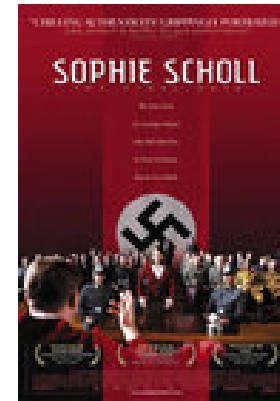


THE GERMAN SOCIETY'S

Friday Film Fest Series



Precis – Allen Krumm

If you travel to Munich and visit the university there, you will come to the **Geschwister Scholl Platz**, a public space dedicated to the memory of Hans and Sophie Scholl and the resistance group to which they belonged, known as the White Rose. The White Rose wrote and distributed tracts which condemned the Nazi government. The goal was to spread anti-war and *anti-nazi* convictions among the general populace. They hoped that the growth of such convictions would lead to an erosion of public support and the loss of power by the Nazis. In retrospect, perhaps this was a naive sentiment, although the Nazis apparently didn't think so, judging by their reaction.

Sophie Scholl: Die letzten Tage

Credits:

Director: Marc Rothemund
Screenplay: Fred Breinersdorfer
Cinematography: Martin Langer
Production year: 2005
Cast: Julia Jentsch (Sophie Scholl); Fabian Hinrichs (Hans Scholl); Alexander Held (Robert Mohr); Johanna Gastdorf (Else Gebel); Andre Hennicke (Roland Freisler); Florian Stetter (Christoph Probst) Jorg Hube (Robert Scholl), Petra Kelling (Magdalena Scholl)
Language: German with English subtitles

The White Rose group was taken seriously by the Nazis because of the relationship tyranny has with numbers. A dictatorship can endure the slow increase of critics through addition, but multiplication can be fatal. Anyone who says “no” to tyranny must be stopped before that “no” begins to multiply. Perhaps the Nazis had read Thomas Jefferson: “When the people fear the government, there is tyranny. When the government fears the people, there is liberty.”

The 4th flyer written and distributed by the White Rose group concluded with a bold and eloquent assertion: *“Wir schweigen nicht. Wir sind Euer böses Gewissen. Die Weisse Rose lässt Euch keine Ruhe...”* Then, seemingly as an afterthought, came the words which epitomized the type of arithmetic that the Nazis feared: *“Bitte, vervielfaltigen und weitersenden.”* To condemn the Nazis made a German a criminal. To seek to duplicate and distribute this condemnation virtually guaranteed a death sentence. Sophie Scholl, Hans Scholl and Christoph Probst were

beheaded on February 22, 1943.

The tale of the White Rose has intrigued people ever since. It is not difficult to see why this should be so. The story is quintessential *Erzählstoff*. At the most elemental level, the group serves as an irreducible archetype of the way we wish we all were, or could be. If some humans can behave with bravery and moral integrity, at least it is possible to think that the rest of us can. However, since bravery is usually difficult, messy and sometimes even deadly, most of us would prefer to avoid it most of the time. So it is gratifying to behold courage in someone else as a vicarious validation of our own characters.

The image of the White Rose group, and in particular of Sophie and Hans Scholl has run the gamut from unabashed hagiography to a more recent form of insistent demythologizing. The hagiographers insist the Scholls were essentially unadulterated heroes, driven by the purist of motives. Over the years this has been the most privileged, albeit implausible version of the tale. The demythologizers tend to adopt a "warts and all" perspective. Some among them contend that the members of the White Rose were merely unsophisticated and somewhat idealistic young people, not aware of what they were getting into. Others take the deconstruction a step further, insisting they were far from perfect, burdened with their own assortment of imperfections and limitations, having less than impeccable credentials as heroes.

So who is right...the petty Wart *Verfolger*s or the delusive *Maskenbildner*? Which camp has the lens to bring this particular episode of history into proper focus? Or is this a false dichotomy? Do we even have to choose? Perhaps it is most prudent to render a ringing verdict of unproven against both sides. Those who would glorify the members of the White Rose and transform them into absurd plastic saints certainly do us a disservice, not to mention a disservice to the memory of the White Rose.

It is naive to want to believe that they could only demonstrate such courage because they were models of virtue and moral probity. Yet demythologizers can be subject to their own peculiar form of naivety, falling prey to a self congratulatory conviction that they alone perceive the real truth, succumbing to a need to behold mythical feet of clay wherever they look. Sometimes demythologizers need demythologizing. Myths are always myths, but sometimes in essence they are true.

It is probably fair to return a verdict of justifiable hagiography in the case of Marc Rothmund's "Sophie Scholl: The Final Days". We expect movie makers to invoke their cosmetological artistic license when they serve up the past, and we are often charmed by the manner in which they apply the makeup. Herr Rothmund is no exception, and he does a commendable job. His powerfully understated movie consists principally of dialogues between Sophie Scholl and Robert Mohr, the police interrogator, and between Sophie and Else Gebel, another female prisoner.

Rothmund's direction conveys a sense of the overwhelming power of the state and the utter frailty of the individual in the grip of state power. Julia Jentsch (as Sophie Scholl) exudes a convincing equilibrium of inner spiritual strength and bewildered vulnerability. Alexander Held portrays Robert Mohr with a blend of *weltschmerz*-laden detachment and passionate intensity, a cross between *Parteigenosse* Josef Friday and a very prosaic Inquisitor. Although he obviously does not believe that human beings can handle freedom, there is just a hint that part of his anger is engendered by a buried sympathy for Sophie. We almost expect him to whisper "Keep up the good work" to her after one of his accusatory tirades. As for Andre Henicke, suffice it to say that he plays Roland Freisler with too much subtlety and restraint to do justice to the genuine article.

The movie is neatly punctuated by scenes which vivify the worldviews animating the players in this drama, and the *zeitgeist* encompassing them: the leaflets pushed by Sophie from the balcony fluttering prophetically to the floor at the university; the janitor groveling to retrieve the pieces of the tract torn apart by Hans Scholl; the windup Hitler aide, complete with *Schnurrbart*, so proud of his ability to guard Sophie when she goes to the bathroom; Sophies *sehnsucht*-laden gazes at the blue sky beyond the windows, and the augustinian logic of her prayers; Mohr's haunted contemplation of Sophie; Freislers fanatic rants, and the protocol driven punctuality of the top-hatted executioners.

The White Rose resisters were utterly human, but that only amplifies the magnitude of what they did. Interpretive struggles over the details of their lives changes nothing in the end about why we remember them. They proved that it is possible to say "no" to tyranny. That is something of which we need to be reminded. That is why the *Geschwister Scholl Platz* is there; Sophie Scholl had the courage of her convictions. *Sie hat ihr Herz in beide Haende genommen.*