

Opening Remarks for the Exhibition

**“Claus Schenk Graf von Stauffenberg and the attempted coup of July
20, 1944”**

at Crown College, University of California Santa Cruz, on May 14, 2009

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Ladies and Gentlemen

Let me start by expressing my thanks to Crown College, and especially Provost Joel Ferguson and Ms. Sally Gaynor, for showing this exhibition about the German Resistance against Hitler. The exhibition describes the failed coup against Hitler on July 20, 1944 and the life of its main protagonist, Claus Schenk Graf von Stauffenberg. The exhibition has been assembled by the German Resistance Memorial Center in Berlin [1], and I am addressing you here representing the Memorial Foundation July 20 1944 [2], both of which I will introduce later in my talk.

The Exhibition “Claus Schenk Graf von Stauffenberg and the attempted coup of July 20, 1944” and the movie “Valkyrie”

This exhibition coincides with the showing of the film “Valkyrie” [3], in which Tom Cruise portrays Count Stauffenberg, a colonel in the general staff of the German army. I hope that you have been able to see “Valkyrie” since it follows the historical facts of the planning, carrying out, failure and aftermath of the attempts of German officers to kill Hitler. The aim of the coup was not only to end the dictatorship by the Nazi Party and restore freedom and the rule of law in Germany, but also to bring the Second World War to a negotiated end, after 5 years of terrible destruction.

Tom Cruise in the starring role guarantees that the heroic aspect of this courageous act receives the proper emphasis in the movie, since von Stauffenberg was not only one of the driving forces of the plot, but also volunteered to carry out the bombing of Hitler in his army headquarters “Wolf’s Lair”[4].

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The exhibition covers much more than just the dramatic events culminating in East Prussia with the explosion of a bomb hidden in a briefcase, followed by a long afternoon and evening of futile action in Berlin during which the coup failed. The exhibition describes first the development of the young von Stauffenberg from a sheltered and privileged youth. He was born in 1907, before the 2nd world war, and raised very much in the old-fashioned way since his father was the chamberlain for the king of Wuerttemberg. He became a German patriot, with close connections to the idealistic circle of the writer Stefan George [5], expressing his thoughts and feelings in poems and in sculptures. Next follows his stellar career as an officer in the German general staff and his conversion to an enemy of the “Fuehrer”, when he learned of the atrocities committed by German forces in the occupied countries, mainly Russia. Von Stauffenberg joined with fellow officers and men and women opposing Hitler in the conspiracy to end the Nazi’s grip on power in Germany. After his grave injuries in fighting in North Africa, von Stauffenberg was posted in the Home Army Headquarters in Berlin, from where he was able to work on “Operation Valkyrie” to break the power of the Nazi party. Since his command was responsible for assembling new army divisions for the war, he gained access to Hitler by reporting in frequent briefings on the status of the new troops. X

The movie “Valkyrie”, a typical Western?

You might have heard that the attempts to film the movie “Valkyrie” on the historical location had generated a great deal of controversy in Germany. At the end, a few scenes were shot in the Army headquarters where much of the drama played out. Although the final version of the movie stays true to many of the historical facts, there has been criticism that the film follows a bit too closely the Hollywood mold, instead of the history books. The simplified recipe of a classic Western calls for a villain, in this case Hitler, and a hero in a white hat, naturally Tom Cruise. To off-set the good and heroic Tom Cruise, you need the good and not so heroic, which in this case are all the civilians involved in the resistance. These were actually responsible for preparing the plans for reverting Germany to a government of law and order. They are shown as indecisive and wanting. The same is true for the other officers involved in the coup, who seem to get all their energy only through Tom Cruise. The resistance of other groups is not mentioned at all, from communist and social-democratic workers to students and professors (for example in the Munich student group “White Rose” around Sophie Scholl), to diplomats and politicians, officers, conservative

landowners, the clergy, and to those persecuted because of their race, religion or nationality.

After the failure of the coup, the GeStaPo found lists and documents and assembled an org chart of the planned German government. It showed that most cabinet seats were to be occupied by civilians. An important detail: the department for propaganda was to be filled only in case of a war!

