

The Beacon

SFX - trucks idle; men in heavy boots and canvas pants jog over cobblestones and sand; in the distance, Wagner rings out from a gramophone into the city night; a man breathes raggedly and deep

1944 in Berlin. It's high summer, but Colonel Claus von Stauffenberg can see his breath in the midnight air.

He stands in the courtyard of the Bendlerblock, with three other officers, defeated yet defiant.

Trucks and staff cars manoeuvre in the darkness to play their headlights on a pile of construction sand. Soldiers crowd around the walls of the courtyard, watching. A squad of ten soldiers, rifles at their shoulders, march into position.

A command calls General Friedrich Olbricht, into the light. Bleary eyed and exhausted, he stands as a lieutenant barks out orders. The firing party steps forward. They aim their rifles, and unleash a hail of bullets.

Olbricht falls dead on the cobblestones.

Stauffenberg is ordered forward. As he steps into the light, all can see his field grey tunic is stained with blood from an untreated bullet wound. He faces his executioners and calls out, in a loud, clear voice "long live sacred Germany!"

From somewhere beyond the headlights, the order to shoot is given. But von Stauffenberg's aide Lieutenant Werner von Haeften hurls himself in front of Claus, intercepting the volley. Haeften falls dead at his feet.

Orders echo round the courtyard again.

This time, the bullets reach their intended target. Claus von Stauffenberg lies dead on the courtyard stones.

Blinking behind his spectacles in the glare of the headlights, Colonel Albrecht Mertz von Quirnheim stands forward as ordered. Commands ring out, and then Mertz is shot dead.

All four officers, executed without legal process.

Welcome to Treason, the remarkable and true story of Claus von Stauffenberg and the plot to assassinate Hitler.

MX in - theme

In July 1944, Claus von Stauffenberg was just 36 years old. He was a brilliant staff officer, regarded by many, including Hitler, as the most brilliant in the German Army. He was a decorated war hero. He had been badly wounded in North Africa, losing his right hand, two fingers of his left hand, and his left eye: he could have sat out the war on a pension. He was married with four children, and his wife was pregnant with their fifth. He had everything to live for – and yet he was prepared to risk all that to try and rid the world of Adolf Hitler and the Nazis.

MX fades

I'm Brian Walters. I've lived with the example of Claus von Stauffenberg, and the other members of the German resistance, for most of my adult life. My father lived in Nazi Germany in 1939 and only narrowly made his escape. During his time there he met people opposed to the Nazi regime and discussed it with them. I first read about Claus von Stauffenberg as a schoolboy. And his example of courage and clarity of purpose – when all around them clamoured in support of the Führer – has stayed with me all my life; a recurring inspiration. This podcast is a result of that long fascination.

MX in - theme (stripped back)

Episode one, The Beacon.

MX fades

SFX - battle sounds; an army on the march; tanks

By July 1944, Germany was locked in a titanic struggle with the Soviet Union. For many Germans, Stalin's Red Army – crushing victors at Stalingrad and Kursk – was a slaving,

barbarian horde, responsible for the slaughter of 22,000 Polish prisoners of war at Katyn in 1940. And now, that Army was advancing on the Fatherland.

Many German people felt they needed the Nazi regime to protect them against the Soviets. Despite Hitler's iron rule, the alternative, now almost upon them, was an unthinkable horror.

And resistance to the Nazi regime was perilous. To stand against this was to risk career, freedom, family – and life itself.

Yet, some were prepared to oppose the Nazis. From the inception of the Nazi regime, with growing ingenuity, determination, and even desperation, brave men and women in Germany worked to overthrow Hitler and save their country.

One of these men was Colonel Count Claus von Stauffenberg.

MX in - string drones

He and the German resistance undertook their insurrection in the face of tremendous obstacles and strong arguments for inaction. To be involved was lonely, terrifying, and utterly committing.

With the July 1944 plot, Stauffenberg and his co-conspirators acted from a profound sense of moral responsibility for their country. They were not brought together by class, philosophy or creed – but by character.

Stauffenberg's conspiracy failed. The resistance failed to assassinate Hitler. They failed to seize control of the German Reich, remove the Nazis or end the war.

