

## NOTES AND COMMENTS

### THE WHITE ROSE ORGANIZATION: A GERMAN ANTI-NAZI STUDENT RESISTANCE GROUP, AND ITS RECEPTION IN THE U.S.A.: 1943-1995

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For several years an exhibit has been traveling throughout Europe and the U.S., making stops at numerous colleges and universities, among them the Carl von Ossietzky University in Oldenburg, Germany, and Towson State University in Towson, Maryland. The exhibit tells the story of the White Rose anti-Nazi resistance organization. The movement was instigated by a few German students and their professor and mentor, with the aim of alerting the German public to the bestial activities and criminal nature of the Nazi government. Everywhere it has been shown, the exhibit has made a deep impression on its viewers. The reaction at Towson State University was no exception. An appreciable number of students and guests of the University viewed the exhibit, and attended panel discussions hosted by experts on German internal resistance groups. The panel included Franz Muller of Munich, an active participant in the White Rose resistance group and present head of the White Rose Foundation. The positive response to the exhibit derives from the emotional involvement of the viewer.

The White Rose exhibition is how about a small number of German students, together with their teacher, were driven by their consciences to protest the crimes of the Nazi Government against innocent human beings, such as Jews, Gypsies, priests, the mentally impaired, the homeless and political adversaries of the Nazi Party. The White Rose organization also protested against the senseless slaughter of the thousands of German soldiers, sacrificed on the battlefields of Europe and the Soviet Union--especially at Stalingrad. The young members of the White Rose dreamed about the creation of a unified Europe, brought together by its commonalities, not divided by its differences. Their uneven struggle, carried out through the distribution of pamphlets in an ever-widening circle of German cities, ended with the apprehension, arrest and eventual beheading of the leaders of the movement. Nevertheless, in the long, dark and troubled night that was Nazi Germany, a few bright stars shone and provided a ray of hope for a better, more decent world.

In contrast to other anti-Nazi resistance groups inside Germany, whose stories only became known in the years after the war, the White Rose resistance organization received early notice in the U.S.

In March, 1943,<sup>1</sup> only five weeks after the event, the Stockholm correspondent for the *New York Times*, George Axelsson, reported the execution of three students from Munich, Hans and Sophie Scholl and Christoph Probst, all leading members of the White Rose movement. Parts of Axelsson's report were inaccurate (He reported that the resisters were hung, when in fact, they had been beheaded, and he reported that the resistance was largely a student movement, while professors were involved), nevertheless, his descriptions of the methods and motives of the group were fundamentally accurate. He identified the White Rose organization as consisting of an idealistic group of mostly young people, who loved their country but hated what was happening to it through the machinations of the Nazi Party, and which was responsible for distributing pamphlets characterizing Hitler and his ministers as murderers and thieves.

Several weeks later,<sup>2</sup> Axelsson corrected the minor inaccuracies in his initial account of the execution of the three students, by indicating that the Scholls and Probst were guillotined. Axelsson's second article also reported the infamous speech made by Munich *Gauleiter* [city official] Paul Geisler, in which Geisler publicly exhorted female students to produce children

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<sup>1</sup> *New York Times*, 29 March 1943: 1.

<sup>2</sup> *New York Times*, 18 April 1943: 26.

for the Fuhrer[Hitler]-illegitimately, if need be. Geisler's remarks provoked hostility among both the students and faculty of Munich University, which led to student riots, and, according to Axelsson's report, prompted graffiti such as: *Revenge for Stalingrad*, and *We Want Our Liberty Back*, on buildings around Munich. Students also distributed pamphlets protesting national socialism [the politics of the Nazis], and against the suppression of independent thinking and what has been termed coercive "Equalization." In their pamphlets, the students pleaded for freedom of opinion and expression, called for a struggle against the Nazi Party, condemned the war, and promoted the idea of the creation of a new Europe. These acts demonstrated that a new belief in freedom and honor was struggling to be born. As Hans Scholl stood on trial for his life, he told public court Chief Justice Roland Freisler that he [Freisler] would soon stand where he [Scholl] then stood.<sup>3</sup> In a later *New York Times* article,<sup>4</sup> Axelsson attempted to interpret the general attitude in Germany. He wrote that the mood in Germany was influenced not only by war conditions, but also by the gruesome methods of the Nazi Party. The Nazi Party and the ordinary people were becoming more and more estranged. A large degree of the will shown by the German people to persist with the war grew specifically out of the conviction that even a limited victory was preferable to defeat, and their belief or hope that the Nazi problem could be taken care of after victory was achieved.

Also, the availability of food was a vital component in aiding the Germans to persist. In this regard, the situation in Germany by 1943, the fourth year of conflict, was much better than it had been in 1917, the fourth year of World War I. In any case, Axelsson's account of the actions of internal resistance groups, especially the White Rose group, clearly indicated the importance of German morale to their war effort.

The highest praise for the White Rose movement appeared in an August, 1943, *New York Times* editorial. The editorial outlined the principal ideas of the movement as expressed in the group's widely distributed leaflets, and concluded with the following tribute:

Six Munich students, one of them a girl of 20, are said have been executed following the issuance of a manifesto. If it is genuine, and there is no reason to doubt that it is, we can see in it the beginning of the end of the nightmare period in Germany itself: it was natural that the older generation, growing to manhood in a civilized country, should be at least lukewarm toward the hideous nonsense of Nazism, but there was doubt as to what could be expected of young people who had never known anything else. An animal brought up in a sty may be expected to behave like a pig. But these Munich students, few or many, representative or otherwise, rose gloriously out of the mud, protesting in the name of principles which Hitler thought he had killed forever. **In years to come, we too, may honor Sergeant Hans Scholl, Sophie Scholl, Christoph Probst, Alexander Schmorell, Karl Huber and William Graf, slain in Munich for a cause that is also ours.** (Author's emphasis.)

