The History of the Twentieth Century
Episode 441
"The Plot to Assassinate Hitler"
Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

"The whole world will vilify us now, but I am still totally convinced that we did the right thing."

General Henning von Tresckow.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century.*

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 441: The Plot to Assassinate Hitler.

I ended the last episode by describing the liberation of Vilnius and the Soviet internment of fighters in the Polish Home Army.

On the day after the liberation of Vilnius, July 14, 1944, Adolf Hitler left the Berghof and returned to his headquarters at the Wolf's Lair in East Prussia. There'd been fears of an Allied bombing raid on the Wolf's Lair, so Hitler had left a few months ago when workers began reinforcing the bunkers to strengthen them against such an attack.

The work was not quite finished, but the situation on the Eastern Front was getting worse by the day and the Wehrmacht needed its commander-in-chief closer to the front lines. Closer, indeed. The Wolf's Lair was getting closer to the front all the time. By this date, July 14, Red Army units were just a few hundred kilometers away, and Germans were facing the very real prospect of Soviet soldiers actually entering the territory of the Reich, something that would once have been considered unthinkable.

No one knew it at the time, but Hitler would never return to his vacation home.

Adolf Hitler had feared assassination for many years, beginning even before he became chancellor. He was always very careful about his personal security; the Nazi Party provided him with bodyguards, and later the SS. He was careful to surround himself with loyalists. Security rules prohibited any of his visitors from carrying firearms. The preparation of his food was

carefully overseen from the vegetable garden to his dinner plate. He had food tasters. When he traveled, his itinerary was a closely held secret.

So Hitler felt reasonably secure against any potential assassin. He also claimed to have a preternatural sense of when he was in danger. Him and Peter Parker. And Miles Morales. (Hitler would probably be outraged to hear me compare him to two comic book characters, one of whom is Jewish and the other Black. Good.) Hitler sometimes boasted to his associates of how, when he was a private at the front in the last war, he would sometimes jump out of his foxhole because he could sense an artillery shell coming in.

I'll just note in passing that Hitler's spider-sense did not warn him of the impending assassination attempt made by Georg Elser in 1940, episode 318.

Fears for his personal safety were therefore more commonly about Hitler getting caught in an Allied bombing raid, hence the precautions taken at the Wolf's Lair. Joseph Goebbels once suggested the *Führer* might be vulnerable to a kidnapping carried out by those sneaky British commandos.

In the years before the war, when Hitler was chancellor, he gave speeches and made public appearances like any politician. As the war dragged on, however, he became increasingly involved in managing it, at the expense of his civilian political duties.

Here was another reason why Hitler had little to fear from an assassin. Once the war began, and especially after the invasion of the Soviet Union, Hitler was usually surrounded by members of the Wehrmacht. It was hard to imagine how anyone could get close enough to him to make an attempt on his life, unless of course they were a soldier.

Hmm.

You may recall, back at the time of the Sudetenland Crisis, a couple of high-ranking German Army officers, who feared Hitler was leading them and the Reich into a war against France and Britain that Germany was not ready for, at least discussed the possibility and the desirability of assassinating Hitler before that happened, for the preservation of the German military and the German state. It's not clear that these discussions got any farther than idle chit-chat.

Something similar happened in 1939, after Hitler began the war and was discussing an offensive against France. A few senior commanders doubted the wisdom of such an offensive and feared it would end in disaster for Germany. But again, these discussions don't appear to have led to any concrete action.

Then came the stunning victory against France in spring of 1940, which laid to rest the doubts of those military commanders who feared Hitler's go-for-broke approach would ruin the nation. It had instead led to victory beyond anything imaginable just six months earlier. These victories also made Hitler tremendously popular and made it doubtful at best that the German people

would accept the leadership of a band of conspirators who'd just assassinated the *Führer*. More likely, the conspirators would be lynched.

There was a small group of military within the Abwehr, German military intelligence, who opposed Hitler, among them the chief of the organization, Admiral Wilhelm Canaris, and his deputy, General Hans Oster. Canaris had always been skeptical of the prospects of German victory in the war. You may recall he was sent to Spain in 1940 to encourage Francisco Franco to join the Axis. Canaris instead urged Franco to remain neutral, candid advice for which Franco was forever grateful.

