

Second Look

German Heroism In 20 July Saga

By Herbert Elliston

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MAN STILL remains the measure of all things in spite of automation and the subordination of self to the state and institutionalized business. For a piece of evidence we have merely to ponder the fact that the ideas back of even the mechanical marvels of the times sprang from some individual mind. And yet the individualist among us is dwindling—particularly the elite whom Aristotle called the "great souled." The pessimists go so far as to say he is a vanishing species.



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They may be right. Perhaps it is out of a fear they may be right that of all the episodes in our contemporary history I am drawn to demonstrations to the contrary. For one of these, a real saga of the heroic in the individual, a case study is at hand in a current book giving the history of the rising against Hitler culminating in the abortive attempt on the Fuehrer's life on July 20, 1944. It is by Constantine Fitzgibbon and is called simply *20 July*. I have read a dozen or so books on the subject, but Fitzgibbon's is the fullest and the most enlightening of them all.

FITZGIBBON called the July 20 plot "the most remarkable incident of our generation" in moral courage. If you can square your morality with your religion, you echo the epitaph when you lay his book down. The man who tried to assassinate Hitler was Count Claus Schenk von Stauffenberg. Stauffenberg was an Apollo-like colonel of 35 who penetrated Hitler's "Wolf's Lair" in East Prussia and exploded a bomb virtually at the Fuehrer's feet without, alas, inflicting more than slight injury on Hitler. A fluke diverted the lethal machine at the last minute. Stauffenberg was merely the agent of this daring enterprise; his companions back in Berlin had prepared a *coup d'etat*. With Hitler still alive, and communications intact, the plot backfired, and there was horrible retribution. It is surprising that anybody was left to put Germany back in civilization.

The story of the plot that failed is a triumph of the human spirit. There is a restorative here for those who see man losing his individuality. If you think that your life has lost purpose and meaning, read this book. (Also, if, perchance, you think there is an inherent badness in the German character, then by all means read

20 July deals not with a movement, for a movement promotes its own heroism, but with exploits by individual men spurred only by their conscience. They were guided without leaders. The conspiracy had to be organized, it is true, but the organization was very loose, and, as it proved, amateurish. And the men in it were not the only resisters in Germany. There were anti-Hitler pockets of individuals loosely gathered together throughout the country. Some acted, some talked, some merely thought.

AND WHAT a roster of gallant martyrs they all made to nourish the faint-of-heart among the men who came after them! If here their sacrifice did not suffice to do penance for the defeated nation, they furnished noble examples of the dignity of man for all time to come. Beck, Goerdeler, von Moltke, Leber—generals, administrators, squires, workers. There was no common denominator among them except in terms of human personality embattled against evil incarnate.

In the main these men held to the Christian faith. How did this square with tyrannicide? A delicate and a thorny question! In this case the answer was left to personal decision, but many theologians since 1944 have come to the defense of the genocide killers. The fact that the state can now be puffed up to walk like God made for a modern interpretation by the religious authorities. Luther, among other church founders, was cited. When the state is transformed into anti-Christ, when a state becomes a chaos, words from Luther could be put alongside Jefferson's as warrant for destroying the government through which such a state acts.

There are still those who belittle the German underground. Perhaps it is because they refused to believe the evidence of it and gave it little or no help and succor. Remember, too, we were committed to the supreme folly of unconditional surrender. But in this matter Fitzgibbon gives another reason for the outside indifference. And that is that we were speaking at this time in Soviet accents — believing that any resistance short of a general uprising by the mass was bound to be spurious. It is easy to see now that there would have been a Soviet Ger-