

Berlin Diaries 1940-1945

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Diaries can be tedious to read, even by their authors. It takes a certain discipline to jot down every day what you have done, even when not much have been done. If you do it too conscientiously there will hardly be time to live and have something to write about, and if you live too much, there will be no time to write it down. Occasionally a note in the diary consists of just one sentence or just a word, at other times it is merely a list of people met during the day, not what was said and done. Yet, accumulatively it has an effect, and when things gets dramatic, as during bomb-raids or the arrests of her friends involved in the failed plotting against Hitler, the accounts are full and riveting, almost on par with literary depictions.

Marie Vassiltchikov was a White Russian princess born as the fourth and youngest child of her princely family in the last waning days of the Czarist regime in January 1917 and as a consequence brought up abroad, mostly in France but just before the war the family were citizens of Lithuania. In addition to her native Russian, she seems to have been fluent in French and English as well, the latter being the language of choice for her diary. Her German, despite her prolonged residence, seems not to have been up to par. A picture of the young princess adorns the cover of the book, revealing a very pretty face, and would not have been amiss as a still for a movie-star. Due to her aristocratic background she moves in a very smart set, with constant receptions at embassies and consulates, being rather chummy with the diplomatic cream. Her friends have castles and estates in the countryside to which one can repair at times momentarily escaping city life. She has procured work as a secretary, first at the broadcasting services, then at the Foreign Office (Auswärtiges Amt), where her duties are rather light, and her pay modest (but poverty is easy to take when you are well-connected). Thus her perspective on daily life during the war years is not very representative but in many ways rather glamorous. Food is rationed and having coupons available is a daily chore, on the other hand not all food items are rationed, so there are possibilities to gorge on seafood, lobsters and especially oysters (she complains of how hard it is to open them, and her bloodied mangled hands). To recount all the ins and outs of her daily life, when days add up to months and months to years, is hardly feasible, for that the reader of this review needs to skim the diaries themselves. But we do witness an inexorable descent into chaos as the war strangles the crumbling nation, although it remains remarkable how well organized the country nevertheless was until the very end. When further resistance was pointless, still desperate appeals for standing up to the last and relentless fighting continued.

The state of war became more and more palpable as the Allied stepped up their bombings of Berlin, which actually had started early on in the war. Berlin was not an easy city to bomb. Streets were wide and houses of stone and mortar, so each building had to be picked out one by one, there being no convenient chain reactions, leading to firestorms as in more traditional and combustible German towns and cities. Nevertheless the damage

done was extensive. Armadas of up to thousands of planes pummeled relentlessly the city, sometimes on days as well as nights¹. There were constant alarms which necessitated seeking out the closest shelter. This was a claustrophobic experience and the author dreaded being trapped and crushed or drowned in one and no one knowing where she was. Shelters were not generally robust enough to withstand a direct hit, and even if they were intact, pipes could break inundating their residents, or the air might run out. In the case of firestorms, which seems not to really have been prevalent in Berlin for reasons just alluded to, they could even serve as ovens frying their inhabitants alive. Still most people survived their houses being bombed to smithereens and ended up as 'Obdachlose'. Moving in a smart set there was however no shortage of friends who were willing to have you crash on them. If you were young and lived in unencumbered circumstances, having your home blown out was no real big deal, no loss of precious and irreplaceable belongings, and you could think of it as an adventure. Also when it comes to basic survival, most people will realize how little their possessions really mean to them. Hence the bombings against civilians did not have the intended effect on morale. True people were killed and thus many lost homes and loved ones, yet this only affected a minority, and those not directly affected could easily ignore the plights of the less fortunate. As in the case of the Blitz in London, bombings rather stiffened the lip than otherwise, and most importantly industrial military production did not seem to have been significantly affected, and the control of the authorities did not break down. The author describes at length and beautifully the effects of the bombings. How houses seemed almost intact, but were ruttet completely. Rescue workers were at hand, as in the case of earthquakes, searching the rubble for survivors, taking out fires, moving the wounded to hospitals. Such accounts are of great value, as there seems to be so few of them surviving the war. A diarist becomes somewhat captured by an obsessive habit, but this means that when the opportunities arise he or she is ready for action². As the author shows, one does not really get used to the bombings, only that it is easier to ignore them, when they are not in effect. She describes how she is at service in a Russian Orthodox church, and the service is drowned by the engines of low-flying planes, the effect being of standing under a railway bridge on which an express freight train roars by, only that the trains never stop coming. She gets some desperate solace from the assurance of a fellow worshipper that one cannot die during mass. The bombings would follow her during the last months of the war when she was acting as a nurse in Vienna. That city might not have been hit as bad as Berlin, and like Berlin it was not prime material for bombing, yet it was harrowing enough, with no type of buildings spared. The Opera house went up in flames with all its sets and props and costumes, the Jockey Club was so badly hit, that efforts to dig up the hundreds of people trapped and killed in it, were soon aborted, and of course hospitals provided no free zone, the one in which she worked hit several times. Still wounded crews bailing out from crashed planes seem not to have been in general lynched, but were treated along with indigenous victims.