There was also the Kreisau Circle, a group that formed around a couple of wealthy Junkers, one of whom was Helmuth von Moltke, grandnephew of Helmuth von Moltke the Younger, the German Army Chief of Staff at the beginning of the last war. You remember him, right? And the great-grandnephew of the elder Helmuth von Moltke, the chief of staff who'd led the Prussian Army to victory in the Austro-Prussian War and the Franco-Prussian War and who famously said that "no plan of operations extends with any certainty beyond the first contact with the main hostile force," a quote which is often condensed into "no plan survives contact with the enemy."

This Helmuth von Moltke, whom we might call Helmut von Moltke the Even Younger, inherited the titles and estates of his illustrious relatives, but he himself was a Christian Scientist and a pacifist. When the war began, Moltke helped assemble a group of people, including Social Democrats, Catholic and Protestant theologians, lawyers, and diplomats, known as the Kreisau Circle, after the Silesian town where Moltke's estate was located. The Kreisau Circle did not advocate assassination or other acts of violence; rather, the group assumed Germany would lose the war and the Nazis would be deposed and spent their time brainstorming what a future free and democratic Germany might look like.

Another group coalesced around the former mayor of Leipzig, Carl Goerdeler. Its members included former government officials pushed out by the Nazis, including Ludwig Beck, former chief of the German General Staff, who'd resigned in 1938 in protest against Hitler drumming up a confrontation with Czechoslovakia. This group leaned right, and they envisioned assassinating Hitler and restoring Imperial Germany and the Hohenzollern dynasty. They imagined that if they could pull off all that, they could also negotiate a peace agreement with the Allies that would preserve Germany's position as a major European power. And also, free ponies for everyone. Why not?

These were three very different groups, though they had in common rejection of Hitler and Nazism, opposition to the war, and opposition to the persecution of Jewish people in Germany and across Europe. Even though some members of these groups were anti-Semitic themselves, they agreed Hitler was taking the whole thing way too far.

But the most important center of resistance appeared in the Army, and it appeared in 1941, at a moment when Hitler was riding high. That story begins with German Army Colonel Henning von Tresckow.

Henning Hermann Karl Robert von Tresckow was born on January 10, 1901, into another one of those families of Junkers, the Prussian aristocracy that supplied so many officers to the Prussian Army and later to the German Army.

Tresckow enlisted in the German Army during the First World War at the age of 16, and was awarded the Iron Cross Second Class at the age of 17. His commanding officer at the time told him that he was destined either to become chief of the General Staff, or die on the scaffold.

In 1926, Tresckow married Erika von Falkenhayn, daughter of another Junker family. Her father was Erich von Falkenhayn, whom we've met before. He was himself Chief of the General Staff after Moltke, from 1914 to 1916, and later commanded the armies of the Ottoman Empire in Palestine.

In 1936, Tresckow joined the General Staff. When the war began, he became a staff officer of Army Group A during the invasion of France. When Germany invaded the Soviet Union in 1941, Tresckow was chief operations officer of Army Group Center, serving under Field Marshal Fedor von Bock, who was related to Tresckow's wife, and then Field Marshal Günther von Kluge.

Tresckow had initially supported Adolf Hitler, but the events between 1933 and 1939, such as the Night of the Long Knives, the humiliation of Army commander Werner von Fritsch, and *Kristallnacht*, soured him on the Nazis.

During the 1941 invasion of the Soviet Union, Tresckow became increasingly appalled by the criminal orders coming from Berlin. The Commissar Order. The *Einsatzgruppen* wantonly murdering Jewish people in occupied Soviet territory. The abuse, starvation, and murder of Soviet POWs. He spoke out against these atrocities to his fellow staff officers, and even urged his commander, Marshal von Bock, to oppose them. He pointed out that the Army administered the occupied lands and therefore held the authority to put an end to these barbaric acts.

Tresckow was unable to persuade Bock, but he did organize some of his fellow staff officers, and by autumn 1941, there was within Army Group Center headquarters a small group dedicated to opposing Hitler and the Nazis. In September, Tresckow sent one of these officers to Berlin to make contact with other opponents of the regime, including Goerdeler's group and the dissidents in the Abwehr.

