

Resistance and poetry

(Written on the 80th anniversary of the attempt on Hitler's life on July 20th, 1944)

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Abstract

The failure of the attempt on Hitler's life on July 20th, 1944, carried out by the Colonel and Chief of Defence Staff, Count Claus von Stauffenberg, had terrible consequences for the conspirators, Germany and Europe in general. Around five thousand people directly or indirectly linked to the Resistance movement were executed between that date and the end of the war. The attempt was not well understood by the allied countries nor by the German people itself. The first recognition of the Resistance was paradoxically expressed by Winston Churchill in 1946.

The Resistance against the Nazi dictatorship started much earlier and was much more important than people tend to believe. Many of the high-ranking officers of the Wehrmacht participated in it, among whom Kurt von Hammerstein, the last general in chief of the army before Hitler assumed power, as well as Field Marshall Erwin Rommel, Admiral Wilhelm Canaris and General Ludwig Beck. They carried out innumerable attempts, first of coups d'état and later of murdering the tyrant, all of which devilishly failed.

In contrast to the Nazi authorities, most of the conspirators were refined people of great culture. In this essay, I will analyse the relationships the executor of the last attempt, Count Claus von Stauffenberg, had with poetry and with music, by contributing with some unpublished data in this regard. Likewise, I will reproduce the two poems the poet Stefan George supposedly gave the hero on his death bed

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eleven years before the attempt, and which undoubtedly constitute a mission that Stauffenberg became aware of only later. Another important element of this story is that many of these Wehrmacht officers in the Resistance greatly admired the poet Rainer Maria Rilke to such extent that they employ the last lines of his “Requiem for Wolf Graf von Kalckreuth” as a motto for recognizing themselves: “Who speaks of victories? To resist is all.”

The attack and the judgement of history

80 years have passed since the attack against Hitler was carried out by the colonel and Chief of Defence Staff, Count Claus von Stauffenberg, as part of a plan long prepared by the high German officiality that aimed to end the war, liberate the occupied countries, set the prisoners in the concentration camps free and reinstall the rule of law in Germany. As it is well known, the attack failed and this had terrible consequences for the conspirators, for Germany and for Europe in general. The attack was not well received nor understood by neither the Allies nor the German people (K. von Schulthess, 2015, p. 199). Thus, on August 2nd, 1944, Winston Churchill refers to these attacks as if they were “extermination fights between dignitaries of the Third Reich” (M. von Dönhoff, 2008, pp. 32, 47). The New York Times of August 9th, 1944, writes that “the attack shows rather the atmosphere of an obscure criminal world, and what was particularly shocking was the fact that for a whole year the highest-ranked officers of the German armed forces had been involved in the preparation of a plan to sequestrate or to murder ‘the head of the state, who, at the same time, was the chief of the armed forces, and this, with a bomb, a typical weapon of the delinquent world!’” (M. von Dönhoff, 2008, pp. 32-33). The Herald Tribune affirms the same day: “The Americans will not be very sorry about the fact that the bomb has left Hitler unscathed and that he himself has liquidated his generals. Americans have no great sympathy for the aristocrats and even less for those who like to march with the step of the goose” (M. von Dönhoff, 2008, p. 33). The attitude shown by the allies towards the Resistance movement can be deduced from the words spoken by the British Prime Minister Anthony Eden. He

said that he would not answer “to these persons” (M. von Dönhoff, 2008, p. 28), as he considered them traitors. And later he wrote: “Our opinion is that they are not useful neither to us nor to Germany” (op. cit. p. 28). In fact, they were not able to distinguish between Germans and Nazis. One of the few survivors of the Resistance, the just quoted journalist and writer Marion von Dönhoff, in trying to understand the incomprehension the Resistance received from the international press, writes: “Nobody can imagine today what it may mean to love one’s fatherland and simultaneously wish for its defeat” (M. von Dönhoff, 2008, p. 33). Regarding the Germans, it should be recognised that for many of them this act also meant a betrayal of the legitimate authority. This idea persisted still a decade. Only in 1954 was there a gesture in favour of the participants, when the president of Germany, Theodor Heuss, in a speech before the students at the Free University of Berlin, expressed his respect for the Resistance (P. Steinbach, 2007, p. 122) and recognised that there had existed “another Germany” (K. von Schulthess, 2008, p. 199). The relatives of the executed conspirators, besides being expropriated of all their assets, did not receive any support from the Federal Republic until the mid-50’s. The heroes obtained certain recognition only in 1964, when some streets received their names and monuments were erected, although in my opinion, not enough. Books about the subject were published too. Since then, every year official ceremonies have been organized in their memory.

