

Wolfsschanze, East Prussia, July 20

As Claus Schenk Graf von Stauffenberg boarded the Heinkel He 111 airplane bound for Wolfsschanze HQ in Rastenburg, East Prussia, in the morning of July 20, 1944, it was with the clear aim of killing the German Führer, Adolf Hitler, and, if possible, his top lieutenants Göring and Himmler, all in one master stroke, but the assassination of the triumvirate was in itself not the ultimate goal; merely a means to an end. Overthrowing the Nazi State and bringing the hopeless war to an end - on terms that would ensure survival of the Germany state under the control of its armed forces - was what the conspirators had in mind.

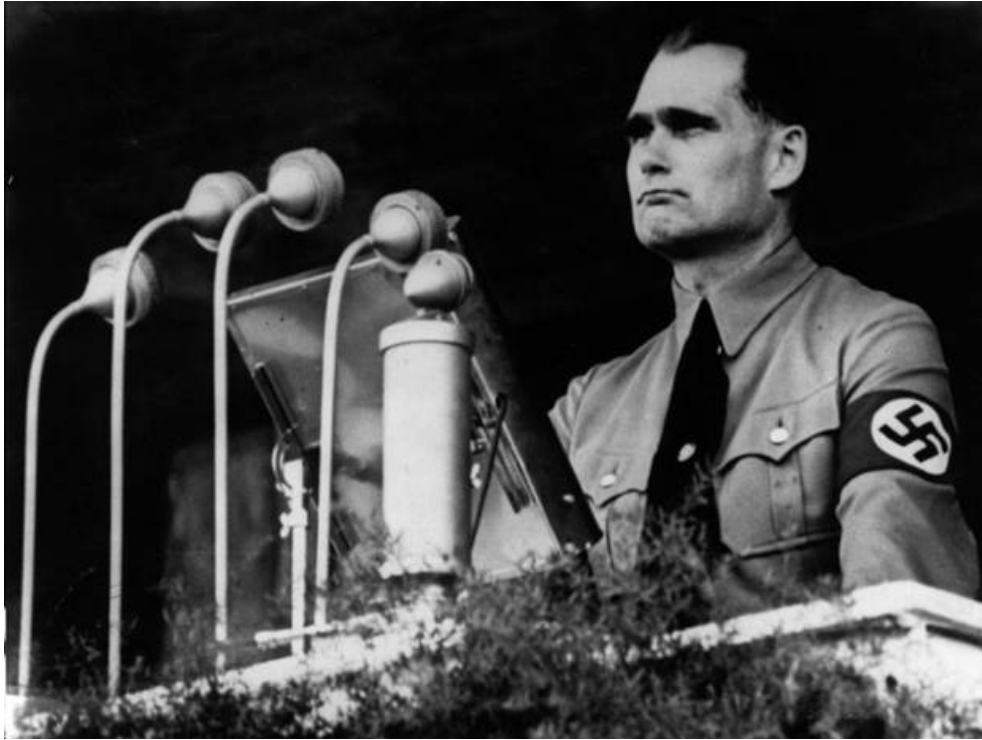
There had been thoughts and plans within army circles for a coup d'état as early as 1938, where a group of officers from the High Command, spearheaded by Admiral Wilhelm Canaris and Oberstleutnant Hans Oster, respectively Head and Deputy Head of the 'Abwehr' [Military Intelligence], along with General Ludwig Beck, at that time Chief of Staff of the Army, had been on the verge of arresting Hitler on the grounds of his dangerous, belligerent course.¹ However, the plan was curbed eventually by the British PM, Neville Chamberlain, and his visit to the German Chancellor in September that year, resulting in the Munich Agreement that 'settled' the Czechoslovakian question.²



British PM Chamberlain, returning from Munich and proudly waving his peace agreement with Hitler's (worthless) signature.

Albeit resistance against the new rulers wasn't confined to military circles, the fact was that the only organization in 1930ties Germany that could muster sufficient strength to rival the NSDAP was the armed forces, the 'Reichswehr'. However, since Hitler had mollified the General Staff by decapitating the rival S.A.³ in the purge of June 1934, the regular army had become increasingly entangled with Nazism, even taking their oath of allegiance, not to Germany, not to the Constitution or the people, but to Hitler himself.⁴

“I swear by God this holy oath, that I will render to Adolf Hitler, Führer of the German Reich and People, Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces, unconditional obedience, and that I am ready, as a brave soldier, to risk my life at any time for this oath.”



“The Party is Hitler; Hitler is Germany and Germany is Hitler! Sieg Heil!” Rudolph Hess at the 1934 Rally, giving his 'Oath to Hitler' oratory.