The Abwehr group had themselves recruited Army General Friedrich Olbricht, the deputy commander of the Replacement Army. The Replacement Army was the German Army's reserve force in the Reich, and Olbricht's joining the resistance groups was crucial. That was because the

Army had a plan in place called Operation Valkyrie. Valkyrie was a plan to use the Replacement Army to oppose any uprising in Germany against the Nazis. The main concern was the millions of slave laborers working in the Reich. Enslavers always worry about an uprising by the enslaved.

Tresckow conceived of a plan, Valkyrie II, a modification of Operation Valkyrie, that would use the Replacement Army to seize power in a military coup in the aftermath of an assassination of Hitler.

Hitler was quite popular in the fall of 1941, when it still seemed possible, likely even, that the Soviet Union would soon collapse and Germany would triumph once more. Of course, that didn't happen in 1941. The German 1942 offensive, a second attempt to force Soviet capitulation, also failed.

Then came the disaster at Stalingrad. By 1943, it was much easier to find Army officers sympathetic to the idea of eliminating Hitler. I'm going to tell you now the stories of three failed attempts to assassinate Hitler. I should say three *alleged* failed plots to assassinate Hitler, as the only evidence we have to support the existence of these plots is the testimony after the war of Army officers who claimed to have participated in them. Of course, after the war, after the Nazis were gone, Army officers would have every reason to claim they had opposed Hitler during his rule, even claim to have risked their lives in failed attempts to kill him. So these stories have to be taken with a substantial dose of sodium chloride.

The first story alleges that two attempts were made on March 13, 1943, when Hitler visited the headquarters of Army Group Center, which was then in Smolensk. The first plan involved the anti-Hitler Army officers shooting Hitler while he was having lunch in the officers' dining room, but it is said that the commander of Army Group Center, Marshal von Kluge, intervened to prevent it, on the grounds that any coup attempt after Hitler was dead would lead to combat between the Army and the SS. Kluge proposed waiting for an opportunity to kill both Hitler and SS chief Heinrich Himmler at the same time.

Later that day, a second attempt was made, despite Kluge's disapproval. A staff officer gave a package to a member of Hitler's entourage, claiming it contained two bottles of Cointreau to be delivered to an Army officer in Berlin as payment on a lost bet. In fact, the parcel contained a time bomb, set to explode while the plane was in the air. The package was put into the hold of Hitler's plane, but it did not explode, supposedly because the hold was not heated and the extreme cold caused the fuse to fail. The conspirators were able to recover the package in Berlin before it was discovered.

Eight days later, on March 21, 1943, Hitler was scheduled to tour an exhibition of captured Soviet military equipment in Berlin. His guide on the tour was an Army officer who was part of the conspiracy. This officer claimed to have hidden a time bomb in his own coat with intent to sacrifice himself to kill Hitler. But Hitler was apparently in some kind of rush and charged right

through the exhibit and out again in about two minutes, before the bomb was set to detonate. The officer then hastily defused the bomb.

Did any of these attempts actually take place? Or were they postwar claims of Army officers who wanted to portray themselves as having been secretly anti-Nazi during the war? Your guess is as good as anyone's.

We can say with certainty that on April 5, 1943, Hans Oster and two other members of his group within the Abwehr were arrested by the Gestapo. The Gestapo investigation was originally about black market currency transfers. In fact, one of the Abwehr conspirators, a lawyer named Hans von Dohnanyi, was helping to smuggle Jewish people out of the Reich and into Switzerland. The unlawful currency transfer that attracted Gestapo attention was Dohnanyi sending a Jewish family's money along to Switzerland after helping the family themselves escape to that country.

The third person arrested on that date is probably the opponent of the regime best known in our time. He was a Lutheran pastor, a theologian, and Dohnanyi's brother-in-law. His name was Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and since you've probably heard the name, I should say a little about him.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was born on February 4, 1906 in what was then Breslau in Germany. As a teenager, he decided to become a pastor. In 1927, at the age of 21, he was awarded the degree of Doctor of Theology. He spent a year in the United States, in 1930-31, studying and teaching at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. (Fun fact: Mrs. History of the Twentieth Century graduated from Union Theological Seminary.) It appears he did not enjoy teaching at Union and found his students disappointing. That's because he never met my wife.

