

# Fighting for the Enemy

by [Samuel Hux](#) (February 2021)



*Three Friends*, Fritz Flebbe, 1915

Ang Lee's 1999 film *Riding with the Devil* was evidently a box-office disaster, which I don't understand, but am not surprised by: so many Hollywood busts have been among my favorite movies, but my failure to understand is because it seems to me so very interesting. It was a fiction based roughly on William Quantrill's "Raiders," the pro-Confederate "Bushwhacker" irregulars fighting the pro-Union "Jayhawkers"

in Missouri. Military history is always interesting; that's my prejudice, and besides I'm a Civil War buff, especially when moral questions are involved. As they certainly are in Ang Lee's film, since the historical figure whose career is the inspiration *behind* it was by all accounts a murderous thug, and a major figure *in* it is an ex-slave who fights beside the Bushwhacker who *owned* him before freeing him. And a major reason the film is so interesting, and intriguing, is that most of the Bushwhacker characters, especially the major protagonist, the son of a German immigrant, are thoroughly admirable figures although "riding with the Devil." The metaphorical devil of the title is of course the Confederate cause.

Which, I confess, gives me a bit of a problem. Most, maybe all, native white Southerners born to native Southern parents, North Carolinian in my case, not internal immigrants so to speak from other regions, retain a soft spot for the Old South, be its vices what they may, and no matter their moral/historical objections to slavery. We tend to admire a gentleman like Robert E. Lee, for all the moral problems attached to his service, and will object—at least I do!—to the contemporary frenzy about and willingness to destroy certain historical monuments. And I'm shocked but not surprised by HBO's imitation of Joseph Goebbels as it symbolically throws *Gone With the Wind* on the bonfire. And what Southerner, even having lived "abroad" (in the North, that is) as I have since my middle twenties, does not delight to hear tripping off his tongue melodious names like Stonewall Jackson, Jeb Stuart and, maybe especially poetic, Jubal Early?

But or however, the reason *Riding with the Devil* comes to my mind right now is because an earlier essay of mine, "Reflections on Disobedience," is in large part a contemplation of a different kind of *riding* with a radically different kind of *Devil* about which one cannot feel any kind of soft spot in one's heart. I speak of Colonel Claus Schenk,

Count von Stauffenberg, who served Adolf Hitler before trying to kill him. But let me return to that subject a bit later. For now, some other associations—in both sense of that plural noun.

There was a time in my life beginning in the late 1970s—when the Second World War was not a distant association—that I spent much of my time in Spain in a region that during the war that preceded WW II, the Spanish Civil War, was Nationalist territory from beginning to end: *franquista* (Franco-ist), *fascist* if you like (although Spanish fascism, *falangismo*, was about as intellectually respectable as fascism could get). From this region Mussolini's air force regularly bombed Barcelona for Francisco Franco, thank god not devastating Antonio Gaudí's *El Templo Expiatorio de la Sagrada Familia*, the most fascinating building in the world for my money. Maybe that's why—but I don't know—some doubtful figures felt comfortable living there.

One of whom was a Latvian named Mihails (“Michael” obviously), but known to all as Miguel, whose left arm hung loosely, seemingly as if boneless, so that a German painter friend of mine with a very odd facility with his five languages called him—I don't know how to spell the adjective—“Shlobba Miguel.” The arm was the result of WW II wounds while he served in the Latvian division of the German *Waffen SS* against the hated Russians and therefore, in effect, *for* the Nazi regime. I cannot claim a close association with Mihails, and I don't think I'd want to, but I had a few barroom conversations with him, finding them disturbing but fascinating. Once he said he was planning to join, somewhere near Madrid, a gathering of ex-SS in honor of the death of Otto Skorzeny, who had rescued Mussolini from incarceration after *Il Duce* had fallen from power in 1943. Well, Shlobba Miguel certainly fought *for* the enemy although, from his point of view, he fought *against* the enemy, not an incomprehensible judgment for a Latvian to assume. Moral ambiguities were on

plentiful supply in WW II in the area of the Baltic and Eastern Europe an American historian calls the Bloodlands.