The initial disdain for Nazism never completely vanished from conservative military circles, but the glorious victories won in the first war years by the German armed forces, from 1935 renamed the ‘Wehrmacht’, had muffled criticism at High Command for a while as the new C-i-C had revitalized the self-esteem in an army that had lived through the humiliating defeat of the Great War and the even more degrading Treaty of Versailles.

“The rapid conquests of 1940-1 had made all discussions with the generals abortive, for they never knew whether they were to be rewarded by Hitler with large sums of money and made field-marsals or dismissed as too incompetent to fulfill the blindly instinctive, though sometimes astute, strategies of their master.”

[Manwell & Frankel; ‘The July Plot’, p. 47]

Now, however, in the fifth war year and with the tide changing, Hitler’s pig-headed and largely amateurish conduct of the war; his incessant growling over the General Staff and arbitrary lay-offs of capable officers who had displeased him; the horrendous crimes committed on the Eastern Front and, not least, the ominous military situation that, after the Allied landings in Normandy earlier that month, had developed into a full-scale, two-front war with three world powers, spelling certain doom for Germany, finally constituted that Stauffenberg, a Swabian of old nobility and a Wehrmacht

career officer, now found himself en route to his sworn liege lord with the intent of snuffing his life.

**“One does not rebel when face to face
with the enemy.”**

The early German resistance to Hitler had been hampered by a number of factors. Firstly, it was not a unified movement, but rather a hotchpotch of different groups with very varying agendas and views on what a post-war Germany should look like and with little knowledge of and contact with one another. Secondly, while resistance movements in occupied countries could often mobilize a patriotic attitude against the Nazi occupiers and were generally seen as ‘freedom-fighters’ by their fellow countrymen, the Germany resistance was always in the risk of being seen as unpatriotic, particularly as there was a war going on, and thus to be denounced to the Gestapo. Even many army officers and officials who may have detested Hitler had a deeply imbued sense of respect for the Head of State; were prone to obedience and nourished an aversion towards being involved in ‘treasonous’ acts against the government, they served, aptly illustrated by the above quote by Generaloberst Franz Halder.

AS THINGS WERE GOING increasingly awry for Germany, feelers had been extended from parts of the resistance through various channels to the Britons to probe whether the 1943 Casablanca decision that Germany (and Japan) was to surrender unconditionally was negotiable if Hitler was done away with. The weak and incoherent German resistance had, however, been unable to make a convincing case or extract promises from the British PM, and support had been limited to an encouraging letter.

Thus, the vacillating generals and politicians spent precious time grumbling, cursing, talking and planning in their own echo-chamber but did little to further their plans.

**“These generals seem to want the Hitler
Government itself to order them to overthrow it.”**

THE NEW BREED of military conspirators came from the core of the Prussian officers corps, most of them nobility like Stauffenberg himself, spiced with a few of the older generation. A key figure was Henning von Tresckow, a staff officer of the 2. Army and himself an unsuccessful would-be assassin.⁵



The new breed. None of the above survived the attempted coup but Hans-Bernd Gisevius who managed to flee to Switzerland. He died in 1974. Source: Bundesarchiv.

The circle also embraced Hans Bernd Gisevius⁶, Ulrich von Hassel⁷, quoted above, General Ludwig Beck⁸ and, not to forget, courageous young Werner von Haefen⁹. A non-military figurehead was Carl Goerdler¹⁰, whom himself, like Gisevius, had been part of the Nazi machinery.

Stauffenberg, for his part, had once been sympathetic to elements of the Nazi cause; its emphasis on a strong military and its devout anti-Versailles stance¹¹, and what he initially thought was a display of military prowess on Hitler's part, but, being a devout catholic, a descendant of old Prussian nobility and a man with a strong sense of justice, the ill treatment of German Jews offended him. Outraged by his experiences on the Eastern front, where he became aware of the mass shootings of Jews, the seed for rebelling against the regime leaders became firmly planted in him. The final nail in the coffin came with Stalingrad where Stauffenberg, despite religious qualms, concluded that the Führer's assassination was a lesser moral evil than a Hitler remaining in power.

IN 1943, STAUFFENBERG FOUND HIMSELF in Tunisia as Operations Offices in the 10 Panzer Corps and directing the unit from one location to another, the column was strafed by Allied fighter bombers. Stauffenberg was severely injured; he lost an eye, his right hand and three fingers on the left. He spent three months at a Munich hospital under the care of the renowned surgeon Ferdinand Sauerbruch, and left the hospital partly an invalid and with a more realistic view on Hitler's military capability.