Anyway, while in New York, he discovered something more exciting than anything going on at Union: the Abyssinian Baptist Church in New York City, an African-American congregation which had some 13,000 members at the time, making it one of the largest churches in the United States. Bonhoeffer taught Sunday School, enjoyed the music, and appreciated the sermons of the church's pastor, Adam Clayton Powell Sr. From this experience he learned about racism and segregation in the United States and the disappointingly timid opposition to them from white American churches.

This no doubt influenced his thinking after he returned to Germany and Hitler took power. So did the fact that his sister married a Jewish man. After Hitler became chancellor, there was a movement within Protestantism in Germany called the German Christian movement, which attempted to integrate Nazi ideologies such as German racial superiority and anti-Semitism into Protestant theology. In opposition to this, Bonhoeffer was one of a group of theologians who founded the Confessing Church, which upheld orthodox Christian doctrine in opposition to the German Christian movement.

The Nazis eventually suppressed the Confessing Church and shut down its underground seminary. By 1941, Bonhoeffer had been banned from public speaking and from writing or

publishing. His brother-in-law, Hans von Dohnanyi, who had secured a position for himself in the Abwehr, persuaded the organization to take on Bonhoeffer as well, based on Bonhoeffer's many contacts with churches and theologians in other countries. As an Abwehr agent, Bonhoeffer served as a courier, bearing communications between the anti-Nazi resistance in Germany and figures in other countries, as well as helping smuggle Jewish people to Switzerland, as was his brother-in-law.

The loss of what was effectively a resistance cell within the Abwehr was a blow to the German resistance movement. It should be noted that it was politically advantageous to the Nazi SS to discredit the German military's Abwehr, as it gave Himmler the opportunity to take control of intelligence operations in Germany away from the military and put it in the hands of loyal Nazis in the SS.

As we've seen, by 1943, after the disaster at Stalingrad, and with Germany's military position growing progressively weaker, Hitler liked to blame the military, claiming senior Wehrmacht commanders were deliberately undermining him. Needless to say, these senior Wehrmacht commanders did not appreciate this. They had reached the opposite conclusion: that Hitler's inept leadership was costing Germany the war.

The upside of this for the resistance was that it made it easier to find and recruit disaffected military officers. The downside was that, with Hitler becoming increasingly paranoid and suspicious of the military, it would make it harder for anyone in the military to carry out an assassination.

In January 1944, the Gestapo arrested Helmuth von Moltke, the even younger one. He was not arrested because of his involvement in the Kreisau Circle; at this point the Gestapo knew nothing about that. He was arrested because he tipped off an Abwehr agent working for the resistance that the Gestapo was watching him.

The following month, February 1944, Himmler persuaded Hitler to abolish the Abwehr altogether and turn its functions over to the SS. Admiral Canaris, now-former chief of the Abwehr, was placed under house arrest.

This had to have been a trying time for anyone involved in this resistance network. Even if the Gestapo wasn't on to you yet, it was sure looking as if they were closing in. And the Nazis had revived the ancient Teutonic concept of *Sippenhaft*, meaning that if you committed a serious crime, like say treason, your family members would be considered equally guilty and subject to the same punishments, whether they were aware of your activities or not. When the conspirators reached out to the British government to offer a deal, under which the Allies would go easy on Germany if Germans overthrew Hitler and ended the war on their own, the British government was not interested. The offer on the table was unconditional surrender. Take it now or we'll force it down your throat later. Your choice.

The conspirators also had to wrestle with the very real possibility that even if they succeeded in assassinating Hitler, there was no guarantee the German public would support the act. Even in 1944, Hitler was generally popular, and killing the leader of your own nation during a war in which Germany's very survival might be at stake would be hard to explain and hard for the public to accept. The conspirators wanted Hitler dead because he was leading Germany into ruin, but if they killed him, it might produce a new stab-in-the-back legend that would put the blame for Germany's defeat and humiliation on them.

There was also the question of who was going to do the deed. It would have to be a soldier, someone who could get close to Hitler, and while the military members of the conspiracy were content to speak out against Hitler in a closed room full of like-minded dissidents, when the question arose as to who would take the lead and do the deed, the only response was an embarrassed silence.

A lot of the military members were wishy-washy about the whole thing. They would support a successful coup against the Nazis, but weren't prepared to move until success was assured. And who could promise success? One particularly frustrating soldier was General Erich Fromm, commander of the Replacement Army. Fromm was the only person, apart from Hitler, who had the authority to execute Operation Valkyrie. That meant that his support was essential to carrying out the anti-Nazi coup that would have to follow the assassination of Hitler. Fromm spoke vaguely of supporting the plot, but was unwilling to take any action personally until Hitler was dead.

