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## **Sophie Scholl: A Life of Courage** **by Wendy McElroy**

The 2005 German film *Sophie Scholl: The Final Days* (*Die letzten Tage*) depicts the anti-Nazi heroine Sophie Magdalena Scholl (May 9, 1921– February 22, 1943). Sophie and her brother, Hans, were leading members of a nonviolent resistance group called the White Rose. Five students in their early twenties formed the group in 1942 at the University of Munich. The White Rose soon became infamous for a leaflet campaign that called for the removal of Hitler from power and an end to the insanity of World War II. The group subsequently became famous as martyrs to freedom and as proof that tyranny cannot destroy man’s passion for justice.

*Sophie Scholl* received wide acclaim in Europe, winning three German Film Awards or “Lolas” — the German equivalent of an Oscar. Julie Jentsch, who portrayed Sophie, was named Best Actress by the Berlin Film Festival, the German Film Awards, and the European Film Awards.

The movie was nominated for an Oscar in the “Best Foreign Language Film” category but lost to the South African film *Tsotsi*.

This brilliantly crafted film deserves every syllable of praise. It is confirmation that German filmmaking, which has arguably been in decline since the 1970s, is reestablishing its reputation for innovation and excellence.

The film’s execution merges with its theme. The lighting is flat and often harsh, with beams of light streaming from windows, lamps, and candles in order to beat back the darkness. On several occasions, the film pauses while Sophie gazes up at the radiant sky before returning to the grim atmosphere of Nazi rule. In that gray world, the eye is drawn immediately to the two “opponents” who will clash: to Nazism as represented in bright red banners that bear a swastika and to Sophie in a dull red sweater.

Settings are minimalistic and stark, with much of the action occurring in one room. Suspenseful music sometimes sounds like a beating heart, sometimes like a ticking clock. It is Sophie’s life that is ticking.

The movie opens in 1943 with a convivial scene where the 21-year-old Sophie, Hans, and two other young men are preparing the White Rose's last leaflet: Number 6. Ignoring the danger, Sophie and Hans decide to distribute the leaflet at the University of Munich in broad daylight while the classes are in session and the corridors are empty. They want to ignite the campus with anti-war passion.

Nineteen forty-three was a watershed year for both the war and the German people's attitude towards it. Pivot points in war usually result from unacceptably high casualty rates that, in turn, inspire disillusionment with government and doubt about whether the conflict can be won. Leaflet 6 declares "330,000 troops" have been sent "to a senseless death" on the eastern front, especially at Stalingrad. (Eventually, 740,000 Axis soldiers will be killed or wounded, and 100,000 will be captured on the eastern front.) The leaflet asserts, "Hitler cannot win the war. He can only prolong it."

The Nazis react with predictable brutality to those speaking truth to power. Rather than publicly admit to losing an entire army at Stalingrad, the regime viciously cracks down on dissidents who are accused of "aiding the enemy" by exposing the facts. As Sophie's cellmate later states, "Even the big shots are scared stiff." This is the juncture in Nazi history at which the minister for public enlightenment and propaganda, Joseph Goebbels, delivers his famous "total war" speech. Desperate to retain control in the wake of military defeat abroad and economic hardship at home, Goebbels declares,

Total war is the demand of the hour.... The homeland must stay pure and intact in its entirety. Nothing may disturb the picture.... Everyone must learn to pay heed to war morale, and pay attention to the just demands of working and fighting people. We are not spoilsports, but neither will we tolerate those who hinder our efforts.

In the film, this speech plays on a radio in the background as Sophie surrenders her possessions and undresses at the prison. Like truth, she is becoming a casualty of "total war." The White Rose is targeted with special ferocity because anti-war sentiments are growing popular; the group's first four leaflets had been printed in the hundreds, the last two in the thousands.

### **Arrest and interrogation**

Against this political backdrop, Sophie and Hans leave stacks of Leaflet Number 6 in the university's empty corridors and corners. Soon the bell will ring and students will flood out of classrooms to find this call for resistance. At the last moment — almost as they are making a clear, clean exit — Sophie and Hans decide to distribute one last stack of leaflets on an upstairs floor. Time runs out. Sophie abandons a pile on a balustrade overlooking the building's main gallery.

Then on impulse, as she leaves to blend in with a crowd of students, she tips the leaflets over the balustrade's edge so that they flutter down, filling the air of the gallery.

It is now too late for Sophie and Hans to escape. A janitor races after them. At first, he accuses only Hans but Sophie insists on taking responsibility for tipping the leaflets and, so, both of them are caught.

For the crime of distributing the leaflets, they will be charged with "high treason, demoralizing the troops, and aiding the enemy." At first, however, their captors want information ... especially, they want the names of other White Rose members. Despite threats interspersed with promises of leniency, Sophie and Hans do not oblige.

