

The Black Orchestra

R. J. Linteau

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R. J. Linteau's World War II novel *The Black Orchestra* is a fascinating alternative history about real German conspirators and a fictional New York priest who tries to stop them.

Composed of Wehrmacht officers, members of Abwehr (the German military intelligence service), and other prominent nationalists, The Black Orchestra sought to overthrow Hitler and regain control of Germany. Their assassination attempt on July 20, 1944, which was led by Colonel Claus Schenk Graf von Stauffenberg as part of Operation Valkyrie, failed. Here, that outcome is reversed in an eventful, alternating plot that begins during the spring before the attempt.

Events within the Black Orchestra, and Stauffenberg's role as the man who would carry a bomb in a briefcase, twine with Father Strauss's perilous journey into the heart of their clandestine group and into Hitler's Wolf Lair. Frequent scene changes between countries and characters create a panoramic, behind-the-scenes view that focuses on actions. Key figures, including Admiral Wilhelm Canaris (Chief of the Abwehr), ground the plot's historical intrigue. Hitler's scenes portray him as a troubled and weakening man, though he's also elusive, as befits his infamy.

The text juxtaposes the Reich's ostentation with bombed-out ruins elsewhere well. But background information about the war is shared in a manner that veers into reportage, replete with numerical facts; this pulls the story away from its individual characters, few of whom are rendered in depth. Many are described most in terms of their physical appearances. Conversations are used to convey information, too, but this results in stilted tones. A noteworthy exception is the lengthy sequence between Strauss and Canaris, wherein banter and camaraderie are shared amid the otherwise dark events.

Indeed, Father Strauss stands out in the text as a whole: a former WWI German soldier turned American, he's coerced by the Pentagon into working for the OSS because of his language skills and past knowledge. Under the guise of a chaplain, and later as a monsignor who works under a Roman archbishop, Strauss becomes a reluctant courier, among other tasks. For political reasons, he must prevent the assassination from unfolding.

But Strauss's experiences and conscience make him think that the world would be better off if Hitler were dead. His opposing impulses linger in the backdrop as he makes decisions that are narrated with cinematic flourishes, such that his desensitization, and later prayers, are minimized. Scenes in the Wolf Lair involve an exciting mixture of simple ingenuity and a rewriting of history, while the book's chapter notes and historical photographs round out its entertaining exploration of what-ifs.

The Black Orchestra is an intricate WWII espionage novel in which a priest confronts questions about moral duty versus allegiance, all while searching for the good amid atrocities.

KAREN RIGBY (October 7, 2020)

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