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# The Story of a Plot That Failed

20 JULY. By Constantine FitzGibbon.  
285 pp. New York: W. W. Norton  
& Co. \$3.75.

By H. R. TREVOR-ROPER

ON July 20, 1944, Count Claus von Stauffenberg placed a bomb under Adolf Hitler's conference table and nearly overthrew the Nazi regime some nine months before it was overthrown by the Allies. This incident, which was followed by attempted military putschs in Berlin, Paris and elsewhere, was the climax and the one significant achievement of the German resistance. Unfortunately it failed. Hitler was not killed. His survival—a miracle which seemed to justify his claims to the protection of Providence—dissolved the temporary solidarity of his German enemies. The putschs petered out. And the Nazi leaders, scared, shaken, but still secure in power, wreaked upon their adversaries a horrible revenge. "The family of Count Stauffenberg," Himmler said, "will be wiped out, root and branch." It nearly was. So were several thousands of other victims whom sometimes only name or fame connected with July 20.

How serious was the German resistance? After the war too many men pretended to have belonged to it. Impatient of these claims, we have sometimes been tempted to restrict the credit to too few—thus endorsing Hitler's own statement that the plot was the work of "a very small clique of ambitious officers, devoid of conscience and at the same time criminally stupid." Idealists have overestimated the unity of the resistance. Cynics have overemphasized its divisions and its impracticality. Its motives have been impugned, for it achieved nothing until defeat was in sight.

Its virtue has been magnified by those who look only at its utterances, and reduced by those who look only at its results. In fact it was of course

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a very mixed movement, compounded of inevitable human weaknesses, inevitable political quandaries. On one wing there were Nazi adventurers, whom it repudiated; on the other, Communist spies, who betrayed it. But its nucleus was a group of brave men with high principles. They had many differences, naturally enough: differences of temperament, of politics, of religion. But they were united by a common faith in the dignity of man which they sought to reassert against a bestial tyranny, even though that tyranny could exploit conventional patriotism and the routine of obedience.

THEY were an élite. It is not an offense in an élite to be few; it is of its nature. Between July, 1944, and April, 1945, Hitler sought to exterminate the élite of Germany. After that, he thought, the mindless masses would be easy to govern.

Constantine FitzGibbon's book is an account of this revolt of the German élite against the tyranny which Hitler had based upon the German masses. It is an excellent book and includes much evidence which has been published in Germany since Allen W. Dulles published his brief, but still excellent, "Germany's Underground" in 1947. Mr. FitzGibbon admits the variety of the German opposition. He admits its numerous weaknesses. But he never forgets the central fact: the positive idealism in which superficial differences were sunk. Any movement of individuals against an established system is liable to armchair misconstruction. Those who grapple with evil must take the risk of appearing with soiled hands. Those who refuse to touch it must take the risk of appearing ineffective. The essential thing is the motive spirit. Above all, the author wishes to stress the fact that this was not (as Hitler pretended) a "palace revolution, carried out by a clique \* \* \* interested in preserving the German Army against the next war. I hope that I may succeed in laying that ghostly fiction."

Understanding this, Mr. FitzGibbon is able to be fair to all parties and to their difficulties. His analysis, for instance, of the difficulties of the officers in the face of their military oath—a real difficulty often overlooked by non-German writers—is admirable. And he does justice at last to the real genius of the opposition, at once the spirit, the brain, and the hand of it—Stauffenberg himself, whose stature emerges ever greater as one studies that small but devoted body, the German resistance.

"Truth is a paradox," writes Mr. FitzGibbon. "In this century it is paradoxical, indeed almost unknown, for a man to act politically with neither doctrine nor party but only his conscience behind him. The conspirators of July 20 acted for their nation, for Europe as a whole, but they did this as men, not as the representatives of some great intellectual theory or inhuman machine. They acted because they knew that as decent, God-fearing men they had no choice. 'It must be done,' said Stauffenberg, 'coûte que coûte.'"

JULY 20 was a plot that failed. Why should we study it someone will ask. Was it not a mere flash in the pan? The answer is that it was not. It was a flash of that spirit which our modern tyrannies seek to stifle, the spirit of man refusing to be submerged in a soulless system. For this reason the Government of Dr. Adenauer deserves credit for the constant support which it has always given to the memory of "The Men of the 20th July," attacked as it is both by Nazis, old and new, who seek to revive the legend of the "stab in the back," and by Communists, who denounce them (like the equally heroic leaders of the Warsaw rising) as "reactionary," "feudal" aristocrats. For the same reason Mr. FitzGibbon's book deserves to be read. Fortunately it is not only scholarly and sensible: it is also very readable.

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Keitel, Goering, Hitler and Bormann shortly after the bomb demolished the map room (right) at Hitler's headquarters, July 20, 1944.  
*Photographs from "20 July."*