

A Symbol in German History

The July Plot to Kill Hitler

There are key moments in history when individuals are faced with difficult moral choices, and when decisions have to be made to set wrongs right, even if it means killing in the name of a higher cause.

One such moment occurred in Germany, nine months before the end of the Second World War. Even before the Allies had landed on the beaches of Normandy in June 1944, it was obvious to many high-ranking German military that the war was lost.

We now know that not all Germans were Nazis, even if many were complicit in its crimes, and that not all German generals admired or respected Hitler. But in the West, and certainly in the East, that was far from a given. In 1944, there was a tendency to confound Germany, the war and Nazism so that all Germans became Nazis.

Because of that, and in the face of certain defeat, a small group of men made up of high-ranking officers as well as a number of prominent civilians in opposition to the Nazis felt it important for the future of their country to eliminate Hitler and negotiate peace with the Allies. Or at least to make a moral gesture, to attempt to overthrow the Nazi government and replace it with a civilian one. They concocted a plot to kill Hitler with a bomb.

The most prominent figure to have emerged from this group of opponents was a fairly obscure officer by the name of Claus Schenk Graf von Stauffenberg. He was given the almost impossible mission of killing Hitler. Many had tried before, and all had

failed. In the current Hollywood version of these events, Valkyrie, in which Stauffenberg is played by Tom Cruise, the film does a respectable job at showing why the conspirators decided to kill Hitler, how they went about it, and where it went frustratingly, painfully wrong.

As had happened so often in the past, luck was on Hitler's side. The meeting in which the explosion was planned to go off did not take place in a concrete bunker, as expected, but rather in a wooden building with large windows that were left open. That diminished the blast and allowed pressure to escape. The briefcase containing the explosive was moved slightly away from Hitler, to the opposite side of a heavy table leg, thus deflecting the blast.

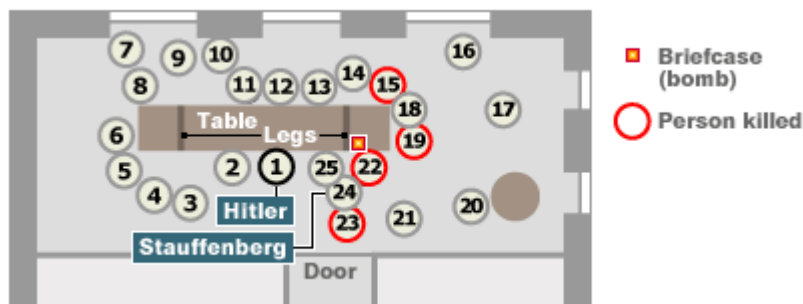
What the film does not show, however, are the thousands later rounded up and killed by the Nazis in a frenzy of revenge killing that lasted months. More than 5,000 people were arrested. Around 200 were executed, many hung with piano wire from meat hooks. Just about everybody in the country with the surname 'Stauffenberg' was arrested and shot, regardless of whether they were involved in the plot or not.

The key here is that Stauffenberg not only possessed considerable energy and singularity of purpose, but that he chose to act in the knowledge that the chances of success were slim, and that he and his family could very well die as a consequence. It is that principle — the willingness to sacrifice one's own life for the greater good — which makes him deserving of history's interest.

How moments like that are used in national histories, however, can subvert their meaning. Germans today prefer to see themselves not as perpetrators responsible for some of the worst crimes of the twentieth century, but rather as victims of the Nazi state. This trend can be seen in a number of recent films such as Downfall (), and

Sophie Scholl, about a 21-year-old student who was executed for distributing anti-Nazi leaflets at Munich university.

This was not just another failed assassination attempt against Hitler. It was a group of men and women who went against the grain, who acted out of a sense of moral conviction, and who acted in the face of death.



- Stauffenberg placed a briefcase bomb under the oak table and left
- One of the table's two heavy supports shielded Hitler from the blast

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| 1. Adolf Hitler | 15. Stenographer Heinrich Berger (<i>killed</i>) |
| 2. Field Marshall Wilhelm Keitel | 16. Rear Adm Karl-Jesco von Puttkamer (<i>injured</i>) |
| 3. Gen Alfred von Jodl | 17. Gen Walther Buhle |
| 4. Gen Walter Warlimont | 18. Lt Col Heinrich Borgmann (<i>injured</i>) |
| 5. Franz von Sonnleithner | 19. Gen Rudolf Schmunt (<i>killed</i>) |
| 6. Maj Herbert Buchs | 20. Lt Col Heinz Waizenegger |
| 7. Stenographer Heinz Buchholz | 21. Gen Karl Bodenschatz (<i>injured</i>) |
| 8. Lt Gen Hermann Fegelein | 22. Col Heinz Brandt (<i>killed</i>) |
| 9. Col Nikolaus von Below | 23. Gen Gunther Korten (<i>killed</i>) |
| 10. Rear Adm Hans-Erich Voss | 24. Col Claus von Stauffenberg |
| 11. Otto Gunsche, Hitler's adjutant | 25. Gen Adolf Heusinger (<i>injured</i>) |
| 12. Gen Walter Scherff (<i>injured</i>) | |

13. Gen Ernst John von Freyend

14. Capt Heinz Assman (*injured*)

Source: BBC News, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/3897885.stm>