Much easier to take and thoroughly likable was a neighbor of mine, a herder of goats whose calls to his flock I can still hear. Carlos had served in Russia against Russians as a recruit in *La Division Azul*, the Blue Division, Falangist volunteers which officially neutral Franco sent to the Germans on loan. Carlos never spoke of this; I knew only because his neighbors knew. My German painter friend, who gave Shlobba Miguel his expressive name had, since he was my age with no compromising past, would occasionally, rarely, recall his father, who died on the Russian front. Once I saw a photograph, I don't remember how, but *not* on display, of *Vater* with a *Swastika* on his arm. Life is so complicated. But some association is still alive in my mind because of my association with another German, a *Wehrmacht* veteran of the Russian campaign.

Jaspar, who died more than a decade ago in his 90s, a film and stage actor, never a star but reliable in "character" roles, was "saved" from the Russian front by his profession, assigned to make training films for the *Wehrmacht*. So technically, and actually also, he had "fought for the enemy." He was also, while "exiled" half each year at least in Spain, a wonderful friend, to whose death even in old age I can never adjust.

More significantly, and much more moving, Jaspar was loved by, and loving of, my Jewish spouse. She was among other things something like the resurrection of Jewish friends he recalled from his youth before the deluge. He was, to her (as deeply and uncompromisingly a Jewish soul as can be imagined), among other things, the most surprising relationship of her life, the discovery and assurance that some human truths are profounder than the historical circumstances that would seem to define and delimit us. There are few memories I have that are as moving as these two in association with one another.

Which observation would seem to get us a long way from my chosen topic, fighting with the enemy. But not really, as I hope to show.

Jaspar suffered a brief arrest for his socialist associations in his early twenties. The experience frightened him sufficiently that he was “not political” for the rest of the Nazi years. When Jewish friends began to disappear, he, like so many Germans, entered the “internal immigration” and tried to ignore or not bring to articulate consciousness what was happening, or to hope that what was not passing would soon pass. He once confessed to me with utter sadness, “I was not heroic.” When drafted to become a *Soldat* he went, did not desert into hiding, as did Oskar Werner, with whom he would play in a film after the war. When Joseph Goebbels needed a certain actor type for a movie, he obeyed the command to shift from *Wehrmacht* training films to the *UFA* film lot.

When he confided to me he was not heroic, he generously did not ask if I would have been. I don't think it crossed his mind, but perhaps it should have. The fact that I served in a good cause while Jaspar served in his earlier war in a bad cause is, for my purposes here, irrelevant. And is so because my service, in the American army, required less bravery than he would have had to display to refuse conscription into the German army—and how could one have refused *Werhpflicht* short of desertion? And possibly—since Jaspar had a minor role in a film in which Oskar Werner played a heroic deserter—he felt diminished because the actual Werner refused conscription through desertion. But how do we know (how could we know?) that Werner's action was motivated by heroic conviction instead of by quite graspable *fear*? Who actually wants to get shot?

I cannot say that I, veteran of The Infantry School, was heroic. Given the date of my enlistment and the consequent date that ended my soldierly training, I missed combat by a few lucky weeks—so I was never tested! I have no proof that I

was braver than Jaspar, and I'm sorry I did not have the sense or self-knowledge to tell him so, sorry that I could not answer the question he, perhaps generously, did not ask.

And furthermore, now that I've gotten myself into this, perhaps above my head and certainly beyond my intention when I began these reflections, I'm not sure my enlistment had anything more to do with conviction (which necessarily precedes bravery or sometimes its avoidance) than did Jaspar's actions. When I eventually joined the profession of academia—the American home of anti-militarism—and was asked why I had ever joined the army, I for years casually answered “to get the G.I. Bill for college,” in spite of the fact that before I went in, I didn't know the Bill existed. So why? I certainly was no patriot, amusedly knowing Sam Johnson's definition of patriotism as the last refuge of the scoundrel. I was on the first step of a disaffection which would, a little later, develop into youthful socialism. I cannot remember any essential or mind-altering or mind-affirming approval of American foreign policy. Etcetera *und so weiter*. I have written about this somewhere else and recently: brought up in the American South, I subscribed to that notion hardly spoken of but so obvious in retrospect that reigned in Southern culture, that serving in some branch of the military was something that a real man did. And of course, being a real man meant being brave. That was its assumed meaning, but the reality was not tested. So I cannot sit in judgment of Jaspar unless I claim with utter arrogance what I cannot assume.