Paradoxically, they received the greatest and earlier recognition already in 1946 from Winston Churchill himself, who, regretting his critical sayings of the first moment, manifested the following before the British Parliament: “In Germany existed an opposition that began to be more and more weakened because of its many victims and of the disconcerting international policy (Casablanca Agreement!), but which belongs to the most noble and grandiose which has ever occurred in the political history of all the peoples. These men fought without internal nor external help, moved only by the uneasiness of their consciences... Their facts and their sacrifice must be the fundament of a new order. We hope that with the passing of time this heroic chapter of German history finds its just recognition.” (E. Zeller, 1957, p. 323; K. von Schulthess, 2009, p. 199).

The true dimension of the Resistance

The Resistance against the Nazi regime was much more important and precocious than one would think and began, strictly speaking, already before Hitler assumed power. The disqualification that the Nazi authorities made of them, by treating them as “a little group of ambitious and criminal aristocrats” (P. Steinbach, 2007, p. 120), does not correspond at all to reality. In fact, to that movement belonged many aristocrats, both military and civilian, most of them catholic, but also many who did not belong to nobility, such as conservative, social democrat and communist politicians, intellectuals, and artists (among others, the group around Harro Schultze-Boysen, N. Ohler, 2021), catholic priests and Lutheran clergymen, etc. Very soon, German aristocracy, with some exceptions, took its distance from Hitler and his movement and ideas. They somewhat despised the Nazi movement because of its socialistic ideas, but above all, because of the personality of the leader, Hitler, a simple army corporal with fanatic features. Besides, opposition against Hitler was very strong among catholic officers since the Catholic Church was more decided than the Lutheran in its commitment with the anti-Nazi fight. The relative weakness of the Evangelic Church is shown by the fact that an important group of Lutheran intellectuals felt morally obliged to create another church, the so-called *Bekennende Kirche* (Confessing Church), to which the most important Lutheran members of the Resistance moved, like Peter Yorck von Wartenburg and Helmuth von Moltke.

But there is nothing better to evaluate the role of aristocracy during this terrible period of German history than a speech delivered on occasion of one July 20th anniversary by Count Alexander von Stauffenberg, the only survivor among the brothers, and later Professor for Old History at the University of Munich: “As far as the overwhelming participation of the German nobility of all lineages in this uprising is concerned, it will be the pride of all Germans who are not caught up in class prejudices, that the oldest and noblest families of the empire, who, as is well known, had already forfeited their 'privileges' for generations, once again asserted their

original right: to live and to die for the German people..." (Manuscript found by the historian Eberhard Zeller, 1957, p. 339).