Here's the bottom line: Everyone in these resistance circles agreed Hitler had to go, but only an Army officer would have the opportunity to get close enough to kill him, and no Army officer was willing to make the attempt.

Enter Claus Philipp Maria Justinian Schenk Graf von Stauffenberg, born to an aristocratic family in Bavaria in 1907. He joined the Army in 1930; his unit was one of those that moved into the Sudetenland in 1938 following the Munich Agreement. Stauffenberg was a right-wing nationalist aristocrat with no particular fondness for democracy. He was a devout Catholic.

He appears to have been a cautious supporter of the Nazis in the early Thirties, but as in the case of Henning von Tresckow, he was put off by the Night of the Long Knives and appalled by *Kristallnacht*. Nazi anti-Semitism offended his sense of Catholic morality.

He worked for the Army General Staff during Barbarossa and was shocked by the murders of POWs and Jewish civilians, as was Tresckow.

In 1943, Stauffenberg was promoted to colonel and assigned operations officer of the 10th Panzer Division. His unit fought against Montgomery's advancing Eighth Army in Tunisia. Here Stauffenberg was riding in a car that was strafed by an RAF fighter on April 7, 1943.

Stauffenberg was seriously wounded. He lost his left eye, his right hand, and two fingers of his left hand. He spent the following three months recuperating in a hospital in Munich.

Following his recovery, Stauffenberg was assigned to the general staff of the Replacement Army. Stauffenberg's new assignment made him valuable to the conspirators, so he was recruited and introduced to Henning von Tresckow. Stauffenberg was a badly-needed shot in the arm for the conspiracy. He was in his late thirties, still young, energetic, skilled in military planning, and firmly committed to eliminating Adolf Hitler. Stauffenberg helped the conspirators refine Operation Valkyrie II, working out a plan under which the Replacement Army would seize control of military headquarters across Europe.

The conspirators made three attempts to kill Hitler, in November 1943, February 1944, and March 1944. All three plots involved getting a sympathetic Army officer close enough to Hitler to set off a bomb, or in the third case, shoot Hitler with a pistol. All of the attempts failed because last-minute changes of plan kept Hitler away from the designated assassin.

On June 6, the Western Allies landed in Normandy. On June 22, the Red Army began its devastating 1944 summer offensive. It was now clear to most military officers, including the conspirators, that Germany would soon be defeated. Did it even make sense to attempt this assassination anymore? What good would it do? Stauffenberg voiced these concerns to Tresckow. Tresckow told him the attempt had to take place even if it made no difference. It was their duty to demonstrate to the world and to history that there were Germans who opposed Hitler and were willing to risk their lives to stop him.

On July 1, Stauffenberg was named chief of staff of the Replacement Army. This was a big break, because in this capacity, he would attend Hitler's staff meetings, giving Stauffenberg direct access to the *Führer*.

There was only one problem. Stauffenberg was also the organization man. He'd drawn up a brilliant plan, but as chief of staff of the Replacement Army, he needed to be there in Berlin to supervise its execution. He was believed by the conspirators to be the only officer who could plausibly take command of the Replacement Army and issue those orders successfully.

This meant that Stauffenberg could not be a suicide killer. If he was going to kill Hitler, he would then have to escape to Berlin afterward to direct the coup. It sounded impossible.

In his new position, Stauffenberg was part of staff meetings with Hitler on July 6 and July 11th, at the Berghof, and on July 15, after Hitler settled into the Wolf's Lair. On all three occasions, Stauffenberg carried with him a briefcase full of explosives, but he made no attempt to kill Hitler on any of them, for reasons that are not clear. Perhaps he felt the time was not right. By some accounts, the conspirators were hoping to act when Hermann Göring and Heinrich Himmler were both present. Göring was named Hitler's successor and Himmler ran the SS, so eliminating all three of them would greatly improve the odds that the coup would succeed. But it seems strange

to make the assassination attempt contingent on the presence of Himmler, who was SS, not military, and did not usually attend staff meetings.

