acquainted with many of the conspirators, agreed to shelter a male friend who was reluctant to go home during an air raid. Missie's old cook was scandalized, and her comment has more than anecdotal value:

“In my younger days, that couldn’t have happened, but this 20<sup>th</sup> July has turned everything topsy-turvy.”<sup>20</sup> The student of the conspiracy can only sympathize with the anonymous Gestapo bureaucrat who observed five decades ago: “This 20<sup>th</sup> of July is getting beyond us. We can’t control the thing any longer.”<sup>21</sup> ...

Notes-

1 – Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (New York: Penguin, 1969), 171.

2 – H. Stuart Hughes, “Contemporary Historiography: Progress, Paradigms, and the Regression Toward Positivism,” cited by Dominick Lacapra in “Letters,” *American Historical Review*. Vol. 88, No. 3, June 1983.

3 – Theodor Eschenburg, “Das obsolete Ehrenwort,” *Die Zeit*. 10 February, 1984, 4.

4 – 24 May, 1987, 14-33.

5 – New York: Perennial Library, 1985, vi.

6 – See Richard Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William Eerdmans, 1984).

7 – See Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York: Oxford, 1975). Fussell argues that the Great War created the essentially “ironic” mode that dominates modern consciousness in the West.

8 – The best known, but by no means only argument that “narcissism” is the distinctive quality of modern Western life, is in Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism* (New York: Norton, 1979). See also Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1976).

9 – See Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (New York: Vintage, 1976). Hannah Arendt’s work focuses on much the same point. See especially George Kateb’s analysis of Arendt: *Hannah Arendt: Politics, Conscience, and Evil* (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Allanheld, 1984).

10 – *The Waves* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1931), 157.

11 – See Christopher Lasch, *The Minimal Self* (New York: Norton, 1984).

12 – Plato, *Apology*, trans. Hugh Tredennick in Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, eds., *Plato: The Collected Dialogues* (Princeton, N.J.: Bollingen, 1969), 28c-39b.

13 – *Selected Works*, trans. M. Grant (New York: Penguin, 1971), 135.

14 – Livy, *Ab Urbe Condita*, Praefatio, 10; Tacitus, *Annales*, III, 65.

15 – Cited in James Wilkinson, *The Intellectual Resistance in Europe* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1981), 141.

16 – *Deutsche Opposition gegen Hitler* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1986), 24-25.

17 – Peter Hoffman, *Widerstand gegen Hitler* (Munich: Piper, 1979), 14.

18 – There are only two studies in the immense literature on 20 July which attempt an ethical analysis of the conspiracy: Mother Mary Alice Gallin, *Ethical and Religious Factors in the German Resistance to Hitler* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University, 1955), and Dieter Ehlers, *Technik und Moral einer Vorschworung* (Frankfurt: Athenäum, 1964). While both works are useful, neither satisfies the need for a detailed study of the conspirators' moral universe.

19 – Jurgen Schmadeke and Peter Steinback, eds., *Der Widerstand gegen den Nationalsozialismus* (Munich: Piper, 1985), 1155.

20 – Marie Vassiltchikov, *Berlin Diaries* (New York: Knopf, 1987), 96.

21 – Eberhard Zeller, *The Flame of Freedom* (London: Oswald Wolff, 1967), 380.