Among the members of the Armed Forces, it is worth outlining at least the most famous participants, like Marshal Erwin Rommel, Admiral Wilhelm Canaris, former General in Chief Baron Kurt von Hammerstein, Field Marshal Erwin von Witzleben, Generals Ludwig Beck, Friedrich Olbricht, and Karl Heinrich von Stülpnagel and Colonels Claus von Stauffenberg, Henning von Treskow and Werner von Haeften. Among the civilians we should mention the Minister of Economy, Johannes Popitz, Secretary of State Erwin Planck (son of the great physician Max Planck, creator of the Quantum Theory and Nobel Prize 1918), former Leipzig Mayor Friedrich Goerdeler, important jurists like Hans von Dohnanyi, Counts Helmuth von Moltke and Peter Yorck von Wartenburg, priests Agustin Roesch, Alfred Delp, Rupert Mayer and Lothar König and the Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer (son of the famous psychiatrist Karl Bonhoeffer, Professor at Berlin University). The socialist politicians who participated in the Resistance include Julius Leber, Wilhelm Leuschner, Theodor Haubach and Eugen Gerstenmeier. Almost all of them were executed after the attack (E. Zeller, 1957, pp. 51-77). Of those named above, only the Jesuit Lothar König, who miraculously managed to escape (M. Alcalá, 1991) and Eugen Gerstenmeier, to whom the "Popular Court", in the last moment, commuted the death penalty to prison (E. Zeller, 1957, p. 82), survived. Many other members of the Catholic Hierarchy decidedly collaborated with the Resistance, although without participating in the preparation of the attacks in a direct form. The most notable cases are those of the Archbishop of Berlin, Konrad von Preysing (M. von Dönhoff, 2008, p. 132), and the Archbishop of Münster, Clemens von Gallen (M. von Dönhoff, 2008, p. 57). It is well known that the Resistance received great help from the Vatican, not only economic support, but also concrete actions oriented to establishing contacts with England. These aimed to warn about the danger Hitler meant for the world peace and to avoid the imminent war (M. von Dönhoff, 2008, pp. 15 and 130).

It is interesting that most of the members of the Resistance were people of high intellectual level and great culture. Stauffenberg, for example, besides being a senior officer, was a poet and a musician. In fact, at some point he doubted between following a career as cellist or joining the military (P. Steinbach, 2007, p. 47). He was also inclined to studying architecture. Finally, he decided to join the army, partly moved by family tradition and his love for Germany. Nevertheless, he never abandoned his intellectual interests and so, some of his survivor companions remember him avoiding in the regiments the “casino life” and fundamentally dedicating himself to reading and to music. Officials under his command remember his classical phrase: “An officer in times of peace must demonstrate education and culture, and in time of war, courage” (P. Steinbach, 2007, p. 49). The influence of his mentor, the poet Stefan George, remained throughout the years. He would read his poems almost daily and knew many of them by heart. Let us remember that Stauffenberg himself was a poet and George found his poems excellent and continuously stimulated him to follow his poetical nature (P. Steinbach, p. 31). But George’s influence goes further than literature. He conveyed to the brothers a sort of idealistic image of Germany, which they were to rediscover and promote. His political ideal for Germany, *Das neue Reich*, was originally a book of poems (S. George, pp. 397-469), but later it became a kind of project for a “new Germany”. George considered himself an “educator” of a new youth, where he saw the “new spirit” from which *das neue Reich* should emerge. He saw the future “new spirit” rooted in a “secret Germany”. The influence of Stefan George left a heavy mark on the brothers, especially on Berthold and Alexander. Claus, however, was more independent and he understood *das neue Reich* rather as a service for a better order.

His brother Berthold was exceptionally talented: he was a jurist and researcher at the Max Planck Institute of Berlin, spoke seven languages, was a philologist and, at the time when he was executed, was working on a new translation of the *Odyssey* from Greek into German. The description a surviving friend of him made about details of the translation is fascinating. Bertold always searched for the sentence in German that better reproduced the musicality of the original verses of

Homer (E. Zeller, 1957, p. 334). Another example of gifted members of the Resistance was Peter Yorck von Wartenburg. He was a jurist as well, but also a literature expert and a polyglot. His grandfather was the great German philosopher of the 19th century, Count Paul Yorck von Wartenburg, who had great influence on Martin Heidegger, above all in the subject of temporality. As an example of his validity, it is enough to remember that Carlos Peña, an important Chilean jurist, and philosopher, profusely quotes him in his recent and notable book “El tiempo de la memoria” (The time of memory, 2019, pp. 17, 71, 119, 128 and 210). The library of his family’s castle, where Peter, the hero, grew up, counted 150,000 volumes and his love of literature was such that he knew more than one hundred poems by Goethe by heart (M. von Dönhoff, 2008, p. 120). He was a very close friend to Count Helmut von Moltke, also a jurist, and together they oversaw the redaction of the new Constitution for a future Germany without Hitler. General Baron Kurt von Hammerstein was a man of great intelligence and culture and was so admired by the German army that Hitler, even knowing that he was his enemy from the very first day, did not dare to have him murdered as he did with so many others (H. M. Enzenberger, 2011, p. 100 ff.). Adam von Trott zu Solz, jurist and diplomat, did his postgraduate studies in Oxford at the beginning of the 30’s and was much admired among his pairs for his intelligence and his culture, and used to be invited in houses of emblematic figures of English politics and aristocracy, like Lord Halifax, Lord Astor and Lord Lothian, where, among others, he met Winston Churchill. (M. von Dönhoff, 2008, p. 154 ff.). All this is in strong contrast with the type of people in Nazi leaderships, who had no university formation, were primitive and uneducated and showed evident psychopathic and antisocial behaviours. The new research conducted by Norman Ohler (2015/2016, pp. 127-214) in different archives in Germany and the USA about the diary of Theodor Morell, Hitler’s personal physician, show to what extent the Nazi leaders, including Hitler himself, were heavily dependent on drugs, particularly morphine and amphetamines. However, also the young soldiers who at the beginning of the war fought the “*Blitzkrieg*”, and the young marines in charge, at the end of the war, of suicide missions in small submarines, were stimulated by high doses of methamphetamine (pp. 217-242).

