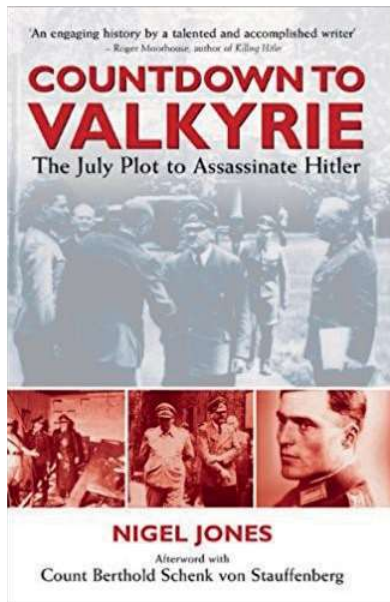


Book Review



Nigel Jones, *Countdown to Valkyrie: The July Plot to Assassinate Hitler*, (London: Frontline Books), 2008, 308 pages.

By **Oliver Cheok**

INTRODUCTION

A common misconception about Germany during World War II (WWII) is that the country was unanimously in support of the fascist Nazi regime. In reality, such a generalisation is not only unfair, but factually untrue as well. One might be surprised to learn that there were over 40 attempts by German resistance to assassinate Adolf Hitler, Führer of Germany, leader of the Nazi political party and dictator of the German Reich.¹

Of these 40 assassination attempts, none came closer to success than the 20 July Plot, led by Colonel Claus von Stauffenberg. Unfortunately, due to a combination of pure bad luck and human error, the plot was ultimately a failure, and most of its perpetrators executed. Nigel Jones's *Countdown to Valkyrie: The July Plot to Assassinate Hitler* gives a comprehensive account of

the events leading up to and the aftermath of the assassination attempt, as well as detailed biographies of all personnel involved.²

EARLY LIFE OF COLONEL CLAUD VON STAUFFENBERG

Claus was born on 15th November, 1907, the youngest of four children born to Alfred and Caroline von Stauffenberg. He had two older twin brothers, Alexander and Berthold. Tragically, Claus's own twin brother, Konrad, died shortly after childbirth, on the day of birth.

Born to a wealthy family of nobility, he was afforded a thorough education, but decided to join the military in 1926, against protests from his father. Stauffenberg was likely influenced by his time as a scout as well as his family's rich history in the army. Claus had always been so adamant on joining the army

that in 1914, at the tender age of seven, while Germany was mobilising for war, he cried at the thought that it would be over before he would be old enough to fight. Later on, after serving for 4 years in different regiments and schools, Claus commissioned as a junior officer in 1930.³

THE RISE OF HITLER'S NAZIS

Historical texts hint at the idea that even in its infancy, Stauffenberg was not a fan of Nazism. While sympathetic toward its aims of economic reconstruction and rearmament, Claus was purportedly hesitant about its doctrinal discrimination against Jews. Nonetheless, Claus opted to take a wait-and-see attitude toward the Nazi political party in order to cement his allegiance. In addition, Claus had other things on his mind, being promoted to full Lieutenant in 1933 and marrying his wife, Nina von Lerchenfeld, shortly after.⁴

EARLY YEARS OF THE NAZI REGIME

With incredible speed, the Nazi dictatorship took over the entire country. Through a process known as *Gleichschaltung*, all organisations and people were subject to the authority of the new regime. All political parties save the Nazi Socialist German

Worker's Party were outlawed. Millions of Germans lived in fear of the German secret police, the *Geheime Staatspolizei* or *Gestapo* for short.⁵

Meanwhile, Claus von Stauffenberg continued to rise through the ranks in the military, during the period Hitler openly declared that Germany was preparing for war, establishing compulsory conscription and allocating resources to the armed forces.

The military restructuring was completed on 4th February, 1938, when Hitler passed a decree appointing himself the supreme commander of the *Wehrmacht*, or German military. Shortly thereafter, the German army began crossing the Austrian border on 12th March, 1938, forcibly taking control. Germany then set her sights on Czechoslovakia.⁶

Hitler subsequently continued his invasion of European territories, taking control of the remainder of Czechoslovakia as well as Poland. Stauffenberg was not alone in his disgust, and resentment against the Nazi regime grew among those in the military. This was perhaps worsened by the fact that Hitler used military force liberally, not affording his soldiers enough time to rest between assaults.⁷

EARLY ATTEMPTS ON HITLER'S LIFE

Resentment against the Führer was so great that the idea of a putsch started to gain traction among *Wehrmacht* officials. This included Army Chief of Staff Halder, who purportedly always carried a pistol when going to see Hitler.⁸ However, attempts to act on these conspiratorial thoughts almost always saw plotters getting cold feet.

