

Hitler's would-be assassin

Were von Stauffenberg's motives heroic or high treason?

Key concept

Role of the individual

Before you read this

Consider what German people were thinking in 1943–44 about the war and their Führer's conduct of it as Germany suffered defeat after defeat at the hands of the Allies. Also, think about high treason; what is it? What drives people to attempt assassination?

The events of 20 July 1944 are attractive to a filmmaker. The plot to blow up Adolf Hitler and to capture control of the Third Reich was spectacular and almost succeeded. The bomb, placed in a briefcase, exploded in Hitler's briefing room at the Wolf's Lair military base in East Prussia. The powerful blast blew apart the prefabricated building, leaving the Führer with badly burned legs, a partly paralysed arm and damaged eardrums. It would only have taken a few relatively minor changes to the course of events for Claus von Stauffenberg to have actually killed Hitler. Had the briefcase not been placed behind the legs of a heavy wooden table, maybe Hitler would have been mortally wounded. Had the briefing that day happened in an underground concrete bunker, the shock waves from the bomb would have been confined, perhaps killing the Führer outright.

Though Claus von Stauffenberg's youth and physical war wounds made him an improbable hero, it is not easy to unravel why he chose this path. Today it is tempting to see the assassination attempt as a relatively unproblematic 'good' act to stop the perpetration of 'evil'. Removing Hitler can easily be seen as a step towards stopping wartime atrocities and replacing conflict with peace. For Stauffenberg, however, the bomb plot came at the end of a long and complicated personal journey.

After all, this was high treason, something to give any soldier pause for thought, and Stauffenberg was a member of an officer corps that prided



Claus von Stauffenberg and Albrecht von Quinheim in Ukraine, 1942.

A German soldier in front of a burning farm building, Russia 1941.



primary sources: for historians these consist of letters and other documents, photographs, etc. relating to and contemporary with the subject.

Claus von Stauffenberg (1907–1944)

- 15 November 1907** Born into an old, aristocratic Catholic family in Jettingen, Schwabia, southern Germany.
Attends Gymnasium (grammar school) in Stuttgart, which gives his brothers and him a high-powered classical education.
- 1926** Joins the Army.
- May 1933** Made lieutenant.
- 1936–38** Attends the Berlin War Academy.
- January 1937** Promoted to captain of the Cavalry.
- May 1940** Receives the Iron Cross First Class.
- 1 January 1941** Becomes a major.
- January 1943** Promoted to lieutenant colonel.
- April 1943** Fights in Tunisia and is so badly wounded that he loses one eye and is left with arms and hands so severely disabled that a special apparatus has to be designed to enable him to prime the briefcase bomb.
- 20 July 1944** Attempts to assassinate Hitler and is shot by firing squad shortly after capture.

Von Stauffenberg's oath for a 'New Order'

We know that the German has powers which designate him to lead the community of the occidental [western] nations towards a more beautiful life....

We want a New Order which makes all Germans supporters of the state and guarantees them law and justice, but we scorn the lie of equality and we bow before the hierarchies established by nature....

We unite in an inseparable community which, through its bearing and actions, serves the New Order and forms for the leaders of the future the fighters whom they will need....

itself on loyalty, duty and obedience. Rules could never be broken lightly, no matter what the cause. More practically, Germany was at war, so a dramatic revolutionary act was all the more difficult to justify because it might split the armed forces in support of or against what was done, leaving the country weakened in the face of the enemy. In the Third Reich, what is more, there was the chance that treason would result not only in the perpetrator being punished personally, but their whole family too.

Putting all of these points together, we can see there is a real challenge to understand why Stauffenberg acted as he did. To complicate matters further, Stauffenberg's biographer, Peter Hoffmann, says the following:

They [the Stauffenberg brothers] were extraordinarily unlike their contemporaries... The fact emerges strongly from the **primary sources**. The more closely a witness was acquainted with the Stauffenbergs, the more cautious he was in describing them, in uttering judgements beyond respect, admiration and acknowledgement of the extraordinary in them. This was particularly true for Claus and his whole, harmonious personality.

How should we understand the actions of this enigmatic person? How did he become Hitler's would-be assassin?

Youthful élitism

An essay written when Stauffenberg was 15 gives an insight into how he had begun to think. It

said, 'There is only one noble profession which the great Greeks and Romans showed us and which the [Medieval] knights exemplified in its supreme form: to become worthy of the Fatherland, to fight for the Fatherland and then to sacrifice yourself in the supreme battle for the nation.' Nor was this the idle fantasy of a rich, dilettante teenager imagining a charismatic life for himself. From an early time, Stauffenberg was more seriously committed to the ideal behind the words than you might expect.