And what, on the other hand, can I know of Jaspar's heroic German opposites? I know Gordon Zahn's *In Solitary Witness*, his examination of Franz Jaegerstaetter, an Austrian peasant later beatified by the Catholic Church. Jaegerstaetter was guillotined in 1943 for repeatedly resisting conscription into the *Wehrmacht* out of religious conviction. According to Zahn, Saint Franz (as one might call him) suffered not only death but the dismissal of his neighbors, as his rebellion was

“generally taken as a self-evident fact that his political and religious fanaticism had finally combined to unsettle him mentally.”

I once wrote an essay about the aristocratic author Friedrich Reck-Malleczewen, comparing him with (or against) the French aristocrat Christian de la Mazière, author of *The Captive Dreamer* who, without any pressure, chose to join the French Charlemagne Division of the *Waffen SS*. Mazière survived to become a principal witness in Marcel Ophuls' documentary *The Sorrow and the Pity*, a vaguely and ironically sympathetic character (speaking of “riding with the devil”). Fritz Reck's greatest and only famous book, *Diary of a Man in Despair*, was published posthumously. After various non-violent protests and acid insults of the *repulsive* (as Reck said) Adolf Hitler, he was arrested more than once, and finally sent to Dachau where he died a couple of months before the defeat, thus escaping the guillotine to which he'd been sentenced.

Not the only reason—but a reason nonetheless—for my thinking now of Jaegerstaetter and Reck is to justify a certain sympathy for my friend Jaspar's “I was not heroic”—a sympathy I don't expect those comfortable in their unearned certainties to appreciate. But most of us—let us confess/confront this—have never lived *under* a regime and *in* a society where the consequences of actions and even opinions expressed could be so dramatically brutal.

None of the above should be taken to mean that my “sympathy” creates an active and thorough understanding of anyone who rode with the devil *in Deutschland* while knowing it wasn't the right thing to do. Indeed, it is easier to understand those who rode convinced they were serving the good. I have often heard people say something like “How could the average German in the '30s and '40s have stood with such an obvious monster?” But I have been cursed or blessed—maybe a kind of “cultural Calvinism”—with a bleak view of human nature so that I may be horrified but not surprised that, for

instance, the Otto Skorzeny I mentioned earlier should have been such a loyal follower of Hitler. Or that young faces, male and female both, in a photo I recall of Germans surrounding Hitler at an intimate moment in familiar social space, should show such rapturous joy. If this is cynical of me, I offer my fraudulent apologies.

But what of a complicated figure like Colonel Claus von Stauffenberg, about as far from the likes of Otto Skorzeny as A is from Z? I still haven't gotten there yet.

Reflecting on "riding with the devil" in a Union vs. Confederate context, and then in an Allies vs. Nazi context is not the same as drawing a moral equivalence between the two enterprises. Although I have met plenty of people who would do just that. The same way some would and do speak in the same breath of chattel slavery and the Holocaust, equating the moral dimensions of the two: "the first was just as bad as the second." And often there is no "equation" but rather "the second was not as bad as the first." It must be obvious I am not one of those people of either inclination characterized above. Indeed—and now I'm about to get myself in trouble—I am inclined to say "the first, chattel slavery, was not as bad as the second, the Holocaust." I rush to make some distinctions which may take some time.

First, while it is absurd to separate the defense of slavery from the Confederate "Cause," and insist the Cause was instead a defense of an essentially rural culture and the God-given right of a community to secede, it is equally absurd to insist the Unionist motivation was an attack on slavery just as much as it was a felt necessity to preserve the union of the states. It strikes me as realistic to assume (even if you have no statistical support) that some on the Union side were in it for the nation's preservation primarily, and some were primarily abolitionists, whether we're talking about supporters, back home, of the troops, or the Blue Bellies in uniform. And it seems to me as realistic to assume that some



Confederates were in it primarily to defend "the peculiar institution" while for some the principle defended was a community's right to defend its rural way of life even to the extent of secession—this whether we're talking about Johnny Reb or his neighbors back home. And I would not be surprised if the "slavocrats" were the minority. But that confession may be no more than a reflex of the fact that as a young Tarheel I was taught that North Carolina had the fewest generals (and assumed slave-holders) of any state of the Confederacy and the most privates or "grunts" (and assumed dirt farmers and mechanics). But who knows how to judge pop knowledge?