Many have reproached the Resistance to have acted late, when the war was already lost, but this does not correspond to reality. The attack of Count Stauffenberg was the last of a long series of attempts, first of coups d'états with the object of removing Hitler and judging him and then, because of the repeated failures, of direct attacks against the dictator's life. The most important attempt of a coup d'état took place on September 1938 and was aimed at preventing the war Hitler wanted at all costs. This attempt was organized by Generals Ludwig Beck, Hans Halder and Erwin von Witzleben, in collaboration with Kurt von Hammerstein (M. von Dönhoff, 2008, pp. 177 and 178). The operation to assume power and neutralise the SS was prepared to the last detail. The plan was made known to the English authorities who were begged not to accept Hitler's expansionist intentions. They ignored the warning and sent Neville Chamberlain, who ended up accepting Hitler to occupy part of Czechoslovakia. This great diplomatic triumph of the dictator would have made a coup d'état very unpopular at that moment and the operation had to be cancelled. The brave Leipzig mayor, Friedrich Goerdeler, then sent a letter to the US government, of which we extract the following paragraphs: "München Agreement was nothing but a clear capitulation of France and of England before this arrogant charlatan... The end of this period of suffering for the German people under a brutal tyranny... has been postponed for an indefinite time... We knew, from our pain, which way the satanic and demoniac Hitler would take. Despite our warnings, Chamberlain followed the steps marked by Hitler..." (E. Zeller, 1957, p. 40).

The ethical problem which the murder implied was resolved when the high officiality verified the massacres carried out by the SS in the rear guard of the Russian front and the mass murders in concentration camps (E. Zeller, 1957, pp. 174-177). Nevertheless, many of the members of the Resistance did not agree with the assassination of Hitler, like the already mentioned counts Helmuth von Moltke and Peter Yorck von Wartenburg. Survivor of the Resistance, Countess Marion von Dönhoff, writes in this respect: "That the subversion was inevitable, that one had to get fully involved with it, became already very clear to Peter Yorck. But for him and for Moltke, who both lived very consciously as Christians, the idea of organizing Hitler's murder according to a plan was a tough problem that did not bother the