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Operation Valkyrie

“Valkyrie” was the code name for the plan to wrestle power from the Nazi party, SS and GeStaPo [6].

Actually “Valkyrie” was an official emergency plan, blessed by Hitler, to safeguard law and order in case of unrest by the civil population or uprising by the ~ 5 million foreign forced laborer. It provided for the Home Army to declare a State of Emergency and take over the government.

Generals Olbricht and v. Tresckow (two of the “extras” in the movie), recognized this as the only way to involve the army in an internal struggle, and they changed the plans for the army to take a stand against the Nazi party, which maintained their own private army in the SS.

The success depended on Hitler to be dead because all German civil servants and officers had sworn an oath of loyalty to Hitler’s person, and would be reluctant to break that oath in time of war.

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Many documents in this exhibition trace the see-saw battle for control of the German Reich in the dramatic hours of July 20, 1944, and contain many military orders issued during operation “Valkyrie” The exhibition contains remarkable documents from “Valkyrie”, including the proclamation that Hitler is dead and that the power has been assumed by the Home Army to suppress an uprising by the Nazi party. But other documents showed that the conspirators encountered many logistics problems, including trivial delays in telexing their orders.

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Why did they coup fail?

The make-up of the resistance: The German resistance was by no means a heterogenic group. There was no agreement that Hitler had to be killed. Religious beliefs and the opinion that the military oath was sacrosanct led to alternatives: they had the army leaders confront Hitler and force him to change his disastrous policies. Or arrest him and have him tried for high treason, not very realistic given the fact that the country was ruled by the Nazi party. Since Hitler was extremely reclusive and suspicious, and access to him was limited, all plans had to be changed on the dot depending on Hitler's plans. The fact that on July 17, Julius Leber, a leading politician opposite to Hitler, had been arrested when he started to have a dialogue with a communist cell which had been infiltrated by the GeStaPo, accelerated the pace to act.

Incredible flukes which saved Hitler's life: Von Stauffenberg had only time to arm one of the two bombs, he placed it behind the heavy table leg which directed the blast away from Hitler and killed three of the attendees, and maybe most importantly, the meeting where von Stauffenberg reported to Hiler was held in a bungalow with thin walls and windows instead of the customary bunker with 12 foot thick walls.

Planning: The attempt on Jul 20 1944 was the 3rd attempt within a fortnight. The two previous one were aborted since Hitler's henchmen Himmler and Goehring were absent at the briefings and the original idea was to eliminate them too to prevent a civil war. After "Operation Valkyrie" had started, it became clear that many military commanders sat on the fence to await the outcome, including General Fromm, Stauffenberg's and my father's immediate boss. Uncertainty about the fate of Hitler delayed the order to initiate Valkyrie, and there was no contingency plan for the event that Hitler survived. The taking over of communications and the government in Berlin was not successful since some of the officers selected for the task were 100% Nazis. And finally there was no response from the public since all the preparation had to be carried out in secret. While the conspiracy failed in Berlin, it succeeded Paris and Vienna.

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The attempted Coup of July 20, 1944 and the Absurd

Last year, Prof. von Klemperer [13] choose the word “absurd” to characterize the situation of the conspirators, not in the daily use of the word (non-sensical, disturbed, crazy), but in the meaning of the philosophy of the Absurd of Albert Camus [14] and the “Myth of Sisyphus”.

The German resistance had to overcome many obstacles. One was the fact that unlike the resistance in the occupied countries which battled a foreign enemy, the German resistance was directed against the government of their own country. This branded the conspirators as traitors, even though they fought a law-less regime, Another obstacle was the failure of the allied governments to take the conspirators seriously, and their refusal to offer encouragement for German freedom fighters to go through with the plot and to plan for a Germany as part of the free world. This has been described by Prof. Klemens von Klemperer of Smith College in his book: “German resistance against Hitler: The search for Allies abroad” [11].