Next and nonetheless, however you cut it, it has to be clear to any clear-headed person that the Union had the moral edge over the Confederacy. And anyone who "rode" with the South was, then, metaphorically riding with the devil.

This is not, however, justification for any equalizing linkage of Johnny Reb with a German soldier, nor justification of any claim that slavery was *just as bad* as the Holocaust. As degrading and immoral as chattel slavery was, it was not murder, unless you think that metaphorical murder (the soul of the slave dying, perhaps, a little bit every day) is as definitive as a shot to the neck (*Genickschuss*) or a gas chamber. It is no defense of the slave-holder that, if he had any sense, he wanted a healthy, living laborer. We should face intractable facts, even when they are of no polemical use for the right-thinking person. And it is certainly of no polemical value to admit a fact so unpleasant to the self-righteous critic of the peculiar institution who will see no morally complicating realities, that not a few owners of slaves and their compatriots thought not only or simply in economic terms (a healthy slave is a productive one) but in terms they thought responsible and moral: that slavery was a positive good for the slave him- or herself, protective, and a few must have thought while congratulating themselves, civilizing. Yes, yes, I know how mistaken (but how many owners ever saw a

Frederick Douglass do we think?), but even horrible mistakes can reveal a non-evil intention or self-justification. But . . . on the other hand, how many Nazis does one think thought that Auschwitz or Sobibor was really good for the Jews or other *Untermenschen*? The mathematics are not hard to figure out.

And now I must put in practice a rule of argumentation I learned from America's greatest philosopher, William James. Confess everything that might raise doubts about your argument as a way of saying "Trust me, I am hiding nothing." The excellent novelist and superb historian (*The Civil War: A Narrative*) Shelby Foote, who spoke with such respect for Lincoln, Grant, Sherman and so on for Ken Burns' great documentary, confessed that had he lived in those times he would certainly have ridden "Confederately"—if for no other reason (and there are others) than the explanation a Johnny Reb captured in Virginia gave to his captors when they asked why he, no slave-owner, fought for the Confederacy: "'Cause," he said, "you down here." This is by way of admitting that, were I asked where I'd have been back then I'd give an answer akin to Foote's. This in spite of the fact that I really do know better, and despite the fact that North Carolina—like its neighbor Tennessee and that part of Virginia that became West—had large numbers of Unionists. And I confess this untestable probability in spite of the fact that among my history-buff's heroes were Lincoln (but who could not admire him?), U.S. Grant, and William Tecumseh Sherman (admired also by *Wehrmacht* staff officers who studied him, by the way—but that's a different matter).

I once lost the friendship of a fellow UNC alum and his Floridian wife when during a briefly pleasant luncheon I confessed (I can't recall how we got on the subject) my admiration of Cump Sherman for his military genius during the famous "March to the sea." A chill immediately set in and we

never saw them again. One interesting thing about Sherman (about as psychologically interesting a character as a soldier ever was) is that he, who bore as much responsibility for the Union victory as Grant did, might easily have become a Confederate. When war began, he was head of a military school in Louisiana that became LSU and lived in close comfort with Southern upper-crust society. Lucky for the Union that he despised the notion of secession.

So I have no classy explanation for why I'd probably have ridden with the Rebs. Maybe because I'd probably have been caught up the romance of a Cause that had no bloody chance at all. In any case, however, it would not have been from compulsion to defend slavery. My predecessors in my paternal line may have come early from Germany, but they had well by that time joined the society of my maternal line, both lines then hill-billy.