Egalitarianism was hardly part of Stauffenberg's developing personality. Although he recognised responsibility towards the wider community, this was not because he thought he was equal to everyone else. He understood himself to be a member of an élite among Germans and, in turn, considered his nation the first among others. This sense of superiority was displayed clearly in an oath that he drafted later in life for his proposed 'New Order', after he had become a resister.

All the talk of a 'New Order' might be surprising coming from someone who would try to kill Hitler, but it was intimately linked to Stauffenberg's patriotism and Romanticism. Nevertheless, the point does highlight an irony: the resister who came closest to assassinating the Führer probably had a lot in common with at least some of his politics.

Almost a Nazi

As a young man, Stauffenberg was drawn towards National Socialism. He joined the Army in 1926 and by the time he was a 22 year-old junior officer, he supported Nazism as the best political force for Germany. He favoured rearmament, the expansion of the Army and the unification of all ethnic Germans within new Reich borders. Unsurprisingly, Stauffenberg greeted Hitler's chancellorship with enthusiasm and on the evening of 30 January 1933, dressed in full military uniform, even let himself be swept along at the head of a torchlight procession. A relative of von Stauffenberg's wife, Nina, later remembered her family's surprise at the 20 July plot, because they thought Stauffenberg was the only real Nazi in the family.

During the Third Reich, Claus von Stauffenberg's military career went from strength to strength. While Hitler's unbalanced attitude towards Czechoslovakia in 1938 turned older, more senior military figures such as General Ludwig Beck (the 20 July conspirators' choice as an alternative head of state) against the Third Reich, Stauffenberg did not yet suffer a crisis of conscience. In September 1939, he participated in the assault on Poland. Showing little doubt in the correctness of the campaign, he wrote home:

The population is an unbelievable rabble. There are a lot of Jews and lots of crossbreeds. It is a people which only feels good when it is under the whip. The thousands of prisoners

will do our farming economy the world of good. They will certainly be put to good use in Germany, where they will be industrious, willing and easily satisfied.

Stauffenberg knew from an early point that the war involved atrocities — although initially he only knew of ones committed by the USSR against Poles. He once said, 'This war is truly a scourge of God for the entire Polish upper class...Many of them will go to Siberia.' But he remained a loyal soldier, receiving an Iron Cross First Class in May 1940 and he became a major on 1 January 1941. So why did he become a committed resister?

People can decide to do something for one simple reason, but it is always likely that important decisions will be much more complex than this. They can be based on multiple motives and it is likely that Stauffenberg's attempt on Hitler's life was just such a complicated action that grew out of several different lines of reasoning. If this were not enough, it is not at all easy to assess the balance of importance between them.

The Jewish question

Stauffenberg's biographer, Peter Hoffmann, believes that Stauffenberg became a determined resister when the Third Reich was still at its military height — that is to say, relatively early in 1942. That May, Lieutenant Hans Herwarth von Bittenfeld, who had served in campaigns in Poland and Russia, told him about the mass murder of Jews.

Romanticism: in this context, self-reference to the ideals of the Greeks, Romans and Medieval Teutonic knights. The poet Goethe and Wagner's operas were strong influences on the movement.

Key points

- The plot to kill Hitler and capture control of the Third Reich nearly succeeded and left Hitler badly wounded.
- Claus von Stauffenberg was a successful career army officer, part of a corps which prided itself on loyalty, duty and obedience; rules could never be broken lightly, whatever the cause.
- Stauffenberg initially supported National Socialism, favouring rearmament and expansion of the Army (against the terms of the 1919 Treaty of Versailles) and the unification of all ethnic Germans within new Reich borders.
- Although unmoved by the plight of the Poles following the September 1939 invasion, Stauffenberg became increasingly disgusted by the mass murder of Jews. He felt that Hitler should be removed and that senior officers should do it.
- He also thought that Hitler's military tactics following the attack of the USSR were ill-considered. Hitler wanted to capture Moscow, Leningrad and Stalingrad but deprived the armed forces of sufficient manpower and resources to achieve victory in any of these battlegrounds.
- Stauffenberg also thought the inhumane way the eastern campaign was conducted doomed it to failure because the Germans treated the captured Russians badly, thus alienating potential allies against Stalin; he deemed this criminally negligent.
- The conspirators' aims were unrealistic. They were too marginal to achieve a takeover of the Third Reich had Hitler died, besides which, they had failed to approach the Allies to discuss peace. Instead, they composed a list of conditions for negotiations with the Allies likely to be dismissed by them as unacceptable.

The website of the German Resistance Memorial Centre, based in what used to be Bendlerstrasse, Berlin (renamed Stauffenbergstrasse) can be found at: www.gdw-berlin.de/ged/geschichte-e.php.

Another useful site can be found at: www.historylearningsite.co.uk/july_bomb_plot.htm.

It would be an interesting exercise to read up resistance to Hitler on these sites then to see the recent Tom Cruise film, *Valkyrie*, to judge just how accurately the film portrays events and Stauffenberg's character.