The fact that several attempts on Hitler’s life failed, and that the chances of ultimate success of the revolution slowly diminished, weighed heavily on the conspirators. The potential futility of another attempt did not discourage the plotters from proceeding with the plan, since they wanted to set a beacon for Germany and the world to prove that “The other Germany” existed, a

Germany where law, freedom, and humanity reigned. Colonel Henning von Tresckow, one of the leaders of the conspiracy, expressed this conviction shortly before his death in the following way: "The assassination of Hitler must be attempted at all costs. Even if it should not succeed, an attempt to seize power in Berlin must be made. What matters now is no longer the practical purpose of the coup, but to prove to the world and before history that the men of the resistance dared to take the decisive step. Compared to this objective, nothing else is of consequence" [12].

The conspirators were thrown into conflicts between loyalty to their country (and I might add also to their families) and upholding humanity. This conflict was ultimately resolved by death. This dilemma reminds us of the hero of Greek tragedy, whom the gods confront with a decision between different actions: although free to decide which one to take, the hero will become guilty through any of them.

When Camus was asked: "does the realization of the absurd require suicide?" he answers: "No. It requires revolt." [15]

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What if...

The conspirators had high hope that the second world war could be ended with an advantageous truce, potentially with German and western armies fighting the Russian forces. Those ideas were always rebuffed when presented to the Western powers. But the importance and the potential ramifications of the attempt to kill Hitler and to end the war can be judged by the fact that in the last year of World War II, i.e. after the failed coup of July 20, 1944 and before the German capitulation on May 7, 1945, about 5 million people died in Germany, many more than in the preceding five war years together [16]. Their lives would have been spared if the coup had succeeded. An early end of the Second World War in 1944 would also have avoided the destruction of many German cities, for example the firebombing of Dresden, immortalized by Kurt Vonnegut's "Slaughterhouse 5" [17].

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The Aftermath

Right after the failed actions on July 20, 1944 the secret police investigated the extent of the conspiracy, and arrested of the participants. The exhibition shows a note by Himmler from a briefing by Hitler: Trial, Family Stauffenberg and Members of the Seydlitz Family, the latter two refer to subjecting the surviving families to persecution as part of the “Sippenhaft” program, the reprisals of kith-and-kin, including separation of children from their mothers and siblings, ending only with the capitulation of the German Reich.

For the conspirators came the public show trials in front of the “Volksgerichtshof” i.e. the “Peoples court” and its notorious president Freisler. Hitler was mesmerized by the heroic attempt to end his dictatorship and the extend of the resistance and he requested daily updates of the investigations by the secret police from his principal aide Kaltenbrunner, and these reports are now public record [21]. He even ordered to have the proceedings before Freisler’s kangaroo court secretly filmed. The films of the sessions of the “Peoples Court” have survived [22], and it was some form of solace for the families of the executed that they were able to see and hear their loved ones one last time, after the reels were discovered after the end of the Second World War. X

Post-war Germany and July 20, 1944

It then took about 10 years before the German public and the German government started to recognize the symbolic and moral value of the German Resistance, and the need to support the surviving families. Before that time, the non-governmental organization “Relief Organization 20 July 1944” was actively providing material and spiritual aid for the surviving families of the resistance fighters. Today, the need for material aid has diminished, and the “Relief Organization” has changed its name to reflect a new focus in its mission. The emerged “Memorial Foundation 20 July 1944” [2] is dedicated to education and public outreach related to the German Resistance. Today, the mission of Memorial Foundation is to preserve the legacy of the German resistance by keeping the memory to it alive. The activities target principally the young people with no direct connection to the time of the 3rd Reich , the soldiers in the German armed forces and the public in foreign countries. To reach the general public, the Memorial Foundation organizes and supports exhibitions like the one we are opening today, symposia and meetings with students and local organizations, lectures, and tours for students and adults to the memorial centers. The planning and

organization of the yearly commemoration in Berlin on the anniversary of the July 20 attempted coup is a major responsibility.

In addition, the Foundation supports academic studies and projects related to the July 20 coup at schools, universities and institutes. This is done often in collaboration with the “Forschungsgemeinschaft 20. Juli 1944” [23] i.e. “Study Group 20. July 1944” which has been active in promoting the accounting of the Nazi Germany past and research into topics related to the German Resistance. In annual workshops, (some of them restricted to young people only) representatives of different academic disciplines discuss aspects of the German resistance and add to the list of scholarly publications shedding light on the circumstances, motives and actions of the German resistance. To name just a few workshop themes [24]:

"Christianity and German Resistance"

"Universities and Students in the 3rd Reich"

“The role of the Press in the 3rd Reich”

“The relevance of the German resistance for post-war Germany”

”Finances in the German Resistance”

“ Resistance und collaboration in Europe“

”Women in the German Resistance“.

