**OPERATION “VALKYRIE”**

Out of all historical figures, *Adolf Hitler* had probably the thickest plot armor. Throughout his political career, **42** attempts at his assassination had been made – and not a single one succeeded. Nearly everyone tried their hand – from peasants of occupied lands, to Hitler’s army high command. There was, however, an attempt that came extremely close to actually killing the führer – the July 1944 bomb plot, also known as *Operation “Valkyrie”*.

By mid-1943, Germany has clearly exhausted its military potential. The three-months long blitzkrieg has turned into three-year long blitzcringe, battle for North Africa has been decisively lost *(as well as Mussolini’s precious Ethiopia),* and Italy was in process of losing Sicily to Allied forces. It could not be proclaimed as the end of Nazism yet, but for many German officers the writing was on the wall – the situation was only going to get worse from that point. They blamed Hitler in leading Germany into disaster, and were actively looking to depose him from power.

Small officer resistance groups existed all the way since 1938, but early plotters could only be characterized as *indecisive and inconsistent* – for example, *Helmuth James von Moltke*, one of the plot leaders, was against killing Hitler and insisted on placing him on trial. Any and all attempts to recruit major political and military figures failed. Ultimately, all attempts to depose the dictator before WW2 were met with an all-around indecision – and, if anything, it made sense. If even the Western powers failed to oppose Hitler, what would make the Germans different?

But as WW2 started, internal anti-Hitler sentiment finally started to pick up steam. The leader of a new conspirational group was General *Henning von Tresckow*, commander of the Army Group Center in Operation Barbarossa. He systematically hired oppositionists into his staff, and by the end of 1942 managed to create a powerful resistance network. His first attempt at assassinating the führer took place in March 1943, and was called *Operation “Spark”*. The plan was to place a bomb in Hitler’s plane, which would blow it up on his flight to Smolensk. However, probably due to the low temperatures outside, the bomb failed to detonate.

During 1943, Tresckow tried to recruit several military figures, such as Field Marshalls *Erich von Manstein*, *Gerd von Rundstedt* and *Günther von Kluge* – but met no success. All 3 of them decided to not pick a side yet – neither joining the resistance, nor reporting the plotters to Gestapo. Even though this is an example of a failure, it shows just how wide anti-Hitler sentiment was, way before the Soviet forces were at the gates of Berlin.

Dodging an attempt after attempt, Hitler was strengthening his security after each one. His inner circle was becoming tighter and tighter, making the chance of success seem dimmer with each time. However, there was one man about to change the status-quo. Meet Lieutenant Colonel *Claus von Stauffenberg*, the protagonist of our story – a Bavarian officer, whose military career began all the way back in 1926. He took part in the annexation of Sudetes, invasion of Poland and Soviet Union, as well as Tunisian campaign. His views on Nazism were conflicting – he was a German nationalist to the bone, and made some *interesting* remarks on Polish Jews. That being said, he disliked Hitler’s policies as too harsh. He had been sitting on this fence until the Night of Long Knives and the Night of Broken Glass (Kristallnacht) – that was when he ultimately realized that Hitler was not there to pursue justice. As a devout Catholic, he was offended by the suppression of religion, as well as escalating genocide of non-Germans.

In 1943, Stauffenberg met Tresckow for the first time. His decisiveness quickly pushed him to the top of the plotters’ circle. When Tresckow was assigned to the Eastern front, thus becoming busier than ever, Stauffenberg was put in charge of planning and executing the assassination.

The new, risky but promising, plan was put forward by *Friedrich Olbricht*, one of the top plotters. It was based on the operational plan *“Valkyrie”*. According to it, *Ersatzheer (the Replacement Army)* could quickly seize power in case of a coup or uprising; however, in Olbricht’s vision, it could be also used to *instigate* the coup itself. Operation “Valkyrie” could only be triggered by Adolf Hitler or *Friedrich Fromm*, commander of the Reserve Army, so the plotters would need to either sway the latter to their side, or force him to comply. After a long time convincing, he agreed to trigger the operational plan, but didn’t promise to stick to any of the sides.

