Plot That Failed The Story of

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

By H. R. TREVOR-ROPER

N July 20, 1944, Count Claus von Stauffenberg placed a bomb under Adolf Hitler's conference table and early overthrew the Nazi reime some nine months before was overthrown by the Alies. This incident, which was ollowed by attempted military utschs in Berlin, Paris and isewhere, was the climax and he one significant achievement of the German resistance. Unortunately it failed. Hitler was not killed. His survival—a miracle which seemed to justify his claims to the protection of Providence—dissolved the tem porary solidarity of his German enemies. The putschs petered out. And the Nazi leaders scared, shaken, but still secur in power, wreaked upon their adversaries a horrible revenge "The family of Count Staufferberg," Himmler said, "will be wiped out, root and branch." nearly was. So were sever thousands of other victims whom sometimes only name d fame connected with July 20.

How serious was the German resistance? After the war too many men pretended to have belonged to it. Impatient these claims, we have some times been tempted to restrict the credit to too few-thus en dorsing Hitler's own statement that the plot was the work "a very small clique of ambi tious officers, devoid of con science and at the same time criminally stupid." Idealist have overestimated the unity the resistance. Cynies have overemphasized its division and its unpracticality. Its mo tives have been impugned, it achieved nothing until defeat was in sight.

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

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a very mixed movement, compounded of inevitable human weaknesses, ineyitable 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.

HEY 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 laving that ghostly fiction.

Understanding this, Mr. Fitz-Gibbon 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 cen tury 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 acte for their nation, for Europe a a whole, but they did this a men, not as the representative of some great intellectual theor or inhuman machine. The acted because they knew that as decent, God-fearing me they had no chốice. 'It mus be done,' said Stauffenberg 'coûte que coûte.' "

ULY 20 was a plot that failed. Why should we study it? someone will ask. Was it not a mere flash in the pan? The ar swer is that it was not. It was a flash of that spirit which or modern tyrannies seek to stiffe, the spirit of man refusing to be submerged in a soulless system. For this reason the Go ernment of Dr. Adenauer d serves 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 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. F tunately it is not only scholarly and sensible: it is also very readable.

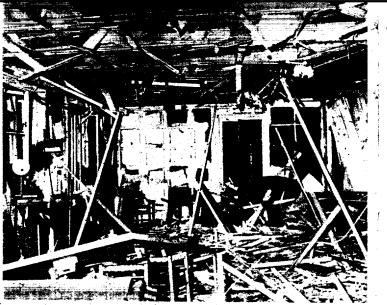
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Keitel, Goering, Hitler and Bormann shortly after the bomb demolished the map room (right) at Hitler's headquarters, July 20, 1944.

Photographs from "20 July."