In the same month, Stauffenberg received an eye-witness report from an officer about SS men rounding up Jews in a Ukrainian town, leading them to a field, ordering them to dig their own graves, and then shooting them. Immediately afterwards, he commented that Hitler had to be removed and that senior officers had a duty to bring this about.

War in the east

Stauffenberg's crisis over the Jewish question was compounded by the leadership of the war in the east. There was the question of strategy. In 1941, Germany attacked the USSR along a massive front stretching from the Baltic to the Black Sea. Hitler did not want to capture only one achievable military objective (such as a given major city); he was pursuing three all at once: Leningrad in the north, Moscow in the centre and Stalingrad in the south. He wanted everything or nothing at all. The scale of his ambition, coupled with insufficient manpower, further sapped Stauffenberg's commitment to the regime.

There was also the way the eastern campaign was fought. In October 1942, Stauffenberg attended a

military conference in Vinnitsa, Ukraine, where he delivered a lengthy 'off the cuff' speech explaining why Germany's policy in the USSR was doomed to fail. Originally, many of the region's peoples had welcomed the invading Germans as liberators from communism, but now they were the subject of atrocities. The shocking treatment of eastern prisoners of war and civilians was changing everyone from potential allies against Stalin into convinced enemies of Germany. Although Stauffenberg did not say as much in Vinnitsa, he thought German actions were criminally negligent.

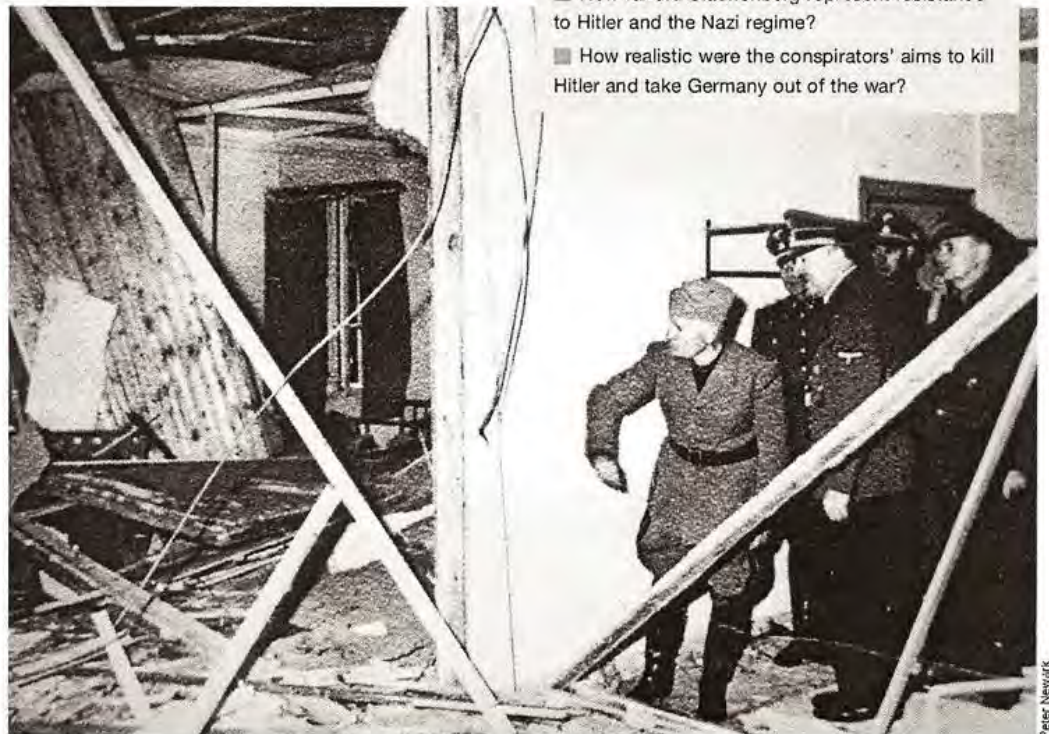
Patriotism

Even before he was injured in Tunisia, Stauffenberg had begun sounding out generals to see if any were prepared to act against Hitler. Their reluctance convinced him that colonels had to accept the responsibility. Stauffenberg had been promoted lieutenant-colonel in January 1943 and his deep, personally-felt patriotism confirmed that, despite his atrocious wounds, he had to do what he could to make a difference.

With the war going less and less well for his country, he said, 'I could never look the wives and children of the fallen in the eye if I did not do some-

Questions

- If Stauffenberg was so aware of the nobility of his birth and imbued with military idealism, would not murder be out of character? So was his assassination attempt in character or out of it?
- How far did Stauffenberg represent resistance to Hitler and the Nazi regime?
- How realistic were the conspirators' aims to kill Hitler and take Germany out of the war?



Hitler shows Mussolini the bomb damage to the briefing room.

Peter Newark

