

Claus von Stauffenberg: Hero or Traitor?

By: Bill Jeffers

On July 20th, 1944 a powerful explosion ripped through Adolf Hitler's Eastern Front Command Center code named Wolfschanze. A bomb placed inside a briefcase had gone off, destroying a conference room where Hitler, along with other members of the Wehrmacht and Nazi hierarchy were discussing the rapidly deteriorating situation along the Eastern Front. Just two years before, Hitler had become the de facto ruler of Europe after his lightning conquests of Poland, Denmark, Belgium, Holland and France. However, Germany's stumbles in the years since 1942, most notably in North Africa and Russia, coupled with the recent invasions of Italy in 1943 and France in June 1944 by the Allied Expeditionary Force had begun to take its toll on an already overburdened military thrown haplessly into battle to fulfill the Fuhrer's lust for empire. Due to these circumstances, a young German General Staff officer named Claus von Stauffenberg decided to act.

As history shows us, Stauffenberg's attempt failed. He met his end in the War Ministry Courtyard (Bendler Block) less than a day after the attempt. Many more would die from his actions in the ensuing months as the Nazis rounded up all of those even remotely associated with Stauffenberg's plans, had them tried before a kangaroo court and hung from piano wire in Plötzensee Prison. Hitler survived the attack only to end his life eight months later as the Russian army closed in on his bunker in Berlin. The millions of dead from both sides speak to the tragic nature of the Nazi Regime and its tainted legacy that to this day still lingers.

While it is true that Claus von Stauffenberg did commit treason in the most strict interpretation of the word by attempting to kill his elected head of state, it is also reasonable to assume that he acted as a German patriot who saw that Hitler was leading Germany towards an

abyss that no army or treaty would save them from. Today, one can see that while Stauffenberg did try to kill Hitler, he was only acting out of a sense of love for his country, a country that Hitler was slowly destroying right before his eyes. This web site will explore the reasons behind Stauffenberg's actions on July 20th, 1944 and how the path of least resistance that many Germans took against the Nazi Regime was really a path to nowhere.

Early Life and Influences

Claus Phillip Maria Schenk von Stauffenberg was born on November 15, 1907 in Bavaria to a family which had long been associated with the old Swabian nobility. At a young age Claus had come to the conclusion that, as an aristocrat, it was his responsibility to defend the nation, keep true its laws, and defend it from abominations of justice and despotism.

Much of this youthful inspiration seems to have come from two maternal ancestors, Field Marshall Count Peter Yorck von Wartenburg and Field Marshall Count von Gneisenau, who had both helped to rid Prussia of Napoleon during the Napoleonic Wars. Stauffenberg admired the way leaders like Yorck and Gneisenau could become "politically engaged", that is, they could transcend the limitations demanded by their chosen professions and see things from a not so black and white perspective. "Not only had they acted as instruments of popular will. They had also tempered, contained, curbed and channeled the potentially anarchic energy that will had unleashed. As always with Stauffenberg, the sense aristocratic responsibility functioned as a governing principle, a moral imperative. It went hand in hand with a respect for the people, but a mistrust of the mob. As he stated on another occasion: 'Popular guidance is an inescapable and important part of politics, and is not something to be left to any Tom, Dick, or Harry without disastrous consequences.'"¹

¹ Michael Baigent and Richard Leigh, Secret Germany: Stauffenberg and the Mystical Crusade against Hitler (New York: The Penguin Group, 1994), 138.

As Claus matured his parents realized that he, as well as his brothers Berthold and Alexander, needed to be mentored in art and the humanities by someone other than their local gymnasium (high school) because the scope of education there was limited. To that end, in 1923 they sought help from the German poet Stefan George. George detested the bourgeois mentality, moral constraints and pre-Vatican two church rites that made up 1920's Germany. He wished to create a newer, nobler standard of values. "George strove to teach his friends a sense of form acquired in and through poetry and regarded as a mental discipline and guide to relationships with others. At a time when spiritual, social, political, and artistic standards were collapsing, George offered "form" as an ideal, maintaining that poetry was the air which the intellectual movement in Germany must breathe if it was to live."²

George's poetry and way of thinking was also noticed by a small but growing political party based in Bavaria. Known as the National Socialist German Workers Party or Nazi Party for short, they would inevitably lay claim to some George's symbols and expressions. The notion of "the thousand year Reich" and "fire of the blood" are two concepts that were used for Nazi propaganda. George would come to detest the policies and racial theories of the National Socialist movement, especially the racial theory of the Nordic "superman." "All of this chatter about supermen," he said, "will merely act as a challenge to the oppressed to rise. Is it not better quietly to ensure that man is capable of meeting the highest demands which can be made upon him? A racial policy is no new thing; it is an evil legacy from the nineteenth century. Only the spirit, not some breeding establishment, is capable of producing a good new race of men."³ George was a man of action, a trait which fit perfectly into Stauffenberg's character. The

² Joachim Kramarz, Stauffenberg: The Architect of the Famous July 20th Conspiracy to Assassinate Hitler (New York: The MacMillian Company, 1967), 29-30.

