

Germans Against Hitler. By Herbert Deinert. (orig. ms).

BERLIN. "The sun shines, and Hitler is master of this city. The sun shines, and dozens of my friends are in prison, possibly dead. Thousands of people like Frl. Schroeder are acclimatizing themselves, like an animal which changes its coat for the winter. After all, whatever government is in power, they are doomed to live in this town."

These are among the final entries in Christopher Isherwood's Berlin Diaries. Hitler has legally assumed power and Isherwood, who "can't altogether believe that any of this has really happened," will leave the city he has come to love and return to England. The Nazi Movement that began a decade ago in seedy Bavarian beer halls has now conquered its very antithesis, Prussia. It seems unstoppable. The people, as always, will adapt or perish.

But Hitler's victory is by no means complete and his support, even among his own Movement, far from unanimous. A year later he feels compelled to murder, in a bloody bid for control, leading members of opposition groups including scores of his own comrades-in-arms. His close friend Ernst Roehm, Chief of the Stormtroopers, is among the victims. Employing the primitive brand of Darwinism that is his trademark Hitler defends the action as a necessary purification of his Movement from within now that it has lost its natural enemies.

It was more rhetoric than reality. There was never a shortage of determined enemies within Germany. That all of their efforts failed and that the Third Reich was able to drag them down with it still boggles the mind.

The year 1938 saw the most promising large-scale conspiracy against the regime. Prominent members of the German military and diplomatic establishment informed the British Government of Hitler's war plans. Churchill was briefed as well. This was nothing short of high treason but "extraordinary times call for extraordinary action" wrote General Beck, the German Army Chief of Staff and a leader of the Opposition. In spite of Hitler's recent triumphs like the occupation of the Rhineland and the Anschluss with Austria there was no lust for war among the German population. WWI was too vivid a memory. In fact, they applauded Chamberlain's "peace in our time" as heartily as anyone. But the German Opposition felt that an unambiguous British statement would serve better to prevent war and in any case would deal Hitler a long overdue diplomatic setback. If he persisted still, Lord Halifax was told, leaders of the Army would resort to force. It was too late. The British had decided that Chamberlain and Daladier should go to Munich.

But the most radical attempt to reverse the flow of events took place fifty years ago. On July 20, 1944, Count Stauffenberg, a brilliant young Staff Officer, planted the bomb that was to kill the dictator. It has been called the revolt of the generals. Naturally, the Armed Forces had to play a major role. But the conspiracy was broadly based. In addition to the military there were the national-conservative dissidents headed by the former Lord Mayor of Leipzig, Carl Goerdeler, and the christian-socialists of the Kreisau Circle around Count Helmuth von Moltke. A most diverse group of men and women: professional soldiers, civil servants, clergy, communists, socialists, trade unionists, professionals, patriots all of them, yet dedicated to a most unusual objective, to rid the nation of its government in the midst of war.

The timing alone caused many Germans to agree with Hitler who called the rebels a criminal and treacherous clique. The conspirators had anticipated the charge. Their actions flew in the face of everything Germans had assumed for centuries about the relationship between government and the governed. Luther, Germany's moral authority, had settled the issue long ago by quoting Romans 13 and allowing no exceptions. Insurrection was both a mortal sin and the cardinal political crime. In all matters but Faith any government was to be obeyed unconditionally. The Lutheran Dietrich Bonhoeffer, writing in Hitler's Germany, reiterates the doctrine nearly verbatim. "Government is divinely ordained authority to exercise worldly dominion by divine right."

German history is not punctuated by such liberating events as The Barons vs John, or Cromwell vs Charles. But Bonhoeffer and others like him realized at last that the ancient doctrine was indefensible in its rigidity. They joined the conspiracy and paid the ultimate price. Stauffenberg and three of his immediate circle were summarily shot. The Wehrmacht was purged. Erwin Rommel, Germany's most charismatic field commander, was implicated and allowed to commit suicide. Nearly 6000 were liquidated between July of '44 and the surrender in May of '45. The families too were held accountable. Goerdeler, chancellor designate, left notes revealing his agonized belief that their failure was God's doing.

Rising in the House of Commons a few weeks after the event Churchill termed it a war among Nazi dignitaries. He knew better. He and Anthony Eden had been informed by the German Resistance who pleaded to be recognized

should they succeed. Bonhoeffer and the Bishop of Chichester, among many others, acted as intermediaries. The OSS' Allen Dulles, from his listening post in Switzerland, furnished the US Government with detailed reports, based in part on his direct contact with members of the conspiracy. But the Allies refused any promises. They were now obsessed with the notion of unconditional surrender, formulated at Casablanca. The war effort demanded the pretense that there was nothing redeeming in any German initiative. The New York Times, untypically muddleheaded, thought bomb planting worthy of gangsters and, echoing the uncompromising Martin Luther rather than the pragmatic Anglo-Saxon tradition, noted reproachfully that Germany's military elite had busied themselves for a whole year with plans "to capture or kill the Head of State and the Commander-in Chief."

Leaving the verdict to history Goerdeler pleaded in a letter from his prison cell: "I ask the world to accept our martyrdom as penance for the German people."

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