By 1942, Stauffenberg's allegiance to the Nazi government had all but vanished. He concluded that Germany was on its way to calamity and that it was morally justified to kill Hitler rather than let him remain in power. This was the start of Stauffenberg's involvement in the resistance.

Shortly thereafter, having been posted to North Africa to join the 10th Panzer Division as Operations Officer, Stauffenberg sustained multiple severe wounds when fighter bombers from the Royal Australian Air Force strafed his vehicle. After three months in hospital care, Stauffenberg survived, but lost his left eye, right hand and left hand. He was awarded the Wound Badge in Gold as well as the German Cross.⁹

OPERATION SPARK

Brigadier-General Henning von Tresckow was the chief conspirator in the 20 July Plot, otherwise known as Operation Valkyrie. However, he also spearheaded a number of attempts on Hitler's life prior to the ill-fated plot in question in 1944. Operation Spark is an umbrella term used to refer to these attempts between 1943 and early 1944.

Operation Spark was named after the idea that Hitler's death would provide a 'spark' and trigger the collapse of the Nazi regime. Tresckow believed that while Hitler was alive it would be impossible to overthrow him, by writ of his charisma, numerous successes and the oath of loyalty all Wehrmacht officers had to swear to him.

On a routine visit to *Werwolf*, his field headquarters in Ukraine in February, 1943, Tresckow had arranged with his co-conspirators to smuggle a small explosive in the plane that Hitler was to fly out in. The bomb was smuggled on board disguised as two bottles of Cointreau, an orange-flavored liquor. The bomb was an improvisation of a time bomb created by the British, and consisted of plastic explosives and a pencil detonator.¹⁰

The detonator contained a copper tube filled with copper chloride. The copper chloride was to take approximately 10 minutes to corrode a wire holding back the bomb's firing pin from its percussion cap. The method of delay was meant to make it stealthier, by avoiding the ticking sound of a clock as well as the smell from a burning fuse. Unfortunately, the method of detonation also ultimately rendered it ineffective due to the cold temperature.

Tresckow arranged for the bomb to be placed on board the plane by his aide, Schlabrendorff. It was to detonate while the plane was near Russian airspace over Minsk, such that it could be attributed to Soviet fighters.

Upon news of Hitler's death, General Friedrich Olbricht was to impose martial law across the country and assume control. This was the precursor to the 20 July Plot, where a similar ploy was planned. However, as fate would have it, the altitude meant that it was too cold for the percussion cap to activate the explosion, and it did not explode. The bomb was later recovered by members of resistance to avoid its discovery. Stauffenberg would later use the same type of bomb in the 20 July attempt on Hitler's life.

EVENTS BEFORE THE 20TH JULY PLOT

After rehabilitating in his home in one of the Stauffenberg castles in southern Germany, Claus was inducted into the team of conspirators and introduced to Tresckow. He was subsequently posted to the *Ersatzheer* where Olbricht was his direct superior.

Olbricht and Stauffenberg recognised that the *Ersatzheer* could be used in a plot to assume control of the Reich. This was because of Operation Valkyrie, a contingency plan which involved imposing martial law over Germany in the event of political turmoil.¹¹ Operation Valkyrie was meant to ensure that anti-Nazi political parties did not assume control in a political vacuum if the Nazi government were to fall. The conspirators approached Colonel-General Friedrich Fromm, Chief of the *Ersatzheer*, for his support. However, Fromm neither reported them nor agreed to help, instead holding out to see to whom his allegiance would pay the most dividends.¹²

Olbricht believed that the Valkyrie plans could be adjusted such that it would support a coup. This involved spreading a bogus message that Hitler had been assassinated by fellow party leaders, thus activating Operation

Valkyrie to assume control. Between August and September 1943, the conspirators revised the official Valkyrie plans to tailor it to the coup.¹³

Stauffenberg personally went to see the Führer to endorse the amended plan. Hitler signed off without reading the proposal, saying that he was sure it was for the best. The most important factor in the balance was the act of actually killing Hitler, who had thus far managed to evade all attempts on his life. Hitler's paranoia had saved his life on more than one occasion. The only remaining option was another time bomb.¹⁴

20TH JULY PLOT

On the 14th and 15th of July, Stauffenberg made two more attempts on Hitler's life. On the first day, at a military conference, the plan was aborted because Hitler's right-hand men, Heinrich Himmler and Herman Göring, were not present. It was decided that for the coup to be effective, the entire trio would have to be eliminated. However, with dwindling time, the condition was dropped the next day, and Stauffenberg was to kill Hitler in the *Wolfsschanze*, or Wolf's Lair, Hitler's base.