³ Kramarz, 32.

philosophy of Stefan George would prove to exert a very powerful influence over Stauffenberg during his formative years and would linger with him until his dying day.

The need to take action coupled with a desire to protect the state led Stauffenberg to enlist in the German Reichswehr (German Army, pre-Hitler) in 1926. Stauffenberg was a sickly child and during his early days as a soldier suffered from bouts of exhaustion to acute gastritis. Through an iron determination he pushed past these ailments and finished his basic training. “Claus chose the No. 17 Cavalry Regiment which, like most regiments of the truncated post-Versailles Reichswehr, was an amalgamation of previously existing regiments.”⁴ He became a second lieutenant in 1930 and a full lieutenant in 1933. Also in this year Stauffenberg married Frehierr Nina von Lerchenfeld who was also a member of the old Germanic nobility.

As Claus worked his way through the junior ranks of the Reichswehr Germany was embroiled in political and economic chaos. The Great Depression had already broken Germany’s economy which was already teetering on the brink due to the massive stipulations of the Versailles Treaty which ended World War One. While Reichswehr officers were discouraged from political conversation and forbidden to vote by constitutional decree, Stauffenberg did not concentrate entirely on his military career. He felt that the army was not just an instrument for war but was an important cog in the creation of a new state. “In Stauffenberg’s eyes the armed forces were one of the essential pillars of the nation, called upon to guarantee both its security and reputation.”⁵ This should not imply that he was in favor of the Weimar Republic. As mentioned earlier his noble birth made him to feel that he had an obligation to serve the community. “Stauffenberg was no lover of the Weimar Republic; on the other hand’ he did not approve of the attitude of some of his fellow officers, though servants of

⁴ Peter Hoffman, Stauffenberg: A Family History, 1905-1945 (New York: Cambridge Press, 1995), 46.

⁵ Kramarz, 43.

the state, who despised it. In his view, it was better to place oneself at the service of the state, even if that seemed inadequate, rather than to stand aside in ineffective arrogance.”⁶ While many of his colleagues insulted the black, red, and gold flag of the Weimar Republic Stauffenberg did not primarily because it was the flag of the state to which he had sworn fealty.

That fealty would soon be tested when Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party came to power. The actions of Hitler and his minions in the days before the Second World War began would erode Stauffenberg’s initial support of them and send him down a road that would lead to eventual action against “The New Order.”

Turning Point

Many Germans initially welcomed Hitler and the Nazis into Power. The ineffectiveness of the Weimar Republic to deal with the staggering rates of unemployment and lowering values of the Reich mark helped speed Hitler into the Chancellor’s Office. Claus Stauffenberg was no exception. He was accepting of the Nazi political platform which called for, “...removing the restrictions on national sovereignty imposed by the Versailles Treaty, of ending reparations, of re-armament to a level comparable to that of other great nations, of soldierly values, of Volksgemeinschaft (community), of an end to political strife, of order and integrity in administration and every day life as well.”⁷ These thoughts were not solely the intellectual property of the Nazis for many Germans had felt this way for years. This “volkish” (people) concept of a community working together for the common benefit was something that many Germans could relate to.

However a person such as Stauffenberg with his aristocratic upbringing and value system was not as easily swayed by Hitler as many of his countrymen were. Two instances in particular

⁶ Kramarz, 43.

⁷ Peter Hoffman, The History of the German Resistance: 1933-1945 (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1977), 316.

in the pre war years of Hitler's Germany helped change Stauffenberg's initial perceptions of National Socialism from one of skeptical acceptance to outright hatred. The first incident occurred in 1934 not long after Hitler rose to power. Known in Germany as the Rohm affair or, more contemporarily known as, "The Night of the Long Knives."

Ernst Rohm was the leader of the Sturmabteilung or SA which was the Nazi Party's semi-private army. Tension between the Reichswehr and the SA had been mounting since Hitler's rise to power due to the fact Rohm wished the SA to become the new German army. This tension came to a head on June 30th, 1934 when Hitler had Rohm, as well as other leaders of the SA, arrested and shot. The actions of Hitler this night did not turn Stauffenberg away from Nazism completely. He was certainly not a supporter of Rohm or his plans for the SA. According to his wife he viewed the situation, "...as the lancing of a boil, as a result of which there would be some clarity in the direction of affairs."⁸ He did come to realize that the way in which Rohm and his men were dispatched was a harbinger of dark times for the future of Germany. Even though Hitler had proclaimed that he only undertook this task in emergency defense of the state this could not belie the fact that Germany was now under the rule of men who held no concept of the normal rules of justice.

