



Sophie Scholl – Die Letzten Tage

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Sophie Scholl – Die Letzten Tage, directed by Marc Rothemund, Zeitgeist Films, 2005, 120 min, German with English subtitles, not rated, approx. \$32.99 (DVD)

World War II is arguably the most exploited source of mass conflict represented in feature film presentations. Thus, films that explore the hostilities of the era through a unique lens are particularly useful in expanding our understanding of such atrocities. Based on historical transcripts, *Sophie Scholl – Die Letzten Tage* (*Sophie Scholl – The Final Days*) allows us a rare glimpse of the Second World War through the eyes of a young woman. This German film follows the final few days in the life of Nazi-resistance activist Sophie Scholl (Julia Jentsch). In addition to offering a film from the perspective of a woman, *Sophie Scholl* provides key reminders of how justice can be perverted in a manner that seems hauntingly familiar in our current ‘war against’ Western world.

The film begins innocently enough, with 21-year-old Sophie and a female friend singing along to a Billie Holiday song on the radio. Sophie announces that she must go; she meets up with her brother Hans (Fabian Hinrichs) and Willi Graf (Maximilian Brückner). They are all members of the White Rose, a non-violent resistance group against Nazi Germany. The triad decides that Sophie and Hans will distribute their anti-militarist leaflet at Munich University the next day. While the siblings are successful in distributing the leaflets before classes are dismissed, a janitor sees Sophie push a stack of leaflets off a balcony, and the Gestapo arrests both her and her brother promptly. This act, a further hint at the playful innocence and youth of Sophie, both contributes to her demise and reinforces her strength of character, as exhibited in her later interrogation.

Sophie and Hans are taken to Stadelheim Prison where Sophie is questioned by investigator Robert Mohr (Alexander Held). The exchanges between Mohr and Sophie are easily the most interesting scenes of the film. At first, Sophie offers an elaborate explanation for her presence at the university that day, and it seems as if her lies are convincing. However, evidence that implicates the pair in the production of the White Rose leaflets is found at the siblings’ apartment, and Sophie confesses to the crime. Sophie and Mohr engage in a heated discussion about morality, law, and order, during which Sophie urges Mohr to recognize the importance of the conscience. She tells him of the extermination of Jewish people and mentally disabled children in Nazi concentration camps. He seems unwilling to believe that such things are happening, but concedes that perhaps some individuals are less worthy of life than others. The interrogation ends when neither Sophie nor Mohr shows signs of altering her or his position, and Sophie refuses to give him the names of any accomplices.

The exchange between Sophie and Mohr challenges the audience—perhaps unintentionally—by drawing significant parallels with the current polemic of war in society. At one point during her interrogation, Mohr accuses Sophie of having committed a ‘crime against ... hardworking troops’ by distributing anti-Hitler literature. This rhetoric resonates with current cries to the public in Canada and the United States to ‘support our troops’ in Afghanistan and Iraq, and highlights the slippery slope that is created when dissenting voices are more or less actively silenced. While it obviously would be inappropriate to align the current state of

North American society with Nazi Germany, the similarities in rhetoric suggest similarities in apparent underlying motives: people meting out justice against other people. Whether it is Mohr's staunch belief in the rightness of the Nazi regime, or Western governments' 'War against Terrorism' today, what counts as justice needs to be subject to criticism.

Sophie, Hans, and another activist, Christoph Probst (Florian Stetter), are taken to the People's Court and found guilty of high treason, troop demoralization, and aiding the enemy. Sophie is the only woman in the courtroom. During her trial, Sophie predicts, 'Soon you shall stand where we now stand.' The three young people are executed by guillotine the same day. Her aloneness as a woman throughout the entire criminal justice process draws awareness to the limited attention women are given in the grand scheme of war. However, this film's singular focus on Sophie illuminates the impact that one woman and her choices and behaviors can have, even in war.

In few war films is the audience privy to the perspective and story of a woman in war. Another German film about the Second World War, *Der Untergang* (*The Downfall*), purports to tell the story from the perspective of Hitler's final secretary, a woman named Traudl Junge. However, it is not her story that is told but that of Hitler. Even though Sophie's story has something of an Anne Frank-like feel to it, in that she is a strong woman with a tragic, important, and well-known story, the fact that it is her own story from her perspective is a refreshing take on the traditional war film that tends to portray war as affecting men only. The film's emphasis on Sophie as a woman, regardless of her specific story, allows a glimpse of the gendered reality of war and the particularities of this dynamic in a phenomenon that is so manifestly male-dominated.

Films about World War II proliferate but *Sophie Scholl* is uniquely useful to our understanding of the possibilities of how war can affect a woman. A growing body of literature recognizes the particularly gendered aspects of war and conflict, which often go unnoticed in various humanitarian interventions and foreign aid. As mainstream media, including war films, begin to recognize women in war as worthy of attention, perhaps a greater awareness of the unique issues women face in war – and the contributions they make – can be engendered.

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