Rare photo of Stauffenberg with eye-patch.
Source: Find-a-grave.

While recovering from his injuries in the summer of 1943 at the family estate of Schloss Lautlingen¹² and frustrated that he could not on his own get to Hitler, he was approached by von Tresckow in whom he found a kindred spirit and a keen organizer of things. Consequently, the still handsome, effective and determined young officer, now a colonel (and a devout conspirator), returned to 'light duty' in the upper echelons of the Wehrmacht.

Senior officers pulling a few strings, Stauffenberg was appointed Chief-of-Staff in the so-called Reserve Army, a Berlin-based unit with the responsibility of training replacement troops for the front, but essentially also a tool to maintain order in the Realm and curb civil unrest, should it be necessary. This scenario was codenamed 'Valkyrie' and Stauffenberg suddenly found himself in a position where he would have not only frequent access to Hitler and thus be able to plan and carry out a successful assassination attempt, he also was situated in the nerve center of the very tool that effectively could take control of the situation in post-Hitler Germany; disarm the SS and arrest the Nazi leadership once the Führer was incapacitated.

Shortly after taking office, Stauffenberg acquired another devoted young man as his adjutant; Oberleutnant Werner von Haefen. From the outset, Stauffenberg made no secret of his stance and von Haefen did not hesitate to vow his support.

Conditio sine qua non

Finally realizing that any attempt in changing the existing rule of Germany would only succeed if Hitler was dead was the turning point for the Army conspirators. As Hess had put it in his 1934 speech, Hitler, the Party and Germany had become one and the removal of the Führer and his closest confidantes thus the 'conditio sine qua non', the imperative prerequisite for a coup d'état to succeed.¹³

Stauffenberg's fateful journey this summer morning was thus the culmination of a long period of vacillating where pros and cons were weighed among a mixed group of people with different views and goals.

In the Lair of the beast

The Wolfsschanze compound in the dense forests near Rastenburg in what was then East Prussia [today Kętrzyn in Poland] was a comprehensive facility with multiple heavily fortified constructions – Hitler's own bunker had an 11 meter thick roof – cordoned off with barbed wire and tank obstacles, concrete entrenchments and with layered security access through a series of control posts.



Rochus Misch on guard duty at Speerkreis I. It's winter 1942 so no mosquitoes, but the name, the guards have given the compound speaks for itself. Source: Rochus Misch' memoir; 'Der letzte Zeuge'.

It was comparable in size to a country village with its own railroad station, post office, hospital, cinema, barber shop, 'Kasino' (German military parlance for a mess hall), a sauna, exercise area and accommodation for visitors. It was also heavily infested with mosquitoes, much to the chagrin of the guards who had to wear nets and gloves not to be eaten alive.

Access security was tight; special passes were needed¹⁴ and the password was changed daily. The area was heavily mined¹⁵, but as of yet [July 20], officers were not required to relinquish their sidearm in the presence of the Führer and briefcases were not examined.



Hitler's personal bunker at the Wolfsschanze. All above the yellow signs is roof. Author's collection 2014.

For those inside the compound, life was tranquil, bordering to boring with routines that pivoted around the Führer's special work pattern. Unless you were a lover of nature, there was little to do in your time off.

"I got used to this strange new world relatively quickly. Nature, the forest and the landscape quickly won me over to my new workplace. There were no fixed working hours here, no office atmosphere, I could go for long walks and enjoy being out in the woods. I didn't miss the big city for a moment.

Hitler himself used to say that they'd chosen the cheapest, most marshy, mosquito-ridden and climatically unpleasant place possible, but I thought it was lovely ... In summer, however, I had to agree that my boss had a point, because myriads of mosquitoes plagued us, sucking our blood. The air was heavy and humid and sometimes difficult to breathe."

[Traudl Junge; 'To the Final Hour']

Rochus Misch, at that time just a trooper in the FBK, describe long hours of relative inactivity where the primary leisure activity is card-playing [Tarock], but he too is infatuated by the scenery of the nature and the opportunities to go swimming in the nearby Masurian Lakes.