The second incident occurred in 1938 and strongly shifted Stauffenberg's support away from Hitler. It all started when a minor embassy official in Paris was killed by a Jew in retaliation for the harsh treatment of his family in Germany. The Nuremburg Laws enacted in 1935 had severely limited the Jewish population in Germany from enjoying a comfortable life since and the restrictions were only getting worse. Joseph Goebbels, Minister of Propaganda for Germany, used the incident as a pretext to launch a pogrom against Germany's Jews. On November 9th, 1938, Nazi hooligans went on a rampage throughout Germany destroying over

⁸ Kramarz, 49.

seven thousand Jewish stores and two hundred synagogues in what has become known as “Kristallnacht” or the Night of Broken Glass. For Stauffenberg, this marked the breaking point. “To his military colleagues, he commented only on the purely pragmatic repercussions: The damage done to Germany’s honor and reputation in the eyes of the world. His primary objections, however, were personal. His own brother, Alexander, was now married to a woman of Jewish ancestry...Jewish members of George’s (Stefan George) circle, some of them among his closest friends, were now under threat. The government and the fuehrer to whom he had sworn his oath of allegiance was suddenly beginning to appear ugly in the extreme.”⁹

Acts of violence against minorities was not all that bothered Stauffenberg about Hitler. Since he became the leader of Germany Hitler had sought to rearm Germany with aspirations of retaking lands lost by the Versailles Treaty as well as adding lands from the countries created by it. In 1936 Hitler re-militarized the Rhineland, which although part of Germany, had become a buffer zone between Germany and the rest of Western Europe after the First World War.

Unopposed by the League of Nations vis-à-vis the annexation of the Rhineland, Hitler then set his sights toward his two southern neighbors, Austria and Czechoslovakia. Austria was annexed in early 1938 after a plebiscite in the country voted for the “Anschluss” or annexation of Austria into Germany. Hitler followed up that bloodless conquest with the annexation of the Sudetenland in Czechoslovakia. This action almost pushed the world into another war but the crisis was averted by the Munich Agreement which once again gave Hitler everything he wanted. It is important here to note that had the British and/or French challenged Hitler at any point until the Munich Agreement the chances are that Hitler would have been deposed quite easily for Germany still remembered the price in blood that it had paid twenty years earlier. Allowing Hitler to get exactly what he wanted only encouraged his lust for farther reach in Europe. As

⁹ Baigent and Leigh, 158.

Stauffenberg remarked about the chain of events, “The fool (Hitler) is bent on war and is prepared to squander the flower of Germany’s manhood twice in the same generation.”¹⁰ His premonition was to be proven correct for Hitler continued to demand more from Europe than it was willing to give.

When Hitler demanded a corridor from East Prussia to the traditionally German city of Danzig the great powers of Europe refused and warned that any attack on Polish soil for such a purpose would be deemed an act of war. Hitler didn’t believe England or France and on September 1st, 1939 sent his armies marching across the Polish Frontier. Two days later Britain and France declared war on Germany and the Second World War began.

War and Realization

With the onset of the Second World War, Stauffenberg set aside his distrust of the Nazi regime as he assumed his duties as a staff officer with the Sixth Panzer Division. Stauffenberg would serve with distinction in all of the major offensives of the German army in the early years of the war. The ease of these early victories made Stauffenberg feel that the shame of the Versailles Treaty had been wiped clean and Germany was now free to impose a new order upon Europe. However, his views on a “new order” were different than those of the Nazi hierarchy. “In his view, the war should not lead to a sort of colonization of Europe but to the final elimination of centuries old tensions.”¹¹

Regardless of these divergent views, Stauffenberg continued to be a model officer and was rewarded for his efficiency with a posting to the General Staff in 1940. His duties now included determining individual battle unit readiness, training questions from the highest to lowest levels of the army, and additionally, he had to deal with fundamental issues such as the

¹⁰ Baigent and Leigh, 159.

¹¹ Kramarz, 77.

buildup of the officer corps. While he found this work less appealing than combat duty he nevertheless poured all his energies into accomplishing his tasks. Lieutenant Colonel Burkhard Muller Hillenbrand, who was Stauffenberg's immediate superior from April to October 1942, remarked, "His judgment was sound; he appeared sure of himself, and he had a high capacity for carrying on sensible negotiations with all sorts of differing authorities. As a result he became far more widely known than would be expected for one of his age, rank, and position. From the first day to the last, Stauffenberg put into his job all his accustomed concentration and energy. Even when the realization began to grow that the war was threatening to end in immeasurable catastrophe for Germany, he continued to work with the same intensity."¹² His divisional commander, General von Loeper also stated that, "he never seemed to be able to do enough work."¹³