Of course no German *Soldat*, if captured by the Allied troops to the east of the Rhine, could explain why he fought by answering "*weil du hier bist*," a really rough translation of "'cause you down (or over, rather) here"—since the *Wehrmacht* had been down or over there in Poland, the USSR, Czechoslovakia, Norway, Denmark, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, France, *und so weiter*, much earlier. But of course, he could make up some pseudo-patriotic answer nonetheless. But it's not that ordinary German soldier—possibly another Jaspar, so to speak—that I am about to start thinking about. But not until one more question.

Robert E. Lee was universally admired during the Civil War (although not by black people, I imagine), not least by Abraham Lincoln and Ulysses S. Grant, and that admiration exists in America still today. Not by all Americans of course. But by most or many (who can be numerically precise?) from the educated classes of a certain age, old enough to have been schooled when History was thought to be essential and absolutely required. I say "educated classes" to distinguish

them from “intellectuals,” who are inclined to “take positions” and judge themselves to be more sophisticated (the “with-it-try” in Joseph Epstein’s wonderful phrase). I mean those with just enough or more learning to recall without making a big deal of it the essentials of what they learned back in the day: the local pharmacist with his library card, Aunt Bett with her book-club subscription, my Dr. Barrett and your Dr. Nathans, those G.P.s who made house calls, your Uncle Mo, my Coach Farley (Bo), and the lawyer who draws up your will, to say nothing of the teacher who suggested you read some Bruce Catton. Why their admiration for Marse Robert?

The “most or many” may be only a significant minority today, given “the contemporary frenzy about and willingness to destroy certain historical monuments” I referred to much earlier in this essay. But those frenzied (whether white or black, as I’m an equal-opportunity despiser) are in my judgment too contemptable to warrant a hearing—as are, obviously, their racist, neo-Nazi, and KKK-ish opponents who would not know who General Lee was if they were asked. Setting aside this trash (a curse on both houses, I say), why the admiration?

It is surely not an endorsement of the Lost Cause nor any longing for slavery or the too-long segregation that was its legacy. It is, I’m going to suggest and let the suggestion do what it can, a matter of what I cannot say too hastily. So: While a minor slave-owner himself (you might say, as you recognize how terrible, that it went with the territory of being a Virginia gentleman, Washington, Jefferson, Madison, Monroe) Lee was a reluctant Confederate, as Lincoln must have realized when he offered Lee the responsibility for the Federal military. When Lee rejected that offer it was because he felt he had to go with his “country,” as Virginia was. We may say “the United States *is*” nowadays, but in Lee’s time the clause was “the United States *are*,” as many have long understood. That reluctance, brief though it turned out to be,

must have been noticed by the Southern officials by the way, since they hesitated for months—otherwise inexplicable—to give Lee command of The Army of Northern Virginia, an award that seems in retrospect to be a no-brainer.

There is the more obvious fact that Lee has been so admired as such an astounding military innovator, practicing tactics that defied all logic and tradition such as cutting your forces in half before a larger foe in order to surprise him elsewhere later, one risk after another with such extraordinary success. And even when he had his great failure at Gettysburg his risky decision to attack the center had more odd logic than historians have generally been willing to credit (a story too complex for here). In other words, Lee's military genius was so *thrilling* it could not fail to touch a chord. And, then, the man was such a complex character, almost a poet on a white horse with his odd locutions (rather than "think *about*" something, he'd "think *on*" it), and his confession (I paraphrase) that "It is well that war is so terrible; otherwise we'd love it too much." It requires a bravery of the imagination to recognize and admit a truth so abhorrent to morality, that there is a certain fascinating *beauty* in warfare—an irony General George Patton was proud to embrace, as I am sure Lee was not. And, then, also, there is a certain romance in loss. Not the Lost Cause itself. But the fact that such a brilliant general had to hand over his sword to Grant (although not accepted by Grant because of his own admiration for the defeated), and died without citizenship at the youngish age of 63 (while looking a couple of decades older) as the obscure president of Washington College—which was of course to become Washington and Lee, a final inadequate institutionalization of the admiration. (But given the fact of the PC Zealots, how long will W and L keep its name?)