The conference

Stauffenberg and Haeften arrived at the airstrip in Rastenburg around 10 o'clock in the morning where a staff car was waiting to take them some fifteen kilometers into the deep forests where the Wolfsschanze was tucked away. Having passed checkpoints where the special passes, issued for the visit, were scrutinized and arriving at Speerkreis II, the innermost area before the 'Führerspeerkreis', they greeted fellow officers and Stauffenberg had an opportunity to exchange a few words in privacy with Fellgiebel, the conspirator in the FHQ communications dept. Meantime, unbeknown to them, the conference had been moved forward half-an-hour to accommodate a visit by Italian Dictator Benito Mussolini later the same day. An impatient Keitel appeared and eagerly motioned Stauffenberg towards the conference hut, but he managed to excuse himself and get a moment of solitude to prime (one of) the bombs. He left the unprimed bomb with Haeften, which should prove to be a blunder of great consequence.¹⁶

The conference was to take place in what is often described as a 'flimsy, wooden hut'¹⁷. In fact, it was a brick barracks, reinforced with a minimum of half a meter of concrete on walls and roof and with its windows protected by steel shutters. However, as the day was warm, all windows and shutters had been flung open.



Conference Room with participants numbered [Legend below]. Whether the briefcase with the bomb was ever in position 'A' remains unclear (see Notes), but it was in position 'B' as it went off.

1. Adolf Hitler; 2. Adolf Heusinger, General (Heer); 3. Günther Korten, General (LW); 4. Heinz Brandt, Colonel (Heer); 5. Karl Bodenschatz, General (LW); 6. Rudolf Schmudt, General, Adjutant (Heer); 7. Heinrich Borgmann, Lieut. Col., Adjutant (OKW); 8. Karl-Jesko von Putkamer, Admiral, Adjutant (Kriegsmarine); 9. Heinrich Berger, Stenographer; 10. Heinz Assmann, Captain (Kriegsmarine); 11. Walther Scherff, General, (Military Historian); 12. Walther Buhle, General (OKH); 13. Hans-Erich Voss, Rear Admiral (Kriegsmarine); 14. Hermann Fegelein, Adjutant (Waffen SS); 15. Nicolaus von Below, Colonel, Adjutant (LW); 16. Otto Günsche, SS Hauptsturmführer, Adjutant (SS); 17. Heinz Buchholz, Stenographer; 18. John von Feyend, Lieut. Col., Adjutant (OKW); 19. Herbert Büchs, Major, Adjutant (OKW); 20. Weizenegger, Lieut. Col. (OKW); 21 Franz von Sonnleithner, Ministerial Counselor (Foreign Office); 22. Walter Warlimont, General (OKW); 23. Alfred Jodl, General (OKW); 24. Wilhelm Keitel, Field Marshal (OKW).

Stauffenberg brought his briefcase into the room as it contained the report concerning the Reserve Army that he was meant to present to Hitler. It did, of course, also hold the one kilo of plastic explosives where the acid was now eating away the copper wire that restrained the firing pin. He placed it carefully under the table¹⁸, as close to Hitler as possible, against the socle-like massive oak leg.

Under a pretext of taking an important phone call, Stauffenberg then left the conference room just minutes before the explosion. At 12:42 a tremendous bang heralded the fulfillment of the first part of the conspirators plan. Stauffenberg, watching as he and Haeften were driven to the airstrip post haste, believed he saw Hitler being carried away on a stretcher and assumed him dead.¹⁹ Along with Haeften he hurried back to Berlin to take the reins of the coup.



Conference room after the explosion. Had it been a wooden hut, it would have been blown to smithereens. Incredible that anyone survived. Source: Wikipedia.

In total 24 persons were present in the room as the bomb went off. Two were killed on the spot and another two died from their injuries while several others, including Hitler, suffered minor injuries.

In the totally trashed conference room everything was in turmoil; some of the attendees were lying unconscious on the floor, some were staggering around in shock; confused, deaf and temporarily blinded. Colonel von Below, Hitler's Luftwaffe adjutant, recalled;

"I had been there for a few minutes when the bomb exploded. The clock said 12.40. I lost consciousness for a few seconds. When I came to I saw around me a ruin of wood and glass. I staggered to my feet, got out through one of the window frames, then sprinted around the hut to the main door. My head was buzzing, I had been deafened and I was bleeding from the head and neck. At the door a terrible scene greeted me. Severely injured officers lay around on the floor; others were reeling around and falling over. Hitler, sure-footed and erect, was led out by Keitel. His uniform jacket and

trousers were torn but otherwise he seemed none the worse. He retired at once to his bunker for medical attention."