While pouring himself into his duties at the General Staff, he also found time to assist the civilian populations of conquered territories in his district. His aristocratic lineage made him feel that it was his duty to foster the progress of man and serve the community. As far back as the occupation of the Sudetenland Stauffenberg had worked to help ensure the economy and humanitarian conditions of those affected by the German occupation. For instance, in the town of Mies, Stauffenberg assembled the local authorities as well as German divisional officers and made them cooperate in matters concerning the local populace. "He instructed the division to buy yeast in Germany and deliver it to the local people. For transport vital to the vicinity's economy and population, petrol was supplied at cost price. Stauffenberg also elicited the support of district authorities in taking measures against an outbreak of hoof and mouth disease. When a shortage of brown coal threatened a glass factory with a work stoppage and the loss of four

¹² Kramarz, 78.

¹³ Kramarz, 65.

hundred jobs, he dispatched the factory manager to obtain coal from Army Group headquarters in Karlsbad; and he again made the divisions resources available for moving it.”¹⁴

Stauffenberg was also quick to punish those who committed war crimes against the civilian population. An incident during the Polish campaign of 1939 highlights this fact. When two women were arrested for using flashlights, the officer in charge had both of them summarily executed because of fears that they were signaling Allied planes. The truth of the matter was that they were more than likely using said flashlights to navigate their way around in the dark during an artillery barrage. “Outraged, Stauffenberg had the officer in question (who happened to be an old friend) court martialed despite his protests that he had only meant for the two women to be ‘bundled off’ quickly.”¹⁵

If Stauffenberg was a humanitarian towards Czechs and Poles, he was also a savior to thousands of Allied airmen as well. When Hitler ordered that all captured Allied bomber pilots were to be executed, Stauffenberg and his fellow officers became horrified by this blatant breach of the rules of war. He was able to circumvent the order in the following manner: “Stauffenberg and his colleagues obtained from POW camps the names of men who had already died. These were then forwarded to his cousin, Helmuth James von Moltke then serving in the OKW (Ober-Kommando der Wehrmacht) Intelligence. Each Allied prisoner slated for execution was, on paper, assigned the name of a dead or fictitious comrade, and reported to the Fuhrer as recently shot. Many British and American airmen thus officially died twice, while a great many other pilots, gunners, navigators, and bombardiers owed their lives to this deception.”¹⁶

Stauffenberg also used his position to create a Russian Liberation Army after the Germans invaded that country (Operation Barbarossa) in 1941. Many Russians, while no friend

¹⁴ Baigent and Leigh, 154-155.

¹⁵ Baigent and Leigh, 160.

¹⁶ Baigent and Leigh, 30.

of Hitler by any means, were certainly no friend of Josef Stalin who was the communist dictator of the country. Ideally, Stauffenberg wished to turn the invasion in his area into a war of liberation by those Russians and non-Russians who detested the Stalinist regime. He had no problems finding willing recruits for the cause. By 1943 the Wehrmacht had successfully recruited an unofficial estimate of between one hundred thirty to one hundred fifty thousand former Red Army soldiers into volunteer battalions. “The success of these measures was soon to be seen. There was no guerilla warfare in the Caucasus, and the North Caucasian people were soon fighting enthusiastically on the German side.”¹⁷ Hitler however, in one of his many blunders as commander-in-chief of the German armed forces, ordered the program stopped. Had Stauffenberg been allowed to continue his program the possible results would have been staggering in favor of Germany. For example, in the country of Ukraine it may have been possible to recruit over a million volunteers to fight against Soviet Russia. Hitler’s hatred of all things non-Aryan kept this enormous advantage from ever seeing the light of day. And as 1942 drew to a close and 1943 began, the results of his decision would soon be seen as the tide of war began to turn against Germany.

The year 1943 would be pivotal for both Germany and Stauffenberg. After the Blitzkrieg (lightning attack) conquests of Poland and Western Europe, the mighty Wehrmacht began to show the reach of its resources as the army became bogged down in the Russian terrain. Within sight of Moscow and possible victory, the powerful war machine ground to a halt and dug in. The scene became more reminiscent of a World War One battlefield than the progress of the “lightning attack” doctrine that had developed since. In 1942 Hitler decided to shift his priority away from Moscow and concentrate his available forces to a city along the Volga River named Stalingrad. This small city had no particular strategic value but by having the name “Stalin”

¹⁷ Kramarz, 101.

became a propaganda target. Due to a simple name, Hitler ordered the German Sixth Army to conquer the city. What ensued has been called one of the most ferocious battles of the Twentieth Century and ended with the surrender of what was left of the Sixth Army in February of 1943. The army had ample opportunity to escape before being surrounded but Hitler insisted that they hold until the last man. Now serving in North Africa as a Lieutenant Colonel, Stauffenberg became so incensed by the OKW chiefs who refused to tell Hitler the truth about the tenuous situation in the east that he remarked to a fellow officer, “the point is not to tell him the truth but to kill him, and I am prepared to do that.”¹⁸