Also on July 15, an officer at the headquarters of the Replacement Army in Berlin jumped the gun and began issuing the necessary orders to activate Operation Valkyrie II. When he learned that no assassination attempt had been made, he hastily countermanded his orders and explained the whole thing away by telling everyone it was a drill. That covered him for today's slip up, but it would be impossible to explain if it happened a second time. Therefore, the next time someone activated Valkyrie II, it had better be the real thing.

A few days earlier, on July 5, the Gestapo arrested two members of the Kreisau Circle. They'd been caught attempting to contact the underground German Communist Party to ask for their support. On July 17, the Gestapo arrested Carl Goerdeler. For those involved in the resistance, it was looking an awful lot like the Gestapo was on to them and was about to unravel the conspiracy and arrest its remaining participants.

Another opportunity to kill Hitler came on July 20, and to the conspirators, it seemed it was now or never.

[music: Schubert, *String Quartet No. 13*.]

July 20, 1944 was a hot and humid day. Stauffenberg and his aide boarded an He-111 transport plane at Berlin and flew to the Wolf's Lair, arriving at 10:15 AM. Stauffenberg had breakfast in the officers' dining room, then attended a pre-meeting with senior Army commanders including the Wehrmacht's commander in chief, Marshal Keitel.

Only after that meeting ended was Stauffenberg told that Benito Mussolini would be calling on the *Führer* this afternoon, so the staff meeting would be moved up to 12:30, just a few minutes from now. Stauffenberg and his aide requested the use of Keitel's washroom for a few minutes to change their shirts and freshen up, a not-unusual request given the weather.

They shut themselves into the washroom to prepare the detonators for the two bombs Stauffenberg had been carrying in his briefcase. This required Stauffenberg do some delicate work with a pair of pliers, and remember he was missing one hand and only had three fingers on the other one, making the preparations difficult. As Stauffenberg was working, a staff sergeant knocked on the door to inform him that the meeting was beginning and he needed to hurry up.

Stauffenberg only had time to arm one of the two bombs. The other he gave to his aide to dispose of. It appears that in his haste and anxiety, Stauffenberg had made a huge mistake. He could have put the second, unarmed, bomb into his briefcase with the armed bomb. The explosion of the one would have detonated the other, producing a blast twice as powerful. Too bad.

Because of the heat, the meeting was held in an above-ground barracks instead of one of the underground bunkers. All the windows were open. Keitel escorted Stauffenberg into the meeting

at 12:37 PM. Another officer was giving a report on the situation at the Eastern Front; Hitler was sitting at the center of the long side of a large oaken table, his back to the door. He turned to them and nodded silently to acknowledge their arrival.

Stauffenberg had requested a seat close to Hitler. He put his briefcase next to the base of the table, just to Hitler's right. A few minutes later, Stauffenberg excused himself. He had to make a phone call, he said. He left his cap behind, to create the appearance that he planned to return shortly.

Instead, Stauffenberg exited the barracks and hurried to where his aide was waiting. The aide had already called for a car. As they waited for the car, they heard a loud explosion. Confident that no one in the room could have survived the blast, Stauffenberg and his aide climbed into the car, which drove them to the nearby airfield. Stauffenberg told the driver to hurry, saying "Right now, every minute counts!" Along the way, the aide threw the second, unexploded bomb out of the car. At 1:15, their plane took off. It landed outside Berlin at 3:45. There was no car waiting for them. Stauffenberg's aide called Replacement Army headquarters to inform them that Hitler was dead.

In the moment after the bomb had exploded in the barracks at the Wolf's Lair, there was pandemonium. Shards of glass were everywhere. The air was so full of smoke and flames and fluttering papers that no one could see for a moment, though everyone could hear the cries of the wounded.

Adolf Hitler was not dead. He lay still for a moment, testing his own body to see if everything was still there and would still move before rising to his feet. Wilhelm Keitel, who had been sitting next to Hitler, embraced the *Führer* in a bear hug, quite contrary to normal military protocol, and cried out, *"Mein Führer, Sie leben!"* That is, "My *Führer*, you are alive!"

It seems that shortly after Stauffenberg left the room, one of the other officers seated at the table noticed that Stauffenberg's briefcase on the floor, sticking out from under the table. That was dangerous. Someone might trip over it. So he pushed the briefcase under the table with his foot, sliding it to the outside of the massive table base. When the bomb exploded, the heavy oaken tabletop and base absorbed much of the force of the explosion. Most of the blast damage was done away from the table, to the right. All four of those present who died from their injuries were seated in that part of the room.