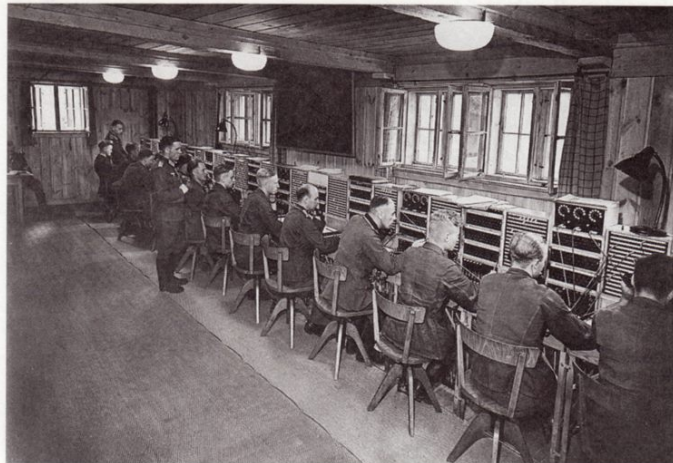
Albeit von Below's recollection of Hitler's appearance seem somewhat idolized, he was right in the sense that the Führer had sustained only minor injuries and the medical attention he was subject to primarily consisted in Dr. Morell extracting wooden splinters from his Master's derrière. The heavy table – and the fact that the briefcase had been moved to the other side of the massive table leg – had shielded Hitler from the full force of the explosion.

Three people lay dead on the floor, two with limbs torn off, killed instantly by the blast. A number were hurried to the nearby field-hospital where one more would die from his injuries. The remainder suffered from various injuries and most had their eardrums perforated.



What is left of the hut today. The 'open book' is a memorial text in Polish and German. Author's collection 2014.

IT WAS AT THIS POINT IN TIME General Fellgiebel was supposed to inform Bendlerstrasse about the outcome of Stauffenberg's actions and subsequently cut connection to the outside world, especially Berlin. He apparently failed on both counts, the reason never fully clarified.



The switchboard at the Wolfsschanze. Photo is borrowed from Rochus Misch's memoir 'Der Letzte Zeuge.

The attempted coup d'état

In Berlin, the conspirators had eagerly awaited Fellgiebel's call.²⁰ When it came [IF it came; historians disagree. See notes], the words were garbled and the meaning not quite clear, especially whether Hitler had really perished or not. As a result, Olbricht refrained from initiating Valkyrie, rather awaiting Stauffenberg's return before exposing himself. Priceless time was thus lost, and it was the second great blunder.

When Stauffenberg did return to Rangsfeld air base with Werner von Haeften, they expected to be picked up by car and informed that the coup was well under way, but there were none to receive them. Finding a phone and contacting Bendlerblock they learned that little had happened.

It was not until four o'clock in the afternoon, more than three hours after the supposed killing of Hitler that Valkyrie was finally set in motion on Olbricht's belated initiative. The Reserve Army was alerted and started cordoning off government buildings and rounding up various persons, mainly of the SS. At 16:40 Stauffenberg and Haeften arrived at the Bendlerblock. General Fromm²¹, ever the fence-sitter, in a vain attempt to protect himself, changed sides and tried to arrest Stauffenberg, but Olbricht and Stauffenberg restrained him at gunpoint and locked him away.

QUITE INEXPLICABLY and contrary to the first rule in any conspiracy's textbook, Berlin's radio-station on Mansurenallee was not immediately seized by the insurgents²² and no broadcast informing the population of Hitler's death and the 'change of guards' was performed. And most remarkably, no step to silence the Nazi High Priest, the diabolical propaganda genius Joseph Göbbels, was taken. That would turn out to be Stauffenberg's third and most crucial mistake

"To think that these revolutionaries weren't smart enough to cut the telephone wires – my little daughter would have thought of that."

The coup failed first and foremost because Hitler did not die; his demise being the absolute prerequisite for success. And in retrospect, the attempt was littered with flaws, both in planning and in execution. The pivotal fault was of course Stauffenberg's double role as assassin and as leader of the subsequent coup. It prevented him from staying with Hitler in the conference room (and thus secure that the bomb remained close to the Führer) and it prolonged the action time as he first had to travel to Bendlerstrasse.

Valuable time was wasted because General Olbricht, uncertain whether Hitler was dead or not, did not initiate Valkyrie immediately after Fellgiebel's (albeit somewhat veiled) report, and because Stauffenberg was not there to take the reins.

ON A TECHNICAL POINT, Stauffenberg only primed one of his two explosive packs²³ and left the other with Haeften. As an officer, he should have known

that the unprimed pack would detonate by the blast of the other and thus more than double the force, so why did he not take it with him? The only persons who could have answered that question were the assassin himself and his batman, and they were both dead that same evening.