In August-September 1943, Tresckow “revised” the operational plan, enabling a quicker seizure of power, and the changes were approved by Hitler himself. He also wrote supplementary orders for various government ministries, radio stations, military districts and the like. Finally, he wrote a message to be broadcasted on the radio:

*"The Führer Adolf Hitler is dead! A treacherous group of party leaders has attempted to exploit the situation by attacking our embattled soldiers from the rear in order to seize power for themselves."*

Now, what was the overthrow plan? The plotters were to convince the population that SS initiated a coup, arrest or kill SS leadership and major political figures, and seize control of the government. Then, they would contact Allies and try to negotiate peace before the Soviet Union could step into the German heartland.

**Step 1 was to kill Hitler.**

On Thursday, 20th of July 1944, von Stauffenberg attended a military conference at Wolf’s Lair in Eastern Prussia. He was carrying 2 small bombs in his briefcase. Hitler and various generals and officers were to attend. At around 12:30pm he went to washroom and started arming them with detonators. Since he was severely wounded in the campaign for North Africa – *Stauffenberg lost an eye, right hand and several fingers on the left hand* – the process was going very slow. When a guard came knocking on his door, saying the conference was about to begin, Stauffenberg could only arm 1 bomb, which assumingly was still enough to kill most of the people inside the conference room.

Stauffenberg entered the room and quietly placed his briefcase against the table’s leg. After several minutes, he received a planned phone call, which gave him an excuse to leave the room.

At 12:42, the bomb detonated, with force brutal enough for Stauffenberg to believe Hitler couldn’t survive. He fled Wolf’s Lair by car, bluffing his way through 3 checkpoints, and made it to Rastenburg airfield. By 16:00, after a 3-hour flight he landed in Berlin. This delay, however, was enough for another plotter to telegraph that Hitler, in fact, survived. It was still widely believed to be a bluff, though; nevertheless, the operation “Valkyrie” was not triggered immediately, but only upon Stauffenberg’s arrival, wasting the crucial time.

The plotters seized control of radio stations and military districts. They could not broadcast their message, because the person in possession of its only copy, General *Fritz Lindemann*, failed to appear.

General *Carl-Heinrich von Stülpnag*el, military governor of occupied France, disarmed SS and SD and captured most of their leadership. He flew to Günther von Kluge’s headquarters to contact the Allies, only to be informed that Hitler was alive. Learning about that too, Friedrich Fromm, commander of the Replacement Army, attempted to change sides and arrest Stauffenberg, but was quickly restrained at a gunpoint.

No one knew what to do or whom to trust, resulting in a mess of contradicting orders and disorganization. However, even despite all of that, in many places the coup was going ahead of its plan, lead by officers who truly believed Hitler was dead. Berlin commandant and a conspirator *Paul von Hase* ordered to secure Wilhelmstraße and to arrest Joseph Goebbels. Nazi offices in Vienna, Prague and many other cities were occupied. Despite all of that, it all came crashing down.

Soon enough Himmler took charge of the situation, issuing orders to revert the ongoing mobilization. By 7pm, Hitler was medically recovered to be able to make phone calls. As he was ensuring more and more people that he was, in fact, alive, the lesser resolute members of the conspiracy started to change sides. The plotters lost control over Berlin, and failed to secure Paris. Fights broke out in already secured headquarters, and conspirators were soon overwhelmed and arrested. It didn’t take long before the Hitler’s government restored control.

4 officers, including Stauffenberg himself, were shot. In the timeline we live in, their sacrifice sadly hasn’t changed a lot. But would their success change the course of the war? Not by a lot. They were not going to unconditionally surrender once Hitler was dead – Stauffenberg for example, as I said, was a German nationalist and despised democracy. Plotters’ goals differed, but the average plan was to kill Hitler, contact the Allies and sign an armistice, to then fight a one-front war with the Soviet Union. Some even suggested trying to team up with the Allies against communism. Certainly, the plotters were too late for both options. *Nobody was about to change sides and forgive millions of deaths.*