Yet, amid the darkness of Hitler's Third Reich, they acted with courage and principle. The blow they struck in July 1944 stands as a beacon of moral clarity for humanity.

Let us go back before 1944, to explore how Claus became the man who would try to topple the tyrant.

MX in - Swaap, v Isterdael

Claus von Stauffenberg knew he was descended from great figures in German history – the Hohenstaufen emperors, and great field marshals like Gneisenau, and Yorck von Wartenburg. His family also produced prince bishops, counts, knights, barons and great soldiers stretching back in an illustrious array for almost a thousand years.

SFX - German countryside

At the turn of the 20th century, the nation of Germany was still new, having been formed in 1871 as a federation of the kingdoms, principalities and grand duchies that made up its component states, including Bavaria, Württemberg and Prussia. There were several existing kings, with the king of Prussia, the largest state, being proclaimed Kaiser, or emperor, of Germany as a whole.

Claus's father, Alfred, was a former army major who served as Lord Chamberlain – in charge of the royal household and the business of the king of Württemberg.

Claus's mother, Caroline, was a close friend of Queen Charlotte of Württemberg before either were married. Queen Charlotte was a frequent visitor to the Stauffenberg home.

In March 1905, Caroline gave birth to twin boys Berthold and Alexander.

Then two years later, in November 1907, Caroline gave birth to a second set of twin boys: Claus Philipp Maria Justinian, and Konrad. A day later Konrad died. Through his childhood Claus spoke of his twin and the sadness flowing from Konrad's death.

The family lived in the Lord Chamberlain's apartments in the Old Castle in Stuttgart, a short distance from the Royal Palace. They spent their summer holidays at the family estate at Lautlingen, in the Swabian alps.

The boys enjoyed a cultured upbringing – they learnt (and spoke) French and English, read a wide variety of literature, and played piano and violin. Claus took up the cello.

MX in - solo cello (Claus' theme)

Claus and his brothers joined with others in their school on hikes with the 'New Scouts'. On these trips they would sing and talk around the campfire, and sometimes read from the cycle of poems *The Star of the Covenant* by Stefan George.

Claus was not quite seven when the First World War broke out.

SFX - World War 1 battlefield

Several of his uncles and other relatives fought in the conflict.

The writer Sebastian Haffner was the same age as Claus. He lived in Berlin during the First World War, and in his memoir *Defying Hitler* captures what it must have been like for many boys living through this experience. He writes that they saw the war as a type of game, tallying up the number of prisoners taken, miles advanced and ships sunk like the points in a boxing match.

One morning Claus von Stauffenberg

... came to his mother sobbing: his brothers had told him that in ten years' time they would be able to join up, but he would not. It took his mother a long time to soothe him, and she ended up promising that she would be 'heroic' and would let all her boys go. Claus prayed every evening that all the soldiers would come home again, all the wounded be healed, and every fallen soldier go to heaven.

In late 1918, Germany publicly conceded that she could not win the war. Discord spread through the country. After years straining together towards victory, suddenly the traces were relaxed. Strikes, mutinies and open revolt rocked the country.

SFX - angry crowds; cheering; protest

On 7 November, the Bavarian government and its monarchy was overthrown. A Bavarian republic was proclaimed. Bavaria being adjacent to Württemberg, the Stauffenberg family watched these events with alarm.

Two days later, a mob formed in the centre of Stuttgart outside the Old Castle, where the Stauffenbergs lived. The crowd brandished communist red flags and cheered revolutionary speakers. The soldiers who were on duty to guard the king deserted. The throng pushed its way into the royal palace.

Claus's father, Alfred, and other royal officials, prevented the surging mass from penetrating the king's apartments, but the crowd lowered the royal standard, and raised a red flag.

It was a terrifying time for Claus and his family. Although they had relatives killed in the First World War, they had been cocooned in privilege. The war had been fought in far-off places like France and Belgium. Now, just as talk of peace was spreading, the war came to their door.

MX in - Auf Wiedersehen My Dear

The monarchy in Württemberg was finished, and having achieved this, the crowd dispersed. After they had gone, Claus's mother went to the queen. She saw the king with tears trickling down his beard. The Württemberg house had been founded almost nine centuries earlier, and now he had presided over its downfall.