The remainder and largest part of the movie deals with Sophie's four days of imprisonment and interrogation in a Nazi prison, followed more briefly by her trial and execution. (Although Hans and Christoph Probst, a fellow member of the White Rose, undergo similar processes, their ordeals take place almost entirely off-screen.)

*Sophie Scholl* is one of those rare movies that maintain tension and suspense even though the outcome is known from the beginning shot. Part of the reason for this success is the realism of the drama, which benefits from the East German archival records on Sophie and her imprisonment that became accessible after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

By mixing "dialogue" from White Rose leaflets with information from the recovered archives, the scriptwriter, Fred Breinersdorfer, was able to reconstruct the "final days" with accuracy.

As a crime-fiction writer and a playwright, Breinersdorfer is particularly skillful in presenting the duel of wits that constitutes Sophie's interrogation by Gestapo police official Robert Mohr. Although *Sophie Scholl* was not adapted from the theater, it resembles movies that begin as plays. For example, much of the drama takes place in one simple setting: Mohr's office in the prison. Most of the ideological conflict comes from lean and meaty dialogue between two people: Sophie and Mohr.

### **The banality of evil**

The movie's portrayal of evil is riveting. "Evil" is not too strong a word. Sophie is being processed through a system that wishes to kill her for speaking the truth and having the courage to say "No." She advocates and employs only peaceful means. As Sophie's execution nears, her dignity is so impressive that a female guard breaks prison rules to permit Sophie to meet one last time with the equally doomed Hans and Christoph. Yet this same guard is a willing cog in the machinery that is designed to destroy the young woman she admires.

The depiction of evil will surprise people who are used to Hollywood Nazis as jackbooted sadists who scream "Raus! Raus!" at the Jews they are herding into concentration camps. Sophie's treatment is not brutal compared with what we have come to expect from Hollywood Nazis. She

is locked into a grim prison but not into a concentration camp. She is interrogated but not tortured. Her family is arrested but they are also released.

The Hollywood characterization captures an aspect of the Nazi regime, to be certain, but it also loses the subtlety that allowed Nazism to become a part of everyday life in a modern, educated nation. It loses the sense of how evil can become commonplace and as routine as paperwork. Or how ordinary people can absolve themselves of all responsibility for facilitating evil.

This concept has been called “the banality of evil.” The phrase was popularized by the German-American political theorist Hannah Arendt in her 1963 book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. Arendt attended the trial of Eichmann, who had been instrumental in administering the Nazi death camps as a high-level bureaucrat. She did not see a sadist monster on trial. Like his fellow Nazi, Heinrich Himmler, who went from being a chicken farmer to head the notoriously sadistic SS, Eichmann seemed to be an ordinary man who had a talent for carrying out orders. Arendt went on to describe how ordinary people can commit terrible acts simply because the acts are performed systematically and within a socially sanctioned context that does not demand or encourage personal accountability.

Thus, the seizure of Jewish property was not theft if the property was confiscated through forms that were properly stamped and filled out in triplicate at a government office. Those who processed the paperwork and inventoried the goods were doing nothing more than that: paperwork and inventory. They were divorced from personal responsibility. Thus, Sophie’s killing is not murder if she is executed after receiving a show trial for violating laws against expressing the wrong political opinions. No one involved in the process needs to feel like a murderer; each is only doing a job.

Any widespread government program rests on ordinary civil servants who staff the halls of bureaucracy and prisons, who type and file the paperwork. These are the people “doing their jobs”; they obey orders and follow the letter of the law without questioning its content. Indeed, the law assumes the role that conscience often plays. It tells them what is right and wrong to do, and they obey.

Some of the people who facilitate Sophie’s killing are anonymous, such as the interchangeable men who lead her down corridors to a jail cell or an interrogation room. These men give less than no thought to the content of their actions. As one guard herds Sophie and another political dissident into their cell, he chides them, “Hurry, ladies. I want to hear the speech,” which was blaring on the radio. If asked, he would probably have claimed to bear Sophie no ill will.

Others are “small people” who swell with self-importance that they borrow from their roles as enforcers of state policy. For example, the university janitor who sees the leaflets being pushed off the railing; he races after Hans and Sophie, yelling, “Stop. Don’t move! Stop at once!

You are under arrest.” Or the milquetoast prison clerk with a bad Hitler hairdo who processes Sophie’s prison paperwork with a snide remark and takes obvious pleasure in the round-up of young, promising students whom most people would consider their “betters.”

Still others are self-aware enough to realize, on some level, they are striking a deal with the devil; they are selling their souls for safety or a snippet of power.