¹ The Americans who flew higher took care of the days, there bombs penetrated deeper into the ground and thus caused more local damage than the low-flying British night-raiders, whose bombs had a more horizontal effect.

² It is not clear that somebody who is not already used to writing down the events of the day, would start do so under exceptional circumstances.

In a comic aside the diarist recounts how some friends of her were bombed out, and one of them digging in the rubble in the hope of retrieving his stuffed orangoutangs³.

What may be of most compelling interest is the friendship she cultivates with the future plotters intent upon killing Hitler. Her boss at the A.A. was Adam von Trotta, a man she greatly admired, to the point of being almost in awe of. Reading between the lines one realizes that she knew much more of the plot than is being revealed explicitly, maybe even knowing ahead of the assigned day. But of course what she wrote down was compromising enough and if brought to the attention of the authorities would have spelled serious trouble to her⁴, her constant efforts to get in touch and aid those afflicted were suspicious enough⁵. The attempt failed for a variety of reasons. First the meeting, because of the heat of the summer day did not take place in a bunker, where the effect of the blast would have been much stronger, but above ground in a flimsy building which caved in. Secondly the assigned assassin Staffenberg were wounded during the war, missing fingers on his hand, and thus somewhat incapacitated and unable to set off both bombs. And finally the portfolio in which the bombs had been placed had inadvertently (incidentally by an unsuspecting fellow plotter) been moved away from the close vicinity of Hitler and to the other side of a a firm beam under the table, taking the brunt. Staffenberg reported that he had seen Hitler carried out dead and then left by car the headquarters in East Prussia and flown to Berlin in a pre-organized getaway. Upon the confirmation of the Fhrer's death, previous military emergency plans, would then be co-opted by the plotters and lead to a seizure of power, followed by similar steps all over Germany and its occupied territories. However, confirmation was lacking, people started to lose their nerves, counter-orders were given. When Goebbels was to be arrested, the officer in charge was put by the former into direct contact with Hitler, who promoted him on the spot and thus effectively put a stop to the attempt. With hindsight I am skeptical whether the coup would have succeeded had Hitler been killed. The killing of Hitler was obviously absolutely necessary, but far from sufficient. As it turned out the aristocratic plotters may not have had a very good idea of the lay of the land. Sure, the commanders in Paris and Vienna followed suit, but the majority of the armed forces were loyal to Hitler (even if his death would have freed many commanders to their oath of fealty) and the general popular opinion seemed to have been against the idea of assassination. Staffenberg was immediately apprehended and executed, and gradually the whole extent of the plot started to unravel. People were arrested, tortured and interrogated. A sham court, a so called Peoples Court (Volksgericht), was set up, with a fanatic judge (incidentally a former Communist) who did everything he could to humiliate the defendants. The whole thing was filmed, but even the hardcore Nazis thought that the whole proceedings were shameful and to release them would be damning⁶. Adam van Trotta belonged to those that were caught early on and executed.

³ The wild animals of the Zoo are killed lest they escape during bombings, which brings in mind some beatnik poem about hippos being boiled alive in their pond during a Berlin raid

⁴ The sensitive material was written in a homespun stenographic code, and soon after the war she took the trouble of transcribing it while she still could make sense of her coded scriblings.

⁵ She and her friend princess Schmburg were eventually warned by a friendly guard not to show up at Gestapo headquarters anymore.

⁶ Many years later the films were discovered in DDR and actually aired on West-German TV

In fact the manner of executions were designed to be as painful as possible, the accused hanged from butcher's hooks and slowly strangled by piano wires, with regular injections to keep the heart beating and prolonging the ordeal. It was filmed, with Hitler gloating over them. Other suspects, such as the grandsons Otto and Gottfried of Bismarck were allowed expert legal support which enabled repeated postponements to eventually have the thing fizzle out by the end of the war. Still as a pretext Hitler had some 10000 people of the aristocracy killed⁷.