Adolf Hitler had been standing on the opposite side of the base and leaning over the table to examine a map when the bomb went off, so not only the heavy table base but the heavy table top shielded him. He suffered only light wounds. Flying splinters from the table shredded his pants and embedded themselves into his right leg. He suffered a minor injury to his eye and a perforated eardrum.

Most everyone in the room had a perforated eardrum. Hitler was one of the least injured of the room's 25 occupants. One was killed instantly; eleven others were taken to a hospital, where three later died from their wounds. Adolf Hitler's personal doctor, mindful of the assassination attempt against Reinhard Heydrich two years ago, in which Heydrich survived the explosion but later died of sepsis, gave Hitler an injection of the rare and precious drug penicillin, only available in the Reich when it was confiscated from American POWs.

Hitler amazed them all by remaining calm and collected—you might even say cheerful. He told everyone his narrow escape was further proof that Providence had selected him for a special mission. He told this to Mussolini as well, after the Italian dictator arrived by train at about 3:00 PM. Mussolini agreed. They conferred for four hours, until Mussolini left to return to Italy. It would be the last time the two dictators met.

In the aftermath of the assassination attempt, the question on everyone's mind at the Wolf's Lair was naturally, *Who did it?* It wasn't long until it became apparent that Stauffenberg was nowhere to be found. When questioned, the telephone switchboard operator reported that Stauffenberg had made no phone call, although he did recall seeing the colonel rush by in a great hurry. Come to think of it, he had a strange expression on his face. Investigators found pieces of Stauffenberg's briefcase which clearly showed the explosion had come from within. They also found the second bomb that had been discarded on the way to the airfield.

The survivors at the Wolf's Lair did not yet realize the assassination was merely the first step of an attempted coup. An officer present at the Wolf's Lair who was one of the coup plotters phoned Replacement Army headquarters in Berlin to advise them Hitler had survived the bomb blast.

But at Replacement Army headquarters, they had also heard from Stauffenberg, who'd insisted Hitler was dead. What to do? A staff officer of his own volition drew up the orders that would put Operation Valkyrie II into motion and brought them to General Fromm for his signature. Fromm was suspicious. He telephoned the Wolf's Lair himself and talked to Keitel, who told him, yes there had been an assassination attempt, but Hitler had survived. Keitel asked Fromm where was his chief of staff, Colonel Stauffenberg? Fromm replied, honestly, that Stauffenberg had left for the Wolf's Lair this morning and had not yet returned.

Moments later, Stauffenberg arrived. He was able to persuade his fellow conspirators at Replacement Army headquarters that Hitler was dead, despite anything they might have heard to the contrary. Together they made one more attempt to persuade Fromm to put Valkyrie II into motion. Fromm refused and ordered the conspirators be placed under arrest. Stauffenberg told Fromm he misapprehended who was in charge and ordered Fromm be taken into custody. He was.

Half an hour later, Ludwig Beck, the former Army chief of staff and the coup plotters designated replacement for Hitler, arrived at the headquarters. He was disturbed to learn that Operation

Valkyrie II had barely gotten started. More reports were coming in that Hitler had survived the assassination attempt. Beck wanted to proceed with the coup anyway, but most of the officers at Replacement Army headquarters were uncertain.

At the Wolf's Lair, military commanders were contacting headquarters across the Reich by telephone, informing them that the Führer had survived but that a coup attempt was in the works and not to accept any orders from Replacement Army headquarters.

At 6:30, German radio reported that Hitler was alive. Inside Replacement Army headquarters, that was the clinching proof. It was no longer possible to believe, or even hope, otherwise. Outside Replacement Army headquarters, police and soldiers had cordoned off the area.

Stauffenberg spent the evening telephoning various military headquarters, ordering them to proceed with Operation Valkyrie II. Eventually, other officers at headquarters, both Hitler supporters and former coup supporters who realized the cause was lost, banded together and freed General Fromm. Soldiers outside forced their way into the building and took the coup leaders into custody. Fromm left the room, returned a short time later, and announced that a court martial had sentenced four of the coup leaders, including Stauffenberg, to death. He ordered the condemned marched out into the building's courtyard, where they were executed.