### **The kangaroo People’s Court**

For example, her court-appointed defense attorney, identified only as Klein, is a bought-and-paid-for toady who asks no questions and provides no defense at her trial. At their first and brief meeting in her prison cell, Sophie asks him, “What will happen to my family?” When he dismisses the question out of hand, she objects, “You are my lawyer!” At this slight stab at the legitimacy of his position, Klein explodes into a furious personal attack on Sophie that ends with his gloating about the upcoming court verdict; it will put Sophie in her place. Klein has consciously chosen to hide behind amoral bureaucracy and will not countenance a moral mirror held to his face.

The judge who presides over Sophie’s trial is similar. Sophie’s cellmate tells her that Roland Freisler, president of the People’s Court, is a former Soviet commissar who needs to “rehabilitate himself on the home front.” Desperate to prove his loyalty, Freisler rages at the three defendants with such fury that the prosecuting attorney seems redundant. And yet, Freisler is clearly afraid. He scans the audience to ascertain their reaction to his words. At one point, Hans replies to Freisler’s boast of not being afraid of the defendants by saying, “If you and Hitler weren’t afraid of our opinion, we wouldn’t be here.”

By far the most interesting face of evil belongs to Herr Mohr, the police agent who interrogates Sophie and forms a personal connection with her, despite himself. His reluctant admiration for her clearly makes him uncomfortable, perhaps because he realizes fully the role he is playing in her destruction and takes some responsibility. Mohr is the most dangerous of the civil-service bureaucrats: intelligent, competent, and loyal to both the ideals and structure of the Nazi regime.

Part of his loyalty is self-interest. When Sophie defends the former democracy of Germany, he replies bitterly, “I was only a tailor in that damn democracy!” But self-interest cannot explain why Mohr is proud of his son’s being sent to the eastern front. He has embraced the overall ideals of Nazism. He ably defends those ideals against uncomfortable facts that Sophie presents and against unpleasant duties such as sentencing her to death (de facto) by preparing her confession. After doing so, he walks to a sink and washes his hands in a gesture reminiscent of Pontius Pilate.

The essence of the ideological conflict between Sophie and Mohr, which is the essence of the film’s overall conflict, occurs in one passage of dialogue between them. Sophie is seated on one side of Mohr’s desk across from him in the interrogation room:

Mohr: You may have used false slogans but you used peaceful means.

Sophie: So why do you want to punish us?

Mohr: Because it is the law. Without the law there is no order.

Sophie: The law you are referring to protected free speech before the Nazis came to power in 1933. Someone who speaks freely now is imprisoned or put to death. Is that order?

Mohr: What can we rely on if not the law? No matter who wrote it.

Sophie: Our conscience.

Mohr: Nonsense! [Grabbing two books, one in each hand, as though weighing them against each other.] Here is the law and here are the people. As a criminologist, it is my duty to find out if they coincide and, if not, to find the rotten spot.

Sophie: The law changes. Conscience doesn't.

*Sophie Scholl* is not merely a movie about moral courage. Its value in that respect should not be understated but, for me, the most fascinating aspect was the interaction between ideals and evil that occurs in subtle and varied ways throughout the film. Over and over, those who “process” Sophie’s murder are either morally dead — that is, they have become true bureaucrats who are just doing a job — or they are shaken by the simple truth and bravery of her being. Her existence is a reproach to the devastation they do under the guise of “greater principles” or expediency.

Like the shafts of light that pierce scenes of darkness, Sophie’s existence pierces through and makes them confront responsibility for their own actions.

No wonder she must die.

Sophie’s death is handled well and not exploited for effect. Her last words, at least in the movie, are “The sun is still shining.” Then there is the sound of a guillotine blade’s falling.

Christoph’s last words are “It wasn’t in vain.”

The movie ends with text that reads, “The 6th leaflet was taken to England via Scandinavia. In mid-1943, millions of copies were dropped by Allied planes over Germany. They now bore the title ‘A German Leaflet Manifesto of the Students of Munich.’”

Two earlier films depicted the White Rose's resistance: *The Last Five Days (Fünf letzte Tage*, 1982) and *The White Rose (Die Weiße Rose*, 1982). But it is the German director Marc Rothmund who brought Sophie Scholl into American awareness. He created a heart-stopping, heartbreaking movie that is inspirational without preaching. It creates fresh perspective on freedoms we take for granted, such as the ability to speak without being killed for doing so. It reminds us to jealously protect that freedom ... especially in times of war when speaking truth to power can easily and officially become "aiding the enemy" and treason.

Wendy McElroy is the author of ***The Reasonable Woman: A Guide to Intellectual Survival*** (Prometheus Books, 1998).

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