Destiny, however, was not quite ready for Stauffenberg to attempt this. In April of 1943 while on a patrol in Tunisia, Stauffenberg’s car was strafed by an allied fighter plane. Alive, but critically wounded, he would lose his right arm and eye as well as the index and ring finger of his left hand. He was flown back to Germany to recuperate. During his convalescence, Stauffenberg finally came to the realization that he must do something to save Germany before it was too late. As he remarked to his wife, “you know I must do something now to save Germany. We General Staff officers must all accept our share of the responsibility.”¹⁹

At this point there would be no turning back for Stauffenberg. The proverbial dye was now cast and he only had a single purpose, the salvation of his country. To accomplish this he had to take the ultimate chance of killing Hitler and being labeled a traitor because no one else seemed willing to take the risk. For only through this act of treason, Stauffenberg realized, would he be able to save the nation he loved.

¹⁸ Baigent and Leigh, 173.

¹⁹ Constantine FitzGibbon, 20 July (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1956), 38.

Assassination Attempt

Now that Stauffenberg had made up his mind to eliminate Hitler, he set about securing both people and provisions necessary for an overthrow. He no longer had faith in the generals of the OKW (Oberkommando der Wehrmacht) to act. As he would remark to his Uncle, Count von Uxkull, “Since the generals haven’t accomplished anything, then it’s up to the colonels now.”²⁰ Uxkull recommended General Freidrich Olbricht who ran the OKH (Oberkommando der Heeres) which was the army’s executive branch. This should not be confused with the OKW which was more like today’s United States Joint Chiefs of Staff. The OKH had within it many officers who shared the same position as Stauffenberg concerning Hitler, including Olbricht. Paraphrasing Hitler from his book *Mein Kampf* (My Struggle) Stauffenberg pointed out that he “had also written that to save a state from destruction, members of that state had every right to rid it of destructive leaders.”²¹ Stauffenberg now felt that his personal oath of loyalty to Hitler, sworn after the Rohm Affair, was no longer binding. Now he could back up his way of thinking by using the despot’s own words against him. As co conspirator and survivor Otto John would later reminisce, “Stauffenberg said, ‘The vital necessity was to create a new situation.’ At this point he was not proposing to assassinate Hitler with his own hand but he was determined to initiate and carry through the overthrow of the regime.”²²

In September of 1943 Stauffenberg assisted Olbricht and another future conspirator, Major General Henning von Tresckow, revive plans for a coup. The OKH and Abwehr (German Military Intelligence) had already had plans for a possible coup drawn up as early as 1938 which

²⁰ Pierre Galante, Operation Valkyrie: The German Generals Plot Against Hitler (Philadelphia: Harper & Row, 1981), 187.

²¹ Anton Gill, An Honourable Defeat: A History of the German Resistance (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1956), 233.

²² Otto John, Twice Through the Lines, (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 133.

would remove Hitler from power if Germany went to war over Czechoslovakia. The success of the Munich Agreement which averted war in 1938 followed subsequently by the quick victories in the early years of the war had shifted public opinion in favor of Hitler and against regime change. In 1943, after the losses in Russia and North Africa coupled with intensive bombing by the Allies of German civilian areas, the popular support for a coup was beginning to swing back towards the conspirators favor.

To that end, Stauffenberg immersed himself in the world of his fellow conspirators and was introduced to a wide circle of people most notably Carl Goerdeler, Fritz Dietlof Count von der Schulenburg, and Dr. Julius Leber. Goerdeler was the former Lord-Mayor of Leipzig and an early advocate of Hitler's removal. Schulenburg and Leber were both members of a society in Germany called the Kreisau Circle which met in secret to discuss the ways in which removing Hitler could become a reality. "His new friends helped Stauffenberg refine his political philosophies, and he quickly became influential in the political circles of the resistance as well as the military circles."²³ His entrance and quick rise to influence did cause friction especially with Goerdeler who thought that Stauffenberg should stick to military issues pertaining to the coup. At the heart of the matter was the type of new government to be instituted after Hitler's removal. While Goerdeler favored a republic not unlike Weimar, Stauffenberg wished to create a constitutional monarchy similar to Great Britain. However, "after several meetings each man came to respect the others ability and dedication to the cause, and their political differences were subordinated to their shared goal of toppling the Nazi regime."²⁴

Tresckow and Stauffenberg set about revising the 1938 coup plan code named Valkyrie which was designed, from a legal standpoint, to deal with various internal disturbances within

²³ James P. Duffy and Vincent L. Ricci, Target Hitler: The plots to kill Adolf Hitler (Westport, Connecticut: Harvard University Press, 1998), 143.