German Chancellor Max von Baden, having demanded the Kaiser's abdication and impatient when he refused, announced the abdication anyway. That night the Kaiser took his imperial train into exile in Holland, and Claus's father took the king and queen of Württemberg from Stuttgart by car. The Stauffenbergs' way of life as trusted royal courtiers was at an end. Now the people would rule. Aristocrats would have to learn to take orders.

It was four days before Claus's 11th birthday. When his birthday came, Claus held back tears. Overwhelmed with his country's defeat, he did not want a celebration, describing it as the saddest day of his life. Claus expressed disappointment that the king had left Stuttgart without a struggle.

MX fade

Four years of war ruined Germany financially. Soldiers returned to their homes bitter and beaten, and with little prospect of rebuilding their lives. Although German forces were in

full retreat by the end of 1918, and despite the strikes and unrest coming after German overtures for peace, these conditions enabled a dangerous justification for the defeat to grow: Germany had been 'stabbed in the back' by those at home, whose treachery had betrayed those at the front. The strikers and revolutionaries were blamed for Germany's defeat.

The 'stab in the back' was a comforting myth and achieved popular currency.

In the power vacuum that followed the removal of the Kaiser and the kings and other rulers of the German States, political turmoil erupted.

Senior German officers, fearing both invasion of Germany by the Red Army and internal revolution by Communists, raised large private armies of returning soldiers, called Freikorps.

SFX - angry people on the streets; small gun battles; skirmishes

Conflict in Germany between the political left and right followed. The Communists staged an uprising against the Social Democrats. The Freikorps and the Army then violently suppressed the Communists.

Unrest spilt across Germany as far as Stuttgart, where there were marches, strikes and shootings. On one occasion, in response to the sound of gunfire, Countess Stauffenberg strode down to the school where Claus and his brothers were studying and hustled them straight home.

War ceased in 1918 on the basis of an Armistice, subject to negotiation of a comprehensive peace treaty. The following spring, the victorious Allied powers gathered for a peace conference at Versailles. But the German delegation was excluded, and at the conclusion the victors dictated terms. If they were not accepted, the Allies would occupy Germany.

They were required to cede large areas of territory to Poland, France and Belgium, and were to lose all colonies. A heavy burden of reparations and economic restrictions was imposed.

Their Army was to be reduced to a rump. They were to have no military aircraft, tanks or U-boats. Almost all the navy was to go. The Kaiser and other German war leaders were to be surrendered to the Allies for trial. Germany was to acknowledge guilt for the war.

In May 1919, when these terms were announced, there was outrage across Germany, uniting all political groups except the Communists. Calls for armed resistance were made across the country. The Allies stood firm, insisting on acceptance by 24 June 1919.

With the Army demobilised, and no hope of military resistance to the Allies' demands, the German decision to accept the terms was transmitted 19 minutes before the deadline.

MX in - Claus' theme

In May 1919, the Stauffenberg family retired to their country estate at Lautlingen, where they were, comparatively speaking, out of harm's way.

For Claus, just entering his teens, these tumultuous political events could have been profoundly destabilising. But both parents remained strong and clear-headed throughout – there was neither despair nor panic. The old national foundations – king, aristocracy, and formal religion – were powerless in the face of the calamities that rocked the country.

MX fade

Later, during his teenage years, national life returned to a measure of stability. Claus resumed school, where he excelled.

At 14, Claus wrote in a school essay that he subscribed to the ideals of 'freedom, order, concord' as his life's aim, and that it was the natural destiny of the citizen 'to further the welfare of the state in his profession.' He was growing into a congenial, confident young man.

In May 1923, with uncontrolled inflation ravaging Germany, the Stauffenberg brothers were introduced to the great German poet Stefan George.

MX in - Thom Denijs - Dichterliebe

George was something of a prophet, a person who saw it as his responsibility to preserve the spirit of Germany, and pass it on. He projected an air of apocalyptic intensity. He took the greatest interest in the development of his disciples, amongst whom the Stauffenberg brothers were prominent. He was deeply concerned for the future of Germany, calling his inner circle 'Secret Germany'. But to everyone else, his band of acolytes were known as The George Circle. His followers called him 'the Master'.