Another major blunder was allowing Wolfsschanze to contact Berlin as the Göbbels quote above illustrates. The severing of the connection was in no way secured by Fellgiebel, who should have administrated a couple of grenades to the switchboard but apparently did little – or nothing at all.²⁴

Sending Major Remer²⁵, a staunch Nazi, to arrest Göbbels without a high-ranking chaperone from Bendlerstrasse and thus give the poison dwarf an opportunity to sweet-talk the major into listening and to talk to Hitler, was a serious misjudgment. There was a reason that the ‘Volksempfänger’, the cheap radio that was in every other German household, was nicknamed the ‘Göbbels Schnauze’, the Göbbels Gob. That little oratorical wizard should have been silenced at once - and permanently.

Neglecting to seize the radio station was an almost unfathomable error. Taking control of the media – and thus public opinion – while denying your adversary the same option is on the first page in the Conspirators Handbook.

“Long live sacred Germany!”

As the coup fizzled out, General Fromm was quick on the trigger in the hope – vain, as we know – to conceal his own involvement. Had he not been a participant per se, he at least had knowledge that he did not disclose to the Gestapo and that easily amounted to high treason in Hitler’s book..

In the night of July 20, Stauffenberg, Olbricht and von Haeften were taken into the Bendlerblok courtyard where a ‘Peloton d’exécution’ waited for them. Illuminated by the headlights of some vehicles, the men were taken one by one to a pile of sand, left there by construction workers, and summarily shot. Witnesses claim that Stauffenberg shouted; “*Es lebe das heilige Deutschland!*” before the shots fell.²⁶



The Bendlerblock courtyard where the conspirators were executed. Today the former HQ houses the German Resistance Memorial Center. Authors collection 2018.

The coup was unraveled rather quickly by the Gestapo and a veritable purge resulted, embracing some 5000 individuals. Some went to concentration camps, some in prison, but the key figures – including General Fromm – came face to face with the infamous Judge Roland Freisler²⁷ in the Peoples Court before they, often just hours later, proceeded to the Plötzensee Prison and their death.



Judge Roland Freisler in the courtroom during the July 20 plot proceedings, berating Carl Goerdler who would have been Reichs Chancellor, had Hitler been killed and the coup succeeded. During the trials, Freisler made a mock show out of the proceedings, yelling insults at the defendants and cutting off their defenses. Source: Bundesarchiv.

STAUFFENBERGS WIFE, NINA, was imprisoned for the remainder of the war and the couples four children were placed in an orphanage. Nina Stauffenberg gave birth to a fifth child while in custody. The family was reunited after the war and Nina lived to be 92, passing away in 2006. The oldest boy, Berthold, born 1934, became a Bundeswehr general and retired in 1994 after thirty-eight years of service. He has frequently given interviews about his father.

But that's another story...

“But even worse than failure is to yield to shame and coercion without a struggle.”

For all its heroism and the indisputable valor of Stauffenberg and his fellow conspirators, it should not be overlooked that there were no thoughts among them of complying with the Allied decree of the 1943 Teheran Conference, demanding Germany's immediate, unconditional surrender.

Neither was a Weimar-style democracy in the textbook; more likely a view to restore an orderly society with liberty, freedom of speech and guarantee of personal safety within the framework of some sort of authoritarian rule with focus on ‘German values’; honesty, dignity, faithfulness and hard work. In soul, if not in body, not unlike the good old Kaiser times. As Hans Bernd Gisevius put it in his memoir; ‘Valkyrie’, they would essentially “paint the ship of state a military grey and set it afloat again”. As it went, the coup; the last serious treat to Hitler's life and the Nazi state, failed miserably and Germany was forced to endure another three-quarter of a year

before redemption came; not from within but in the form of a conquering foe, spelling even more violence and hardship to the suffering people.

From the outset, chances for success were slim and even the conspirators admitted that. Stauffenberg confided to a colleague that it was “questionable that it would succeed”, and von Tresckow stated that the attempt would “very likely go awry.”

So, was it worth it? Were the belated, amateurish actions by ill-prepared conspirators who for the most part did not even really believe in their own cause justified, considering the horrendous repercussions that followed in their wake? Could this, in its essence merely symbolic act at this late hour have changed anything, had they been successful and slain the beast in its lair?

We will let German historian Joachim Fest have the final word:

“After several unsuccessful attempts to overthrow the regime, the conspirators’ sole remaining ambition by July 20, 1944, was to save as much of Germany’s ‘substance’ as possible from the impending catastrophe. Recent evidence proves how well founded their motives were: one study shows that, while slightly more than 2.8 million German soldiers and civilians died during the nearly five years between the beginning of the war on September 1, 1939, and the attempt to assassinate Hitler on July 20, 1944, 4.8 million died during the nine and a half months before the War ended in early May 1945. These figures appear even more shocking if we calculate how many were killed on average every day during those two periods. Before the attempted coup some 1.588 Germans were killed daily; after it 16.641 - more than ten times as many - perished, even though the war had obviously been lost? To this human cost must be added the destruction visited upon cities, industry, and cultural treasures. The cities of Stuttgart, Darmstadt, Braunschweig, Würzburg, Kiel, Hildesheim, Ulm, Mainz, Dresden, and Potsdam were all laid to ruin after the coup attempt, most of them having already suffered gravely in earlier bombing raids.”