²⁴ Duffy and Ricci, 143.

the Third Reich. These disturbances were linked primarily with the millions of so called “foreign workers” in Germany and the possibility of them instigating violence. When the code word Valkyrie was issued units of the reserve army, basically trainees, soldiers on leave, and training staff and cadres would assemble immediately and be transformed into fighting units to deal with the disturbance. Both officers came up with using these plans as a pretext to stopping a revolution by Nazi Leaders once Hitler was dead. This would help endear the population to their cause and furthermore give legitimacy to their actions in the eyes of the army. “The entire plan to overthrow the regime, therefore, depended on an enormous hoax carried out in large part by scores of officers and troops obviously following orders.”²⁵

There was one snag on which everything Stauffenberg had worked for hinged. In order to successfully activate Valkyrie the commander-and-chief of the reserve army, General Freidrich Fromm, had to give authorization. Fromm was also another officer who was no fan of Hitler’s and he often expressed his distaste for the National Socialists within his private circle of friends. He was also no dummy either when it came to matters as serious as this. Perhaps his one fatal flaw, both to himself and eventually Stauffenberg, was that he always traveled the road of least resistance. Fromm would often boast to others that he, “always came down on the right side.”²⁶ Although Fromm would probably not interfere with a coup attempt that Stauffenberg was planning, that also meant he might not support it when the critical hour arose. If Fromm would not sign off on Valkyrie then Stauffenberg was prepared to have the General arrested and carry out the Valkyrie order in his name. If this part of the plan were botched in any way, the coup would simply fail.

²⁵ Joachim Fest, Plotting Hitler’s Death: The Story of the German Resistance, (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1994), 219.

²⁶ Fest, 220.

When Tresckow was sent to the Eastern Front, Stauffenberg in effect, became the instigator of the coup. His first priority was to secure the services of someone who was willing to give their life for the sake of ridding Germany of Hitler. The first bona fide candidate was Captain Axel von dem Bussche who was recommended by Schulenburg. Bussche was a decorated war veteran who had come to despise Hitler in 1942 after witnessing a mass execution of Jews in Ukraine. He was more than willing to do the deed. Stauffenberg was able to procure several pounds of a British explosive compound through the Abwehr and his plan was to have Bussche blow himself up while modeling new army uniforms for Hitler. Hitler, however, cancelled the presentation. This scenario was repeated several times through the end of 1943 into early 1944 with no success. When Bussche was injured waiting to carry out the assassination, Ewald Heinrich von Kleist volunteered in his stead. Once again Hitler continued to elude the assassin's "bullet" and further prolonged the attempt. "These tense weeks were filled with plans, action, hope, and disappointment."²⁷ The longer it took to kill Hitler the chances increased that they would be discovered by the Gestapo who were already investigating and arresting members of the Kreisau Circle. Also, the longer it took to act, the shorter the window for diplomacy became as well. The Tehran Conference in 1943 between Britain, Russia and the United States had resolved that those countries would accept nothing less than unconditional surrender from Germany. This simply put meant that Germany would cease to exist as a nation. The only factor in the conspirators favor was that Germany still retained control of Western Europe and with that control came a modicum of bargaining power.

Stauffenberg now decided that he alone would carry out the plans by his own hand because on June 6th 1944, Germany lost whatever diplomatic leverage it had as the Allies

²⁷ Eberhard Zeller, The Flame of Freedom: The German Struggle against Hitler, (Coral Gables, Florida: University of Miami Press, 1969), 267.

invaded in Normandy. Within two weeks of the invasion, Allied forces in both theaters of combat had paralyzed German troop movements. “Hitler, more than ever convinced of the incompetence of his generals, promised new forces.”²⁸ Where these supposed forces looked good on paper in reality they were an outright fiction. Consequently, help for the beleaguered troops at the front never arrived. And while Stauffenberg and the conspirators waited for the opportunity to strike, the noose slowly began to tighten around Germany’s neck.

In order to start the bomb ticking, so to speak, Stauffenberg would have to grasp a pair of pliers with the three good fingers of his left hand to break an acid capsule which ate the timed fuse down to the point of discharge. He would keep the bomb concealed in his briefcase because the chances of it getting searched were minimal. By now, Stauffenberg had become Fromm’s chief-of-staff and therefore had almost daily access to Hitler. His first attempt was on July 11th when he was summoned to Hitler’s mountain retreat in Bavaria named Berchtesgaden.