Given all this, it must be the case the admiration is recognition of the fact that Robert E. Lee strikes one as a thoroughly honorable man who suffered the misfortune (even if

chosen) of fighting on the wrong side of history and on the wrong side pure and simple. Is there an ironic moral principle here? I'd propose a wager I could not honor if I lost. I would bet a million that if admiration could be weighed or measured, that extended to Lee would at least equal what Grant received and would exceed Sherman's share by far.

Just to test my thesis, briefly and hesitantly, I'd like to reflect upon what historians have called the "Rommel Myth." What Winston Churchill said of Erwin Rommel during WW II, "May I say across the havoc of war, a great general," is not an extraordinary remark. I might say, not across war's havoc but now in retrospect, something similar of SS General Felix Steiner, but I prefer to shut my mouth instead. Of course Rommel was a great soldier; of that there can be no doubt. What's in doubt is the extent of his involvement in the plots against Hitler: indirect for certain, knowing what was going on but probably keeping a distance, not so far away however that Hitler did not take revenge. The stories about Rommel the man are intriguing, such as his rolling across the desert, coming across a guard-less British military hospital, and strolling through it giving encouragement to doctors and wounded. If true—I sense it was—it suggests a remarkable person.

What we "know"—most people aware of him—probably comes from Nunnally Johnson's screenplay based on Brigadier Desmond Young's biography, the 1951 film directed by Henry Hathaway, *The Desert Fox*. In the first scene, British commandos raid a villa in North Africa, firing into rooms; a wounded and dying commando asks a German officer "Did we get him?" and the officer (Richard Boone) answers "Don't be foolish, Britisher," and the film audience is frankly pleased and assured: "of course not." And James Mason as Rommel rewards that response throughout the film. In all Rommel movies since (with the exception of a German film I haven't seen), the general and field-marshal is a respectable and admired hero riding with

the devil. I've seen many photos of Erwin Rommel but, when I think of him, the face I see is James Mason's, and I'll bet I'm in the majority. This admirable man, we say, who tragically fought on the horribly wrong side. Which finally gets us, by indirection, to Stauffenberg.

Were this a college course I would require you to read Peter Hoffmann's biography. But since this is only an essay, I'll summarize Stauffenberg's life as succinctly as I can.

He was born into Bavarian aristocracy in 1907, Catholic, so there was no traditional expectation that he would, like Protestant Prussian "vons," become an army officer, although he was drawn to that career even as a child, even though he flirted as a teen with the life of architect or musician. He even wrote poetry adequately enough to be invited into the aesthetically elite Stefan George Circle. A university degree, then, in literature would have seemed appropriate, but he chose to train in a cavalry regiment, where he became an officer in 1930, and began his rise through the ranks which led during the decade to staff-officer status.

I'm not one of those academics who dismiss Wikipedia, but in this case if you trusted Wiki you'd assume Stauffenberg began as an ardent Nazi, for which there is no evidence in the 400-plus pages of Hoffmann's authoritative volume. He first "accepted" Nazi rule, as he accepted the military tradition of being apolitically above and uninvolved with politics. ("No politics" is not always a curse: think of its opposite in South American history!) But his souring with Nazidom began at least as early as "The Night of Long Knives" and later with *Kristallnacht's* evidence that the antisemitism was not a passing phenomenon. Nonetheless, military professional that he was, he served loyally in the invasion of Poland, and then in Russia, and then in Tunisia—sacrificing in the process one hand, two fingers on the other, and one eye.

By 1942 he'd become convinced that Hitler had to die,

and joined the conspiracy which led to the July 20, 1944 assassination plot from which he, unlike Rommel, kept no distance at all, indeed becoming the one to pull the trigger. The opportunity took another couple of years, punctuated by numbers of other attempts by other officers, frustrated by Hitler's sheer luck and his planned protective inaccessibility. By then Stauffenberg, now a colonel and trusted staff officer, had the access.

At Hitler's Prussian headquarters *Wolfsschanze*, Stauffenberg brought his bomb in a briefcase, set and timed it with a mangled hand, placed the briefcase near Hitler in the conference room, then accepted a phony phone call and left to make his way back to Berlin to help lead the coup. As anyone who's seen enough movies knows, an aide finding the briefcase in his foot's way moved it sufficiently away from Hitler so that when it exploded it killed underlings but only wounded the *Fuehrer*. Stauffenberg, unaware of the failure to kill Hitler, tried his best to further the coup, which failed when Hitler's survival was proven. By nightfall Stauffenberg and allies were executed.