“The lack of a comprehensive view, which is so integral to these events, has eroded the legacy of the German resistance. That legacy lies not in the political views of the opposition but rather in the insights that the plot to assassinate Hitler - like all momentous historical occurrences - offers us into the thoughts and actions of people operating under the most extreme circumstances. The fact that the subjects of this book failed in the end, after many attempts, does not in any way detract from their memory or from the example that they set.”*

[Joachim Fest; ‘Killing Hitler. The German Resistance to Hitler, 1933-45]

Further reading

Lammers, Karl Kristian; **‘Hitler’s modstandere’** [Hitler’s opponents], 1996

Manwell & Fraenkel; **‘The July Plot’**, 1964

Fest, Joachim; **‘Plotting Hitler’s Death’**, 1996

Misch, Rochus; **‘Der Letzte Zeuge’**, 2009

Junge, Traudl; **‘Until the Final Hour’**, 2002

von Kardorff, Ursula; **‘Diary of a Nightmare, Berlin 1942-45’**, 1963

Gisevius, Hans-Bernd; **‘Til den bitre ende’** [Zum bitteren Ende], 1948

Holocaust Encyclopedia website; German Military Oaths

After the Battle Magazine, Special Issue 19, 1977

Traces of War website; Assault and coup of July 20th, 1944

German Resistance Memorial Center: <https://www.gdw-berlin.de/en/home/>

An excellent facebook page:

<https://www.facebook.com/GermanResistance1933.1945>

List of attempts on Hitler:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_assassination_attempts_on_Adolf_Hitler

Notes:

¹ Hitler’s machinations to get rid of some high-echelon officers in the Wehrmacht were a contributing reason.

² Britain’s (and France’s) policy of appeasement, a result of war-weariness and the horrors of the Great War, 1914-18, would eventually work counter-productive and encourage Hitler to ever increasing demands. Concluding the Munich Agreement gave Hitler control with the (fortified) Czech border (and subsequently the rest of the country).

³ SturmAbteilung – Storm Detachment – was a paramilitary section of the NSDAP, largely composed of uniformed thugs, barflies and losers. They played a major role in Hitler’s ascend to power, but had by the early thirties grown both in numbers (some four million) and in ambitions, perceiving themselves as equals or even superior to the regular armed forces. Consequently, they had to be curbed and that happened on the night of June 30, 1934, where the S.A. leadership under Ernst Röhm was eradicated during the so-called ‘blood-purge’.

⁴ For us, the children of Western liberal democracy, it is hard to fathom the importance of this oath and the impact on the mind of the ‘Führerprinzip’ [Leader Principle], but for a Prussian officer in 1944, to break his oath was for many, for most actually, a virtually impossible act. Even more surprisingly, the oath was not a brainchild of Hitler himself or the NSDAP, it was proposed by high ranking officers in the Wehrmacht.

⁵ On March 13 that same year he had attempted to blow up Hitler’s plane after a visit to the front at Smolensk, but the bomb failed to detonate. Another attempt just a week later at the Zeughaus by a volunteer suicide bomber, one colonel Gersdorff, misfired, as Hitler suddenly changed his plans and left the place early (and the courageous colonel had to rush to the bathroom to disarm the bomb).

⁶ Originally of the Gestapo, he became a member of the resistance and worked for the Abwehr from his consular base in Switzerland. Trapped in Germany for several months after 20 July. Escaped to Switzerland January 1945. His memoirs are an important source of information about the resistance.

⁷ Formerly German Ambassador in Rome; became with Beck and Goerdeler one of the leading figures in the resistance among the older generation. Arrested 28 July and executed September 1944. His diary is a principal source of information.

⁸ Chief of the Army General Staff; resigned 1938. An outstanding member of the older generation in the German resistance movement; nominated to become Head of State after the coup d’état. Was allowed by Fromm to commit suicide on 20 July 1944, but failed and was shot by an army officer.

⁹ Stauffenberg's adjutant; accompanied him to Rastenburg on 20 July. Executed on Fromm's orders alongside Stauffenberg.