Once again, fate intervened and the second attempt proved a failure as well. This was because

Hitler was called out of the room at the last moment, after the bomb had already been activated and Stauffenberg had made his leave. Stauffenberg was only just barely able to make it back to the room to intercept and defuse the bomb.¹⁵

The third and final attempt was also to be held in the Wolf's Lair, a week later on 20th July. The attempt was rushed because false rumors had spread that the Gestapo had discovered the plot and were going to arrest the conspirators. Once again, Stauffenberg flew down with the 2-pounds of explosives safely stowed in his briefcase. Upon arrival, Werner von Haeften supplied him with an additional 2-pound explosive. Shortly before the meeting, Stauffenberg excused himself to arm the bombs, saying that that he needed to adjust his bearings.

The subsequent assassination attempt was unsuccessful due to a combination of reasons. Firstly, the meeting's location was changed from an underground bunker to a windowed hut, which would disperse the blast. Time restraints also only allowed Stauffenberg to arm one of the two two-pound bombs. Lastly, a colonel at the meeting accidentally kicked over the briefcase and restored it on the other side of the table leg,

made of thick oak. Modern experts agree that if any of these variables had been otherwise Hitler would certainly not have survived. The bomb exploded at exactly 12:42 p.m.¹⁶

While the meeting was taking place, Stauffenberg took flight with General Erich Fellgiebel, whose job it had been to cut communications from the Wolf's Lair after the detonation. Stauffenberg witnessed the explosion from a distance and assumed Hitler dead. In reality, the table leg had proven thick enough to shield Hitler sufficiently from the blast. Upon landing in Berlin at around 4 pm, Stauffenberg learnt that Hitler had survived the blast and his co-conspirators had not activated Operation Valkyrie due to conflicting information. Olbricht eventually put his foot down and issued orders for Operation Valkyrie to be mobilised.¹⁷

Subsequently, all over German-occupied territory, members of the Reserve Army were mobilising and taking control, arresting high-ranking government officials. With communications back up, Himmler issued orders to disregard Olbricht's and cease Operation Valkyrie, although the coup was still in full effect in many areas. At around 7 p.m., Hitler had

recovered enough to start making phone calls, and spread the word that he was still alive, quickly putting an end to the coup.¹⁸

Many of the conspirators had at this point decided to switch sides, and Chief of the Reserve Army Fromm was able to regain control. In order to save himself, and avoid implicit participation in the plot, Fromm quickly ordered executions of all personnel involved, disregarding specific instructions from Hitler to keep all plotters alive. Fromm himself was later found out and sentenced to death as well.¹⁹

Thus, the closest plot to kill Hitler to ever come to fruition ultimately failed.

CONCLUSION

All things considered, Nigel Jones's book offers the reader a very enjoyable reading experience, and serves as a comprehensive one-book-summary of the German resistance as well as Stauffenberg's life. *Countdown to Valkyrie: The July Plot to Assassinate Hitler* is incredibly readable and comes across more like a narrative rather than a regular old history textbook. The events within its pages are so exciting and nail-biting that it could easily be mistaken for a work of fiction.

The book is also almost completely based on primary sources and is widely considered to be one of the most accurate accounts of the German resistance among experts. I recommend this book to anyone keen on finding out more about Nazi Germany and the realities of living in it.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Jones, N. (2008). *Countdown to Valkyrie: the July plot to assassinate Hitler*. Barnsley: Frontline.
- 2 Ibid., 281.
- 3 Ibid., 23.
- 4 Ibid., 27.
- 5 Ibid., 32.
- 6 Ibid., 56.
- 7 Ibid., 80.
- 8 Ibid., 284.
- 9 Ibid., 152-155.
- 10 Ibid., 138.
- 11 Ibid., 158-159.
- 12 Ibid., 160-161.
- 13 Ibid., 199.
- 14 Ibid., 158-160.
- 15 Ibid., 180-182.
- 16 Ibid., 192.
- 17 Ibid., 201-203.
- 18 Ibid., 216.
- 19 Ibid., 283.