It should be mentioned that one of the recent workshop topics has been the somewhat controversial subject of the relationship of the military resistance fighters to the holocaust and how much and when they knew of the German atrocities committed in Russia [25].

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The German Resistance Memorial Center

The German resistance represents a shining beacon within recent German history. In 2004 at the memorial for the 60th anniversary of July 20 1944, the German President Köhler coined the phrase: “Widerstand ist Anstand”. The translation into English is not unique (and none of them rhyme!), but the many possible translations describe the understanding of today’s German public towards the German Resistance. “Resistance is Propriety”, ”Resistance is Civility “, “Resistance is Decency“, all emphasize that resistance against dictatorship has to be part of the political conduct of all citizens in a democracy, and can’t be just the exception as it was during the 3rd Reich. Another possible translation, “Resistance is Policy“, describes the commitment of the German government to weave the memory of the German Resistance into the fabric of the new German armed forces.

To promote this right, or one might even say the duty of every citizen to resist an un-lawful ruler, the German government and the City of Berlin have established the German Resistance Memorial Center [1] to document the resistance and opposition to the Hitler dictatorship. The material collected in the exhibition in Berlin proves that the German resistance against Hitler was wide-spread among many groups within Germany.. Prof. Hans Mommsen from Bochum University deals with issues of the

participation of different groups and the secrecy surrounding them in his book “Germans against Hitler. The Stauffenberg Plot and Resistance under the Third Reich” [19].

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Symbolically, the permanent collection of the German Resistance Memorial Center is housed in the former offices of the Supreme Headquarters of the Home Army which was the center of the revolt in Berlin. Here on July 20, 1944 my father, Lt. Colonel Joachim Sadrozinski [20], worked side by side with von Stauffenberg to wrestle the political power in Germany from the Nazi party and the SS, even when it had become clear that the attempt to kill Hitler had failed. Some scenes of the movie “Valkyrie” were filmed in this building, and Tom Cruise is shown dramatically to die in a hail of bullets in the same courtyard where Stauffenberg and 3 of his co-conspirators were killed in the evening of July 20, 1944. This courtyard is the place, where every year since 1954 on July 20 the governments of Germany and Berlin hold a commemoration to honor the men and women who resisted the Hitler dictatorship.

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Another part of the German Resistance Memorial Center is the shack within the walls of the Ploetzensee prison where over 200 participants in the July 20 plot were executed after being condemned to death. Many of the testimonials in the Ploetzensee Memorial Center are to the thousands of persecuted persons from Germany and other European countries who were executed there during the Nazi terror.

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Testimonials to the German resistance

There are many testimonials to the German resistance, in forms of movies, books and scholarly articles. Many are in English, fortunately. The link to the website of the German Resistance Memorial Center in your invitation will lead you to a nearly complete book list [7].

I want to mention the work by Prof. Peter Hoffmann from McGill University in Toronto, who has researched the German Resistance for many decades, and who has written a seminal von Stauffenberg biography [8].

Many books emphasize the fact that resistance in the 3rd Reich was driven by conscience and the cry for freedom. This is expressed already in the titles of the very early books I want to mention here: “Das Gewissen steht auf”, translated into English as “Conscience in Revolt” [9] written by Annedore Leber, the widow of the murdered socialist politician Julius Leber, and Eberhard Zeller’s “Geist der Freiheit” translated as “Flame of Freedom, The German Struggle against Hitler” [10].

Outlook

As you will see, the material exhibited here allows you a look into the events and persons connected with the German resistance against Hitler, and the dramatic actions on July 20, 1944. The sphere of the German Resistance spans 100 years in German history, from the youth of the resistance fighters to their untimely death and up to today's public exhibitions, the academic debate and popular movies. I hope that this exhibition and watching Tom Cruise in the movie "Valkyrie" will be motivation for you to learn more about the German Resistance, one of the few events during the Hitler regime that we can be proud of.

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