others. Moltke refused to remove a criminal by committing a crime. Yorck did not communicate his opinion so clearly, and in the last phase he decided completely to the crime "(p. 132). Of the generals implicated in the rebellion, not all agreed with the murder either, like General Rommel. However, Stauffenberg's attitude was completely clear and he repeatedly manifested: "We have proven ourselves before God and our consciousness: it must happen" (E. Zeller, 1957, p. 177). He did not need to convince the young officers, because his mere presence was enough. "They trusted Stauffenberg and found in him the power to go through all difficulties and begin something new" (op. cit., p. 177). The high officiality was also scandalized by the brutalities committed by the SS commandos on the civilian population which showed a kind of oppositional attitude or conduct to the regime. Count Helmuth von Moltke, who worked in the judicial branch, tells his English friend Lionel Curtis in a letter from April 1942 the following: "Every day 25 people are sentenced to death by ordinary courts and another 75 by military courts." (M. von Dönhoff, 2008, p. 111). And according to the acts of the Ministry of Justice, the number of executions in 1943 was 5,764 (E. Zeller, 1957, p. 337). All this led to the fact that from the beginning of 1942 and up to July 20th, 1944 no more attempts of coups d'état would happen – something impossible by that time – but only attacks against Hitler, consecutively carried out by Henning von Treskow, Fabian von Schlabrendorff, Rudolf von Gersdorff and Axel von dem Bussche (M. von Dönhoff, 2008, pp. 40-46), until those of Stauffenberg - which were not one, but three, on July 11th, 15th and 20th - all of which diabolically unsuccessful (E. Zeller, 1957, pp. 231-297). I will not extend on the details of the last one as it is well known through films and documentaries, but I would like to remember its terrible consequences: more than a half of all deaths in the Second War occurred between July 20th, 1944 and the capitulation on May 8th, 1945; Hitler had around 300 conspirators or suspects executed in the first days after the attack, among whom 19 generals, 26 colonels and commanders, 2 ambassadors, 7 diplomats, 3 secretaries of state, the chief of police, several priests and theologians and numerous senior officials of the most diverse ministries and governorates (M. von Dönhoff, 2008, p. 36). In the later period and until shortly

before the end of the war, around 5,000 more people were executed because of the attack of July 20th (E. Zeller, 1957, p. 312).

Resistance and poetry

What is not well known is the relation of the Resistance with the poetic world. Stauffenberg's extraordinarily cultivated mother was a friend of Rainer Maria Rilke and she spoke with him about her talented young sons. Rilke, after meeting them, wrote to their mother that their face expression showed they would have a great future. Nevertheless, no further close contact resulted from this encounter. Different was the situation with the other great German poet of the first half of the 20th century, Stefan George, who was introduced to Countess Stauffenberg by Mrs. Kröner, the wife of a famous editor from Stuttgart (P. Steinbach, 2007, p. 24). The poet was immediately interested in the three young Stauffenberg boys, especially in Berthold and Claus, and incorporated them into the closest circle of his followers. George showed a rigorous intellectual incorruptibility against the spirit of time and the prevailing trends, and he wanted "to oppose a secret Germany to the confusions of the present" (P. Steinbach, 2007, p. 26). This "secret Germany" would hide the forces and the ideals of the nation, whose means of understanding should have an aesthetic, immaculate form. George wanted to take distance from every manifestation of massive culture. His high aesthetic aspiration was shown by his extremely elaborated, well-mannered and baroque language. His disciples had to exercise this language and write poems that were presented to the master. He also demanded from his followers to truly identify with his poetry and never to take a determined political option. He considered political debates nonsense. The Stauffenberg brothers belonged to this circle in heart and soul.

Stefan George did not demand from the brothers to isolate themselves under something like a consciousness of belonging to an elite; he rather wanted them not to lose themselves in everyday life and to never forget the promised ideals. George was very influential for Claus. He taught him to never submit himself to the prevailing trends. The memory of George helped him to always "take a distance" and, thanks