¹⁰ Former Mayor of Leipzig and for a while Price Control Commissioner in Hitler's government. From 1937 the principal advocate of resistance among the older generation and a tireless propagandist for a new government to replace that of Hitler. Arrested August 1944 and executed February 1945.

¹¹ The Versailles Treaty of 1919, that had imposed very harsh peace terms on Germany, was widely considered a humiliation in the officers' corps and Hitler's rejection of the treaty was in part what made him – initially - palatable to the Army.

¹² The castle is today a museum dedicated to the German Resistance.

¹³ Another condition for a successful attempt had originally been that Heinrich Himmler, Head of SS and – if possible – Reichsmarshal Hermann Göring should be killed in the same blow, but realizing their absence, the conspirators chose to carry on anyway.

¹⁴ According to Rochus Misch, he and his fellow FBK guards were issued a special 'Open Sesame' pass that granted unimpeded access to all areas.

¹⁵ Rochus Misch describes how mines scattered in the forest would frequently go off when some animal released a tripwire.

¹⁶ The whole matter about the bombs and why one charge was not applied is shrouded in the fog of history. Some historians claim that the second bomb was just an 'auxiliary' device, others that Stauffenberg was caught in flagranti while arming the bombs and had to abort, others again that two bombs would have made his briefcase bulky and suspicious. Whatever the truth, the only people who really knew died that same evening.

¹⁷ It is often claimed that the choice of the hut was a surprise for Stauffenberg and that it contributed to the unsuccessful outcome of the attempt. This is contested by Joachim Fest. According to him, the noon conference had taken place in the 'Speer Hut' for quite some time as Hitler bunker was undergoing refurbishment. Furthermore, Stauffenberg had been in Wolfsschanze just a week before (July 15) where the conference also took place in the hut.

¹⁸ In most accounts, Stauffenberg carry the briefcase into the room and places it in position A. It is subsequently moved by Colonel Brandt to position B. Fest claims that Stauffenberg let Major Freyend, Keitel's adjutant, carry the briefcase and that it was he who placed it under the table. Freyend survived both the explosion and the war, so Fest may have his information from the horse's mouth.

¹⁹ In all likelihood, Stauffenberg made this up to support his claim that Hitler was dead to his fellow conspirators to bolster their resolve. Several minutes passed before any organized help was given to the victims in the hut and at that point in time, Stauffenberg and Haefen was on their way to the airstrip.

²⁰ Whether Fellgiebel in fact managed to make the call or not, it to this day not fully clarified. Code words as to whether the attempt had been set in motion or Stauffenberg had relented had been agreed, but no secret word in the case that the bomb did go off but failed to kill Hitler had been thought of. Thus, if Fellgiebel should convey that message, it would have to be in veiled terms; a very dangerous undertaking that would invariably besmirch himself to the eavesdropping Gestapo. Most likely, no call was performed.

²¹ Fritz Fromm. Colonel-General and Commander-in-Chief of the Reserve Army. Refused to support the officers at the Bendlerstrasse on 20 July and placed under arrest by them. Subsequently executed Olbricht, Stauffenberg and their immediate supporters, and induced Beck to commit suicide. Was himself arrested; tried and executed March 1945.

²² A half-baked attempt was performed, but, owing to the absence of the conspirators own technical experts, the station manager bamboozled the major in command of the unit into believing that all broadcast had been shut down, when in fact several communiqués from Wolfsschanze were aired shortly after.

²³ In the movie Valkyrie, Stauffenberg only manage to prime one bomb before he is told to hurry up by an annoyed Keitel. According to Manwell & Kraenken, the second charge was

just an auxiliary in case something went wrong with the first one (whatever that is supposed to mean).

²⁴ In Fellgiebel's defense it was no easy matter, as the communication system was comprehensive and sophisticated. It is unclear whether he actually tried and to what extent, but post-war estimates that to secure a complete cut-off would have required a team of 20-30 men. In one account, the SD took control of communications, sidelining Fellgiebel.

²⁵ Before July 20 was over, Major Remer had made Colonel.

²⁶ In the American movie 'Valkyrie', Werner von Haeften throws himself in front of Stauffenberg, taking the bullets. This scenario is purported by historian Joachim Fest, but the source is not disclosed. Sounds a bit 'Hollywood' to me, but then again; Haeften was a devout admirer of his superior.

²⁷ One July 20 defendant, Fabian von Schlabrendorff, escaped the noose when Freisler was killed during a major USAAF air-raid on the morning of February 3, 1945, the very day Schlabrendorff was standing trial. When the siren sounded, Freisler ordered all into the air raid shelter, but stayed behind to collect his files. That cost him his life and with the infamous judge gone, executions ground to a hold.