I'll not try to answer fully the question always asked, why in the first place did Stauffenberg first accept the Nazi regime, the apolitical tradition aside, and why did he serve Hitler's Germany through Poland, Russia, and Tunisia right up until near the end? I've tried to answer those questions at some length in another essay and cannot repeat that effort here. I will just remind my probable reader, and myself as well, that we do not know and never will know what it was like in that place at that time. We may think we can imagine it with great effort, but that will be no real test; we cannot even imagine how the test would feel. Never having been surrounded by such overwhelming but ubiquitous evil, which swiftly and efficiently took on the look of normality, we are innocents—and *arrogant* innocents if we don't recognize and admit how little we know.



The much more important question about Stauffenberg is Why did he do it? It is absolutely necessary to declare that his motives were not those of some few conspirators (and of all, some cynics would insist), that Hitler's policies and decisions were directly losing the war for Germany: his motives were strictly moral. To remove the monster. Peter Hoffmann's extraordinarily detailed examination of Count von Stauffenberg renders that conclusion beyond doubt.

The final question—I hope I can say “of Course”—is why we admire von Stauffenberg as we do in spite of his decade or more of service to the Third Reich. And I make the answer more difficult and challenging by suggesting that it is not simply because “he tried to kill Hitler.” For I am proposing that even if he had not been the one to pull the trigger, if he had only been a member of the July Plot, just one of many, or even if he had merely been sympathetic to the conspiracy but not active, or even if . . . but now I am moving beyond my imagination's capacities . . . we would still find him admirable. So: the meta-question, so to speak. Why? *Warum?*

The answer to that *why* is already implicit. As I said about Lee pages back, he “strikes one as a thoroughly honorable man who suffered the misfortune (even if chosen) of fighting on the wrong side of history and even the wrong side pure and simple.” But for now, an adjustment, so to say:

I think it safe to say “we” admire Lee, we defined as I specified it several minutes ago to exclude wise-acre intellectuals of the Left, P.C. zealots, and KKK-ish scumbags. However, I'm not sure it's just to say “we” admire von Stauffenberg, as opposed to admiring his final action. So perhaps I should say—and here is the adjustment—that this essay, given the path it has taken, is maybe not a pure *examination* of a certain kind of admiration, but is, rather, a *confession*. So I take responsibility. I admire von Stauffenberg, I do. *I.*

I find it astounding that Lee's actual life has been so little subjected to fictional examination. Of course there are numbers of biographies and historical studies. But no novel or drama that reminds one of *tragic literature*. Of course Lee makes the occasional appearance in historical novels such as those of Michael Shaara (*The Killer Angels*) and his son Jeff Shaara. And there are a couple of fantasies bearing little relation to Lee's *lived* life: one an absurd fiction in which Lee is put on trial in the Confederacy for his failure at Gettysburg; one, not an absurd fictional possibility, Thomas Fleming's *The Secret Trial of Robert E. Lee*, in which Lee is tried for treason after The Civil War. But there is no straight-forward narrative, not that I know of, adhering closely to Lee's career, which would make such a wonderful plot. (Where was Margaret Mitchell when we really needed a Lee novel?)

The finest literary thing done on/for Lee is the late Donald Davidson's "Lee in the Mountains," a poem about Lee's last days, as president of Washington College (later of course Washington and Lee), a celebration and lament. "Oh what could have been!" is my response to what two admirers of Lee and Davidson's poem might have done but, alas, did not: the novelists and friends Walker Percy and Shelby Foote. But there's nothing in the literature like what Paul West did for Stauffenberg in his remarkable novel *The Very Rich Hours of Count von Stauffenberg*.