In addition to the interest shown by the *New York Times* in the White Rose resistance group, the organization American Friends of Germany conducted a gathering at Hunter College, New York City, in which hundreds of New Yorkers participated "to pay tribute to six heroic victims of the other Germany." Reportedly, Eleanor Roosevelt attended the gathering and delivered a significant speech.<sup>5</sup> Many of the details about the gathering remain unknown. In February 1943, the same month that saw the arrest and beheading of Hans and Sophie Scholl and Christoph Probst, one of the White Rose leaflets was given by Helmut James von Moltke to a Norwegian bishop named Berggrav. Bishop Berggrav delivered the leaflet to British authorities, who used it in broadcasts by the British Broadcasting Company (the BBC). The Royal Air Force also disseminated the leaflet by dropping it in large quantities over German territory. It is likely that U.S. authorities also knew of the White Rose leaflet. On June 27, 1943, in a radio broadcast series entitled *Deutsche Horer* (German Listeners), Germany's literary genius in exile, Thomas Mann, paid tribute to the students of the White Rose. Mann asked that the Allies distinguish between Germans and Nazis, and referred to Sophie and Hans

3 *New York Times*, 25 April 1943: 26.

4 *New York Times*, 2 August 1943: 14.

5 School, Inge. *Students Against Tyranny*. 159.

Scholl, Christoph Probst and Professor Huber as "good, splendid young people, whose lives had not been [sacrificed] in vain; they [will] not be forgotten."<sup>6</sup>

Despite early media recognition of the White Rose student resistance group, the organization has received scant attention in U.S. textbook literature, even in textbooks dealing specifically with German history. Gordon Craig, in his classic book *Germany 1866-1945*, simply states that German resistance movements such as the White Rose organization and the July 1944 Hitler assassination plot group would become a part of the history of the Second World War. However, Craig maintained, these groups were not rooted in the mass of Germans.<sup>7</sup> In any event, those interested in the moving and important story of the White Rose group have ample opportunity to study it. Richard Hanser's 1979 book, *A Noble Treason*, offers a fascinating and detailed account, though there are a few errors and omissions. A popular U.S. American historian, John Toland, praised Hanser's treatise saying: "Until now the remarkable and gallant achievements of the White Rose have been little more than a footnote in history. Hanser's admirable full length treatment, researched in depth, at last gives the White Rose proper credit as a significant force in the anti-Hitler movement." Axelsson's work demonstrates the reception and reaction to the White Rose student resistance group in the U.S.A., during World War II, however a significant dialogue between interested parties in the U.S. and Germany, remained to be started. In an unpublished leaflet, Christoph Probst suggested that meaningful negotiations under the guidance of such pivotal world leaders as Franklin D. Roosevelt would end World War II. This statement provoked the anger of Roland Freisler, the President of the ironically termed People's [public] Court, in Munich.<sup>8</sup>

If one considers Probst's suggestion from a broader point of view, one may deduct that the White Rose students, together with their mentor, Prof. Kurt Huber, as well as the many other German resistance groups (including those within the military), have roots in Euro-American philosophy, ideology and history. Their demands for freedom of expression, for a government that represents the desires of the governed, the right to overthrow criminal and irresponsible government, the right to self-determination for all nations and, most importantly, the right to basic freedoms, are rooted in the ideas of the 17th century English Revolution, the Euro-American Enlightenment, the Declaration of the Rights of Man, the Citizen (of French Revolution fame), and the first ten Amendments to the United States Constitution. Thus, the anti-Nazi students of the German resistance take on a wider significance. The members of the White Rose Resistance were martyrs--not only for **their** Germany, which they loved dearly, but for some of the best ideas that Western civilization has had to offer.

After reading Hanser's book, *A Noble Treason*, a student at Towson State University commented:

After reading about the White Rose group, it occurred to me that the Hitler regime [itself], gave [the impetus for the] beginning of resistance. Therefore, I wondered, if Hitler had not come to power, would the executed members of the White Rose have achieved the same greatness, bravery, and enlightenment [of] spirit in a non-totalitarian Germany? I could not reach a decision, but I realize that to have the basic qualities of those who died for what they believed in is enough. I can only hope to live life [']s promise] to the fullest as Hans and Sophie Scholl, Christoph Probst, Kurt Huber, Alexander Schmorell and Willi Graf did.<sup>9</sup>

**NOTE:** Parts of this article were presented as a paper during the touring of the White Rose Exhibit at the Carl von Ossietzky University in Oldenburg, Germany (Towson State University's partner university in Germany), on July 2, 1994. The author, a member of the White Rose Foundation, was instrumental in bringing the White Rose Exhibit both to the Carl von Ossietzky University, and to Towson State University.

6 *Ibid.* 153.

7 Craig, Gordon. *Germany 1866-1945* (Oxford U.P., 1978).

8 Hanser, Richard. *A Noble Treason* (New York: Putnam, 1979).

9 Shelley, Mathew, unpublished report, Towson State University, 1994.