Stauffenberg had initially hoped to get Hitler, Heinrich Himmler, and Hermann Goering in one fell swoop. Goering was the head of the Luftwaffe (German Air Force) and architect of the Final Solution. Himmler was head of the Schutzstaffel more commonly known as the SS and was charged with carrying out Goering’s plan. Over time, Stauffenberg dismissed Goering as a target because it was felt that he would not have much influence over a coup attempt. Himmler, on the other hand who was the master of a state within a state with his SS minions, could pose a severe problem in a post coup reality. With combat beginning to inch ever closer to Germany’s borders Stauffenberg decided, at the very least to make a go of killing Hitler whether or not Himmler was there hoping that once the head was dead then perhaps the arms would die with it. He tried again on July 15th but again to no avail. As other conspirators began to doubt that the coup would be successful as well as timely due to the Allied advance, Stauffenberg remarked to

²⁸ Zeller, 275.

them, “But even worse than failure... is to yield to shame and coercion without a struggle.”²⁹ On July 20th, he would finally get his chance.

Leaving Berlin on the morning of July 20th with his aide Werner von Haeften and General Helmut Steiff who were both involved in the conspiracy, they arrived in Rastenburg, East Prussia, which was home to Hitler’s Eastern Front Headquarters code named Wolfschanze, before noon for the Fuhrer’s midday conference. Stauffenberg ensconced himself in an office where he was able to break the acid capsule and start the fuse. He then proceeded to the conference room and tried to get a good spot to place the bomb. Because he was a junior officer, he would not be able to place himself directly beside Hitler so instead chose one end of the table and placed the bomb on the inside of the table support. Then, feigning some important task, Stauffenberg left the conference room and proceeded to join his aide who had their staff car ready to go. It was just after 12:40 PM. “Suddenly, as witnesses later recounted, a deafening crack shattered the midday quiet and a bluish yellow flame rocketed skyward.”³⁰ Believing that Hitler could not have survived the explosion Stauffenberg and Haeften were able to bluff their way out of Wolfschanze and board a plane for the return trip to Berlin. Hopefully, Operation Valkyrie would already be in motion by the time they returned.

Failure and Fallout

Stauffenberg returned to Berlin around 3:30 in the afternoon only to find that “Valkyrie” had not been set into motion. Conflicting reports from Wolfschanze concerning the state of the Fuhrer’s health were causing some within the conspiratorial circle to waver from their earlier convictions. In fact, Hitler had only been slightly wounded due to the fact that another officer in the conference room had moved Stauffenberg’s bomb to the outside table support. The result

²⁹ Fest, 254.

³⁰ Fest, 258.

being that when the explosion went off the force of the blast caused the conference table to act as a shield, absorbing most of the deadly energy. The room was destroyed but Hitler, “who had escaped with minor cuts and bruises, was euphoric with relief. His trousers had been shredded by the blast, but otherwise even his dignity was intact.”³¹

Meanwhile, Stauffenberg was trying in vain to get the coup operational. One reason was that Fromm, predictably, would not sign off on the orders releasing the reserve army to lock the down the various administrative and communication centers until he had confirmation of Hitler’s death. As a result, Stauffenberg had the fence sitting general arrested and began to carry out “Valkyrie’s” plans in his name. Unfortunately this would ultimately prove to be too little, too late. “Soon the Bendler Block (Army Headquarters) was sealed off by troops who now knew that Hitler was still alive and that the orders they had been given were unauthorized. The news spread and within the building itself several officers not involved in the conspiracy began to ask questions about what was going on. Stauffenberg was exhausted. He had spent hours driving the others along by the sheer force of his will, but now he knew he had not carried the day.”³² After Fromm had freed himself from his confinement he had Stauffenberg, Olbricht, Haeften and other officers associated with the conspiracy arrested intending to do to them what they had done to him earlier in the afternoon. He announced, “In the name of the Fuhrer a court martial convened by me has pronounced sentence: Colonel von Mertz, General Olbricht, the Colonel whose name I will not mention (Stauffenberg) and Lieutenant von Haeften are condemned to death.”³³ Around 12:30 in the morning of July 21st, less than twelve hours after the coup attempt, Stauffenberg was led into the courtyard of the Bendler-Block and placed in front of a

³¹ Gill, 246.

³² Gill, 249.

³³ Hoffman, History of the German Resistance, 507.

temporary firing wall. His final words as he was executed were, “Long Live Holy Germany!”³⁴
The coup had ended in failure.