What to make of the plot? In many ways once can argue it was coming far too late in the day. There had been heroic anti-Nazi opposition before the war, but the plotters seem not to have objected to the war, some of them had actually been ardent Nazis being eventually disillusioned. Most of them were of the aristocracy, who traditionally had looked down on Hitler and his plebeian, somewhat egalitarian movement, but who no doubt had gloried in the initial military exploits of the regime. It was when things were going bad and a more and more intransigent Hitler threatened to plunge the county into disaster that they started to act. The plotters had in mind a rehabilitation of Germany, concluding a peace with honor, but for this it was far too late. The Allied was bent on unconditional surrender well knowing, maybe as early as 1942, that the fate of Germany was sealed and it was only a matter of time before it would crumble⁸. In particular they refused to make any distinction between Good and Bad Germans, as Churchill remarked, having the Germans kill each other was only good. Any peace feelers from the Germans were to be met with silence⁹. A plotter such as Adam von Trotta was a Rhodes scholar and had spent time in Britain and moved in (conservative) international circles which generally thought the Versailles treaty to have been unfair to the Germans and had seen with some satisfaction Hitlers successes at counteracting them. Circles which obviously was marginalized at the time as defeatists. Even if their seizure of power would have been successful, they could hardly have expected to be received by open arms. Another matter, on which the diaries shed no light whatsoever is the plotters involvement with the Final Solution. In fact Jews are almost never mentioned in the diaries. The only exemption being a certain Sigrid Grtz (whose mother is Jewish and deported to Theresienstadt, where she miraculously survives) who seems to have some trouble with the authorities but appears untouched. This is obviously a key consideration for a fair appraisal of the plotting. In fact it is an important question in general, how widespread was the knowledge and hence tacit approval? One should make a distinction between toleration of the atrocities and an active championship of the same, perhaps not so much from a moral point of view, as a practical. Even if the plotters were aware of the extermination, it does not mean that they

⁷ The Gestapo headquarters in which the interrogations and proceedings were conducted was hit by Allied bombs. During one of those raids, the adamant judge Feisler, was killed by a falling beam, clutching the files of an accused to his chest

⁸ It has been argued that the demand of unconditional surrender was counterproductive as it only strengthened the resolve. Hitler, by all accounts would have rejected any kind of surrender no matter how reasonable and advantageous the conditions might have been, so this argument only makes sense in a post-Hitlerian world

⁹ There had been some such. The farcical flight by Rudolf Hess in the beginning of the war to the pathetic efforts of a Himmler to save his neck at the end.

would have continued the policies, but most likely they would have been dismantled, as opposed to the war against Soviet Union, which was of far more vital importance.

There is a need, at least in retrospect, to find good Germans, even among those who might have approved of the war ends. Thus the enamoring of Rommel, who is rumored to have been part of the plotters or at least privy to their activities. As a reaction against the idealization, one may, as I have been above, prone to disparage their efforts. Still they lived in a totalitarian society, a concerted effort was very difficult, and only when in obvious dire straits, were there any hopes of a spontaneous support. They risked their lives, stood up to torture, and behaved in generally with courage and utmost propriety, even when their cause was lost and they had nothing to show for it.

To someone more versant with European aristocracy, which like all aristocracies tends to spill over national borders, the diaries have an additional charm. As a general reader one may be intrigued to meet two grandsons of Otto von Bismarck, as well as a descendant of the Austrian minister Metternich, other names mean little if anything at all. Hitler's attitude to the aristocrats was one of mistrust, early on royal families were forbidden to be part of the war, lest their exploits would render them additional prestige and appeal, and the attempt at the assassination gave him a very good excuse to settle scores. The actual victims of the plots seem to have numbered in excess of 10'000¹⁰ a figure that seems very high considering the extent of the plot, but of course guilt by association carries a long way, and is by nature inductive.

The author, already a widow, died from Leukemia in London 1978. Before that she had been persuaded by family and friends to have her diaries published. That involved some editing on her part, as part of the diary had been lost and she had to indicate what happened during the missing period. Her untimely death put a stop to her concluding the task and her brother took over, inserting running commentaries on many of the people alluded to in the text, as well as on concomitant events in the war, many of which are very helpful as well as insightful. He also provides an epilogue, informing the reader what happened to the cast. One noteworthy thing is that some of the very compromised Nazis, such as Dr Six, were welcomed by the Allies. Apparently even democratic regime needs the expertise of how to conduct dirty business.

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¹⁰ According to the editorial remarks.