to many of George's poems which he knew by heart, he managed to have an own style in his relationships with his friends and comrades. The Stefan George circle somehow continued to exist after the poet's death in December 1933. My professor during the 60's in Heidelberg, the great psychiatrist and philosopher Hubertus Tellenbach, also belonged to this circle and he told me on one occasion, in 1966, that he had heard that Stefan George had given Claus the mission of "murdering the tyrant", putting in his hands two poems related to the subject: "The Antichrist" and "The action". This was confusing for me because the attack took place in July 1944, that is, eleven years after the poet's death. Tellenbach also told me that the motto used by the members of the Resistance for recognizing themselves was a verse by Rilke, the end of the "Requiem for a Suicidal Poet" (2010): "*Wer spricht von Siegen. Überstehen ist alles*". ("Who speaks of victories. To resist is everything."). However, time went by and already mature, I rekindled my love for Rilke, and I translated his *Elegies* and his *Sonnets* into Spanish (first editions in 2002 and 2004); I was also very interested in the details of his life, and, by surprise, in a biography of him I found a quote of the poet Gottfried Benn, referring to the role that verse had in his generation of opponents to the Nazi dictatorship (H. E. Holthusen, 1968, p. 100). Something similar happened with the anecdote of Stefan George. After that talk with Tellenbach I became interested in the Resistance Movement and one day I found in a biography of Stauffenberg a whole chapter dedicated to the relation of the three brothers with the poet (P. Steinbach, 2007, pp. 24-32), describing the same history of the great influence George had on Stauffenberg, but in more detail: the poet exiled himself in Switzerland shortly after Hitler's accession to power and he told his disciples: "we are being governed by mentally retarded people" (2007, p. 51). There he became ill and, already at death's door, the three brothers went to Locarno to accompany him. The poet appointed Berthold as his heir. Steinbach does not mention that Stefan George gave Claus those poems, like Tellenbach told me. Nevertheless, [there are two places where the biographer Peter Steinbach describes facts in complete coherence with Tellenbach's sayings. First, when he](#) ends the chapter dedicated to the relationship between the Stauffenberg brothers and the poet with the sentence: "He (George) instilled in the young Stauffenberg a feeling for

the possibility that public circumstances could also be handed over to a person who he considered the 'Antichrist'" (p. 32). Second, when Steinbach writes in the following chapter: "His (George's) poetry meant a legacy for them (his followers). Special significance had for Stauffenberg '*Der Widerchrist*' (...) This poem was published in 1907, the year Stauffenberg was born, and witnesses George's will not to abandon himself to the 'devoted opinion', but to strive for a 'transforming action'. There are also even other poems with similar purpose, like '*Der Täter*' (The perpetrator) or '*Der Empörer*' (The Rebel)." (Steinbach, 1957, pp. 41-42). Furthermore, the historian Eberhard Zeller, in his extraordinary book about the July 20th, 1944, written shortly after the events, talks about the importance of the poem "The Antichrist" for the conspirators. Zeller also reports that Countess Maria Stauffenberg, Berthold's widow, told him that some day before the attack, her brother-in-law Claus showed her in George's book "*Das siebente Ring*" (The seventh ring) the poem he was reading: "The Antichrist" (1958, p. 258). In the revised literature I have not found the confirmation that George in his last minutes of his life also gave Claus the poem "The action", like Tellenbach stated, but it seems highly possible to me, considering the constant position George's against the prevailing opinions, manifested among others in his poems "*Die Tat*" (The action) or "*Der Täter*" (The perpetrator), and the development of the events.

I will reproduce here only parts of my English version of them. Toward the end of the first one, "The Antichrist" (*Werke, Band I*; Complete Works, Volume I, p. 258), the poet exclaims:

"The prince of the vermin expands his reign,
there is no treasure that he lacks – no happiness that he needs.
Let the rest of the rebels sink!"

And the second, "The Action" (*Werke, Band I*; Complete Works, Volume I, p. 84), ends like this:

“He does not listen to the words of well-meaning persons,
he advances with savage young steps,
and when before his hand brandishing a naked sword,
the monster succumbing, drowning in burning ash and poison,
he follows his way, illuminated by the fire of the torch,
directing his beautiful silent gaze up to the limit of the sky.”

The verses speak for themselves. We do not know to what extent Stauffenberg understood the mission entrusted to him, but the often-mentioned historian Eberhard Zeller (1953/1957, pp. 334-335) recounts that Berthold’s widow told him too that, in the last days before the attempt to murder Hitler and in the middle of bomb attacks, Claus, sitting on the balcony, often recited these verses. Many years later, when I was revising Stefan George’s work, of which Claus knew one hundred poems by heart, I found a poem dedicated to the hero that I did not know and that portrays him in an unparalleled manner (*Werke, Band I, Complete Works, Volume I, 1958, p. 150-151*):

“You, dear friend, enigma that martyrs us,
your smile plays and recognizes, like I do,
the inscrutable abyss between us.
And she appreciates that secret and rejoices.
that she cannot ever understand it...
And we, with our love, we seek to bridge this abyss,
and follow, without fear, your transformation.
From your face emerges the look of a victor.”

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