

Sophie Scholl: The Final Days

Germany's most honored film of last year (named the best film of the year) was *Sophie Scholl: The Final Days*, based on the true story of a young woman who challenged the Nazi regime in a protest act in February 1943. Her full story emerged only recently, when long-hidden historical archives and some eye-witness testimony about her plight came to light and were fashioned into a gripping film drama by screenwriter Fred Breinersdorfer and director Marc Rothemund (*film now running at the E Street Cinema*).

Sophie Scholl (Julia Jentsch) and her older brother Hans (Fabian Hinrichs) were part of a university resistance movement in Munich called the White Rose which came to oppose Hitler and the Nazis through clandestine mailings and leafleting. Their protest activities are discovered and lead them both to intense interrogation at the hands of the local Gestapo. After initially denying involvement, Sophie confesses to her questioner Robert Mohr (Gerald Alexander Held) after hearing that Hans has confessed, then she fends off his offers for her to renounce her protests. Swiftly, she and her brother and another student colleague face an iniquitous farce of a trial--led by the frenzied Nazi Judge Roland Friesler (André Hennicke)--are condemned to death and, without ceremony, executed. That such brutal, summary acts follow from such simple and basic grievances is devastating.

The core of the movie is the few days interrogation of Sophie by Mohr. This is compelling drama fashioned from the potentially dry official records of Gestapo files unearthed after German reunification. At first, in denial mode, Sophie seems correct but restive, covering all her bases with the best stories she can, while Mohr, like a good, dogged detective, keeps finding holes in those stories. Once she has admitted her protest intentions, however, she comes to gain a new confidence and the poise that comes with the conviction of her cause. She is not so much noble as firmly grounded, secure in her faith, her belief in freedom, and her conscience. Meanwhile, it is the petulant Mohr (in a fascinating performance by Herr Held) who begins to lose it, falling back on class arguments--the state is paying for her privileged education--and personal justifications--if not for the Nazi Party, he says, "I would still be a country policeman." A final tirade against Sophie's God is a curt admission of Mohr's defeat.

As Sophie, Julia Jentsch (recently seen in *The Edukators*), graces the film with an open, unassuming face, the face of a school girl that might be compared to a modern-day Joan of Arc. Her essence is calmness rather than histrionics. Other than some furtive tears, Ms. Jentsch shows the stalwart Sophie break down only once: a private, agonized scream in her cell when she realizes that the death sentence awaits, an outburst the more devastating because of what we have already seen her endure with such unremitting self-possession.

The film is chilling, and has every right to be, but it is also redemptive. Mr. Rothemund does not direct Sophie Scholl, and Ms. Jentsch does not portray her, as a paragon but rather as one person who is high-minded, a trait the viewer can't help but think we would all hope to show in such dire circumstances. We would all hope that we, too, could be quiet heroes *in extremis*.

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