I remain aware that some people, and not necessarily the P.C. Zealots, do not believe that Lee deserves a celebration and lament beyond Davidson's not very famous poem (if they know of it). But I repeat that I do believe it. All that we know about Robert E. Lee tells us, if we listen, that this was an excellent man who wanted to do what was right, even though we know deep down that the big thing he did was wrong, which is, ironically, what makes him so interesting and tragic. The only way one can escape this truth-assuming one is

paying attention—is to ignore this inconvenient truth: to see Lee’s nobility you have to look at him the way he was seen *then*, the way his soldiers saw him, the way Lincoln saw him, the way his foes on the field of battle saw him, the way Grant who accepted his surrender saw him, the way the surviving Union cabinet (as if acceding to Lincoln’s unwritten judgment) saw him as they did not impose the charges of treason they might well have. The way to ignore Lee’s nobility is to judge him by alien and ostensibly more moral standards, as W.H. Auden put it about someone else in a different context, have Lee “be punished under a foreign code of conscience”—so easy to do if one is a self-satisfied moralistic prig with no awareness of, and no pressure felt from, a tragic sense of life.

And I remain just a little stunned by, and a great deal saddened by, the fact that the subject of Lee’s life could have made for a great drama in the Greek or Shakespearean line—or even more a loss since it might have been a rival for that famously longed for “great American novel” (a “rival” because that book already exists, featuring a tragic mariner and a whale).

Which leads us again to Colonel Claus Philipp Maria Schenk, Count von Stauffenberg, and which of course leaves us with a similar problem that surely is clear by now, as it has surely been clear all along. Stauffenberg served in the *Wehrmacht* for more than a decade before he tried to kill the tyrant. And for some—reasonable people perhaps, but analogous nonetheless to the P.C. Zealots—that service by a military professional will always outweigh the rebellion of a German patriot who was moved to rebellion because of the murder of the Jews more than any other issue, which motivation these ostensibly reasonable people will never quite believe. To distrust or reject the idea that von Stauffenberg was noble in spite of all his tragic flaws all one has to do is believe—as many among the “reasonable” do believe—that there is nothing

noble about the warrior ethos. But, nonetheless and at least, Stauffenberg is immortalized in Paul West's novel, and while the 2008 film *Valkyrie* never had a chance for an Oscar (which is a kind of recommendation in itself) it's an excellent reminder of why von Stauffenberg deserves admiration.

For what I've been "thinking on" (to adopt Lee's locution) is the *tragic hero*. People of some humanistic-literary education (among whom the "reasonable" will claim a place) just know that "Tragedy" is the noblest of literary modes or genres: while telling or dramatizing the saddest stories and lamenting the human condition it elevates and celebrates the capacities of the human. But anyone who remembers his or her lessons knows that Aristotle teaches that the tragic hero or heroine is a noble but flawed person who suffers a fall into misfortune in part as a result of the very flaw(s) which occasion costly mistakes (or *hamartia* in Aristotle's Greek).

Sometimes the flaw itself is even admirable, as when Oedipus is so over-confident that he can escape the gods' plans for him, or thoroughly understandable as when an aged King Lear cannot distinguish between true daughterly love and a clever facsimile, or forgivable as when Hamlet hesitates to credit what is too horrible to credit. Sometimes the flaw is like a surprising weakness hidden beneath a strength of character, as when Othello is no match for Iago's cunning, or Macbeth not equal to his own ambition abetted by his wife's—both resulting in unjust violence, especially terrifying and unendurably heartbreaking in Othello's case. Sometimes the "hamartic" action is even thrilling, as when Clytemnestra would like to bathe in the blood of her guilty husband Agamemnon. We could go on with a catalogue. We would never find, however, anyone's idea of a Sunday-school teacher.

But what I find that's disturbing is a certain triviality, a lack of serious character, a kind of mental prissiness, in some of the reasonable who find the tragic hero

so moving when relegated strictly to the fictional realms, but so easy to dismiss when there for all to see in history.

«[Previous Article](#) [Table of Contents](#) [Next Article](#)»

---

Samuel Hux is Professor of Philosophy Emeritus at York College of the City University of New York. He has published in *Dissent*, *The New Republic*, *Saturday Review*, *Moment*, *Antioch Review*, *Commonweal*, *New Oxford Review*, *Midstream*, *Commentary*, *Modern Age*, *Worldview*, *The New Criterion* and many others.

Follow NER on Twitter