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20 July: Conspirators linked with Claus Schenk Graf von Stauffenberg attempt to overthrow the Nazi dictatorship

In every dictatorship, there are people who protest against oppression and state terror. Various forms of resistance are also not unknown in Germany during National Socialism. Sometimes, the resistance consists of perilous help for the persecuted, other times in listening to banned programs produced by Feindsender, or enemy radio stations, or in as apparently simple an action as refusing to give the Hitlergruß (Hitler or Nazi salute). The regime punishes resistance of any form extremely severely. However, they do not force anyone to commit crimes, to make money from neighbours' possessions, to build a career at the cost of those who are marginalised, or to execute people of the Jewish faith on the Eastern Front. In this way, refusal to participate actively can be seen to be a passive form of resistance. At the same time, a small few openly and actively offer resistance to the regime. Sophie Scholl, a young student, her brother Hans and a few like-minded people form a resistance group that they call 'White Rose'. They distribute leaflets opposing the regime, but they are betrayed, arrested and executed. Some years earlier, Georg Elser, a Swabian carpenter with links to the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) plans an assassination attempt on Hitler. In November 1939, Elser detonates a bomb in the Bürgerbräukeller in Munich as Hitler is delivering a speech. The bomb detonates and kills a number of people, but not the Führer, who had left the hall earlier than planned. Elser is executed in the Dachau concentration camp shortly before the end of the war. Unlike Sophie Scholl, Elser is barely acknowledged and sinks into oblivion after 1945, largely due to his communist beliefs and because of the other victims of his act. It has only been in recent years that Elser and his courage have been appropriately honoured.



The act of resistance that is best known and most famous today in Germany is, however, undertaken by officers from the German Army, known in Germany as the Wehrmacht. The Wehrmacht is Hitler's most important instrument in the subjugation of Europe and plays no small part in the annihilation of the European Jews. In contrast to the claims after 1945, there is no such thing as a saubere Wehrmacht (clean Wehrmacht) that aimed to defend the fatherland while Hitler and the SS commit crimes. The Wehrmacht and its victories are a crucial prerequisite for the Nazi Regime's murders in the occupied countries. The Wehrmacht is also directly involved in many crimes. Hitler effectively bought the military's loyalty prior to 1939 by instigating large-scale rearmament and the associated complete disregard for the conditions of the Treaty of Versailles. In addition, every German soldier was required to swear a Treueid (an oath of



allegiance) to the Führer, to whom the soldiers commit their life and honour according to ancient tradition. This oath of allegiance represents a moral dilemma that should not be underestimated for many soldiers and officers in the light of the regime's war crimes which simply cannot be overlooked. Nevertheless, so long as the war runs successfully, no really purposeful resistance forms. However, in June 1944, a very different military situation is emerging. On 6 June, American and British troops land in Normandy; since the February 1943 catastrophe of Stalingrad, German troops are in retreat on the Eastern Front. The German defeat is clearly apparent to any soldier with a degree of reasoning. Now is the time to remove Hitler, and thereby avoid total military collapse with a speedy conclusion of peace, thus saving Germany's 'national interest'. There have been a number of previous attempts by German generals to thwart Hitler's plans, but on each occasion they each ultimately founder or fail due to a lack of resolve or unfavourable circumstances. This time, however, the Tyrannenmord (murder of a tyrant) needs to succeed. Over 200 people are privy to the plans, including one General Field Marshall, 19 Generals and a number of senior administrative officers. Some of the conspirators have contact to the Kreisau Circle, a resistance group consisting of officials and aristocrats that is preparing plans for a Catholic-conservative state following Hitler's removal. The assassins' motives on 20 July vary considerably, based on widely different experiences and convictions, but they all share the desire to bring the war to an acceptable end for Germany by means of the assassination. The assassins also want to end the persecution of the European Jews. It is interesting to note that the majority of the assassins are also not democrats; some even dream of the restoration of the monarchy in Germany.



The assassination, code-named 'Operation Valkyrie', is to be carried out by a Colonel in the General Staff, Claus Schenk Graf von Stauffenberg. As a member of the General Staff, Stauffenberg, a professional soldier, belongs to the inner circle of the German military leadership. Stauffenberg is a nationalist patriot, who initially welcomed the successes in the war but, in the face of the war-crimes being committed by the regime, is increasingly turning his back on Hitler. In his youth, Stauffenberg had belonged to the so-called George Circle that had formed around the mystical-elitist poet Stefan George. Stauffenberg positions a case containing a bomb under the meeting table during a briefing with Hitler in 'Wolf's Lair', one of the command posts for Hitler in East Prussia. Following Hitler's death, the plan is that leading Nazis will be detained and the military will be sworn in as the new government. However, the assassination attempt fails. The bomb detonates and kills four participants in the briefing; others are seriously injured, while some - including Hitler - only suffer superficial injuries. The coup is violently suppressed on that same day. Stauffenberg and a number of other conspirators are condemned to death and executed within hours on that same night. In a degrading show trial, further leading conspirators are likewise sentenced to death.

In post-war West Germany, the conspirators of 20 July become central figures in the commemoration of German resistance to Hitler and Nazism. The highly controversial rearmament of Germany and creation of the Bundeswehr German Armed Forces as a successor to the Wehrmacht in the mid-1950s

make it all the more important to have positive military role-models and figures that people can identify with in the Army. Even though the assassins' goals and motivations may not completely correspond with today's democratic concepts or moral beliefs, the fact remains that these men risked and lost their lives in an effort to prevent one of the worst mass-murderers in human history from committing further atrocities.

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