The Stauffenberg brothers were to become some of the most trusted of Stefan George's inner circle. George made Berthold one of the two executors of his will with special responsibility for the future of 'Secret Germany'.

Some have tried to allege that George was in some way the precursor of the Nazis. Rather, it was Stefan George's fate to have his terms and symbols adopted by the Nazis – but without the inner meaning he attached to those terms and symbols. There are many examples. His last book of poems, published in 1928, is entitled *The New Reich*. George's conception was entirely different from Hitler's ambitions for his Reich – it involved an inner realm – and yet the Nazis' co-option of the term gave their aspirations a faux intellectualism and spirituality.

Stefan George also adopted the swastika as a symbol for all that is good in Germany. He had it printed on the cover of his books of poetry. It was a choice which fired the popular imagination of a country searching for national identity. Other nationalist publications, and some anti-Semitic ones, began using the swastika. The fledgling Nazi party jumped on the bandwagon, adopting the swastika in 1920. They more commonly referred to it as the Hakenkreuz (hooked cross).

In the 1920s, George publicly stated, through his publisher, that the swastika should not be seen as a political symbol, but by then he could not turn back the tide.

MX in - Thom Denijs - Dichterliebe (reprisal)

Claus was a member of the Stefan George circle from the age of 17 until the death of the poet when Claus was 27. George reinforced Claus's sense of the spiritual greatness –

even nobility – of Germany's past. He also emphasised Claus's heritage as a descendent of the Hohenstaufen rulers of Europe. Not only did George feed Claus's artistic and aesthetic sensitivity, but he also counselled Claus to make the most of his life – to use it in a way that fulfilled his destiny.

Claus's choice of vocation was the subject of intense interest among friends and family and in the George circle. He considered a career as a solo cellist. In the end, he was strongly influenced by his sense of aristocratic inheritance and obligation.

In 1926, at the age of eighteen, Claus von Stauffenberg did what he had dreamed of as a child: he joined the German army.

SFX - regiment in training; jogging, military whistle and snare

Claus threw himself into his career, but did not abandon his old interests. He could often be heard practising his cello in the barracks.

MX in - muffled cello (as if inside, heard from from outside)

He gained a reputation for great efficiency, for friendly manners towards all, and for imaginative tactical insights. His superiors noted that he was widely read, had unusually wide-ranging interests, liked to talk, and had a strong influence on his fellows – often mediating in disputes.

Claus graduated in 1929, first in the list of cavalry officer cadets. He was awarded the Sword of Honour for outstanding performance. One of his regimental colleagues, Henning Wilcke, described him as a 'blazing sacred fire'.

In 1930, at the age of 22, Claus met Nina Baroness von Lerchenfeld at a ball. She was sixteen.

MX in - Mystery Waltz

Her mother mentioned him to her, admiring his fine manners and the way he so correctly kissed the ladies' hands. The other girls were enthusiastic: 'That Stauffenberg dances so

well!' All this made Nina react negatively. She took a set against him, but Claus was attracted to her. It wasn't long before Nina warmed to his charm and congeniality.

Her father was Baron Gustav von Lerchenfeld – the former royal chamberlain to the king of Bavaria – precisely paralleling Claus's father's role at the Württemberg court.

On Claus 's twenty-third birthday in 1930, the young couple became engaged at Nina's parents' home.

MX in - Kevin MacLeod - Wagner Bridal Waltz

Nina had turned seventeen three months earlier.

SFX - wedding; people applauding; glass and cutlery clinking; chatter

In April of the next year, they were married - a time of hope and joy for the young couple. It was a glittering occasion. Claus wore full uniform - including his helmet. 'To marry,' he said, 'is to be on duty.'

The ceremony took place amidst a nation in flux. Germany was in the grip of the depression, and President Hindenburg was losing the faith of his parliament and the people.

MX in - Nazi theme

Within two years, the Nazi Party would take control. Their ascension ushering in one of the darkest chapters in human history.

MX fade

Treason is written and narrated by me, Brian Walters. Script editing, original music, sound design and editing is by Sam Loy.

You can learn more about Claus von Stauffenberg and German Resistance with the book, *Treason*. Available through Apple Books or the website brianwalters.com You can find a link in the episode's show notes.

All the very best, and may you find the inspiration you need in your life.