As soon as the coup attempt had been contained the Nazis began a relentless manhunt to locate anyone who had even a remote connection with the conspiracy as well as those with which they wished to settle old scores. “Hitler was in dead earnest when he declared in his radio address immediately after the suppression of the uprising that the resisters would be ‘mercilessly exterminated.’”³⁵ Their deaths, which would have no outcome in the direction of the war, were to be meted out purely for the psychological and symbolic values. Estimates of the total butcher’s bill for July 20th have varied from less than five hundred to over four thousand executions. “All in all, the number of those executed in connection with the uprising was probably less than two hundred, while the total of those arrested in all likelihood never reached a thousand.”³⁶ Kangaroo courts led by “Hitler’s Hanging Judge”, Roland Freisler, were quick to hand out death sentences to all those even remotely connected with the coup. “In any event, most of them did not even plead or regret or apologize. They remained stubbornly unrepentant. They defied the regime, convinced to the end that the attempt to overthrow Hitler had been justified.”³⁷ In Stauffenberg’s immediate household, his wife and children were arrested and continued to live under the threat of execution until the end of the war. Stauffenberg’s older brother Berthold was a victim of Freisler and his show trials. In fact some who had never even lent their support to coup became victims. General Fromm met his end shortly after dispatching Stauffenberg in the Bendler-Block courtyard even though he did not actively participate in the coup and had shot the ringleaders when the uprising was quashed. His luck of always coming

³⁴ Hoffman, History of the German Resistance, 508.

³⁵ Theodore S. Hammerow, On the Road to the Wolf’s Lair: German Resistance to Hitler, (Cambridge, Massachusetts, the Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press, 1997), 370.

³⁶ Hammerow, 370.

³⁷ Hammerow, 376.

down on the right side of matters had finally run out. Even more saddening was the loss of Field Marshall Erwin Rommel. Even though Rommel saw that Hitler was leading Germany towards ruin he refrained from participating in the coup. When his name was dropped during one of the many barbaric interrogations by the Gestapo, the Nazis gave him a choice: Commit suicide or face a trial in front of Freisler which would more than likely lead to execution. Rommel chose the former to avoid the humiliation and thus, arguably one of Germany's greatest military commanders of the Second World War was eliminated, and he didn't even lift a finger to help the resistance movement.

Conclusion

Was Claus von Stauffenberg a traitor to Germany, as many Nazis would claim and continue to do so even after the end of the war? Or instead, was Stauffenberg really a traitor to National Socialism and a hero to Germany? It would be correct to assume that Stauffenberg's actions on July 20th would more than likely have done nothing to stem the tide against the Allied onslaught against Germany. Some have argued that in light of that information it would have been wiser to wait for the inevitable collapse of the German armies in which case Hitler would have been removed regardless. As far as Stauffenberg was concerned, there was a more pressing need to rid the world of Hitler now rather than later. Since Hitler took office, he had basically burned every political, economic, and social bridge that Germany had to the outside world. If Germany was led to ruin by his hand, the shame and embarrassment of every German who could not or would not voice a concern over Hitler's atrocities both at home and in the occupied lands would have been magnified thousands of times over. Someone had to step up to restore Germany's honor before it was too late. Stauffenberg's early influences on his life coupled with what he witnessed as a member of Hitler's Germany spurred him to action because Hitler

ultimately ran anathema to Stauffenberg's view of what the nation should be to its citizens. In the end, he was a hero who was definitely not alone in his views.

Eight months after July 20th, Hitler was dead and the Third Reich with it. Hard years would follow for Germany as it would be divided into East and West Germany and became the front line for the Cold War. From the end of the Second World War to 1989 Germany as Stauffenberg knew it would not exist. It would take the collapse of the Soviet Union, the same Soviet Union who had raised the Red Banner in victory over the Reichstag in 1945, to allow Germany to become whole again. And by no means would this new Germany be anything reminiscent of what Stauffenberg had in mind for a post Hitler Germany. Indeed, the nation adopted a political system more like his former colleague in the conspiracy, Carl Goerdeler, had envisioned.

On the 50th anniversary of the uprising German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, while giving a speech in the courtyard of the old Bendler-Block where Stauffenberg met his end, remarked that what the conspirators had done was, "an act of moral self assertion. They had proclaimed to the world that the dignity of each individual human being is more important than any political power and is superior to it. The resistance had united Germans of the most diverse political convictions in a common struggle against the rule of criminality."³⁸ As Professor Theodore Hammerow would conclude, "Admittedly, most of the members of the resistance, fallible, gullible, sometimes culpable, had at first accepted and served the Third Reich. Then, gradually, almost in spite of themselves, they began to rise above the limitations of their age, their class, and their ideology. They began to see, hesitantly, intermittently, reluctantly, and often dimly, the terrible evil in the Nazi Regime. And having seen it, they eventually decided to oppose it."³⁹

³⁸ Hammerow, 404.

³⁹ Hammerow, 405.

Stauffenberg realized that no matter what Germany's situation any would be preferable without Hitler than with him. His character and sense of duty to the nation, not the leader, he loved and served compelled him to act. His was not one of political ambition or even rule but it was instead a sincere affection for the place he called home. Ultimately, he would prove this by giving his life fighting a tyrant and his barbaric lust for war, death, pain and suffering. Posterity can hardly ask for more from those it labels heroes.

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