Fromm apparently wanted to demonstrate his opposition to the coup, and likely also wanted dead witnesses who could testify that Fromm himself had been at least a little bit coup-curious.

By that evening, Hitler's mood had darkened. He vowed that "I am going to make such an example of them that no one will ever feel the slightest desire to commit a similar betrayal of the German people."

At 11:30 that evening, a radio truck arrived, and from there Hitler gave an address that was broadcast across the Reich, so everyone could hear for themselves his familiar voice. He told them that "a tiny clique of ambitious, unscrupulous, criminal, stupid officers" had tried to kill him and seize control of the Reich. He again spoke of how Providence had spared him for the sake of his sacred mission, and then invoked the stab-in-the-back myth, comparing the day's events to the supposed betrayal in 1918. But this time, he assured his listeners, the conspirators "would be paid back in the fashion National Socialists are accustomed to."

So why did the coup fail? It was partly bad luck. First, the staff meeting had been moved up, which didn't give Stauffenberg enough time to fully prepare. Second, the meeting had been moved into an above-ground barracks with the windows opened, rather than held in an underground bunker, closed in so that the force of the explosion would be greater.

But even if Hitler had died, many in the Wehrmacht and in the SS would have remained loyal to the regime. The best the coup plotters could have hoped for was civil war between military units loyal to the coup leaders and those loyal to the Nazi government.

And beyond that, it seems unlikely the coup leaders could ever have convinced the German public of the rightness of their cause. Germany was about to enter the sixth year of the war surrounded by enemies and threatened with extinction. The murder of the national leader during such dire circumstances would be perceived not as an act of justice or liberation, but as a shocking betrayal by the Army, the very people entrusted with the safety and security of the Reich.

We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd like to thank Andy and William for their kind donations, and thank you to Seth for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Andy and William and Seth help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone always, so my thanks to them and to all of you who have pitched in and helped out. If you'd like to become a patron or make a donation, you are most welcome; just visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

As always, the podcast website also contains notes about the music used on the podcast. You know the drill. If you hear a piece of music on the podcast and you would like to know more about it, including the composer, the performers, and a link to where you can download it, that would be the place to go. While you're there, you can leave a comment and let me know what you thought about today's show.

And I hope you'll join me next week, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*; as we get caught up on developments in Normandy and in the United States, the Democrats nominate Franklin Roosevelt for a fourth term as President. That's next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. Before I leave this topic, I want to say a word about the involvement of the two most senior German Army commanders on the Western Front: Günther von Kluge and Erwin Rommel.

Erwin Rommel was in the hospital on the day of the assassination attempt. Three days earlier, as Rommel was riding in a staff car visiting various German headquarters on the Normandy front, as was his habit, the car was strafed by an Allied fighter. The driver was hit and Rommel fell out of the car and fractured his skull.

In the years after the war, American, South African, Canadian, Free French, British, and New Zealander pilots have come forward and claimed credit for the attack, but no one knows for certain who it was.

But during the investigations in the aftermath of the assassination attempt, Rommel's name came up several times. His exact degree of involvement remains unclear. He is known to have urged an end to the war, and it appears likely that at the very least he was aware of the plot, even if he

did not condone it. It was alleged that Rommel had agreed with the conspirators to be part of a post-Hitler German government.

The Nazis, however, were not interested in the finer points of Rommel's degree of involvement. They wanted retribution against anyone even peripherally involved, but Rommel was so famous and popular that to condemn him as a traitor and execute him would have been a serious morale shock for the German public.

With that in mind, Rommel was offered the choice between a treason prosecution and suicide. He chose suicide. If he had chosen prosecution, he would have exposed not only himself but his family to Nazi justice. Suicide allowed the German government to announce publicly that the 52-year-old war hero had died from injuries related to the Allied attack and give him a state funeral. It also meant his family would be safe and would receive his military pension.

Günther von Kluge, commander-in-chief in the West at the time, had known about the assassination plot for years and had agreed to support the military coup. On July 20, having erroneously been informed that the assassination was a success, Kluge issued military arrest warrants for more than 1,200 SS officers in Paris, though when he learned that Hitler was alive, he hastily rescinded the warrants.

What happened next? Well, that's a story for another episode.

[music: Closing War Theme]