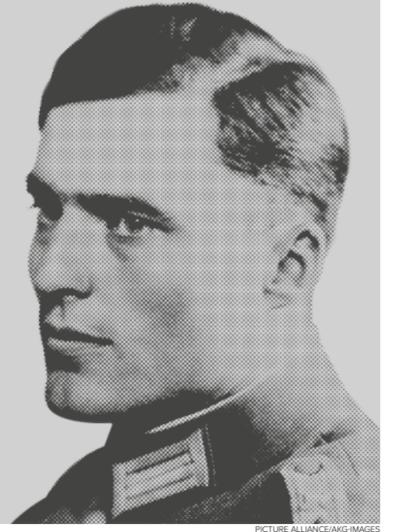


The great historical gray area

A new biography of Claus von Stauffenberg, the man who tried to kill Hitler, has reignited a long-running historical debate. It says a lot about the German state of mind



PICTURE ALLIANCE/ANG-IMAGES

BY LUTZ LICHTENBERGER

At midnight on July 20, 1944, four men are escorted to the inner yard of the Bendlerblock, the headquarters of German Army in Berlin. The glaring headlights of military vehicles cast the scene in a ghostly atmosphere. The firing squad consists of 10 petty officers. They proceed to execute four conspirators, chief among them a high-ranking officer named Claus Schenk Graf von Stauffenberg.

Earlier that day, Stauffenberg had detonated a bomb at the Wolf's Lair, Adolf Hitler's Eastern Front military headquarters – a two-hour flight from Berlin. The dictator had survived the assassination attempt thanks to a series of flukes, but primarily because hot temperatures that day caused the venue for the tactical session to be moved from the bunker, where the bomb would have caused considerably more damage, to a lightly built shack nearby.

In the ensuing hours, the conspirators nonetheless went forward with their elaborate plan to overthrow the regime in Berlin, but after the *Führer* himself called several loyal generals and officers, Stauffenberg and his men were captured and killed. With their deaths, the plot to end the Nazi stranglehold over Germany and

most of Europe was all but over. The regime did not end until ten months later, when the Allies captured Berlin and Hitler killed himself in his bunker there. The debate in Germany about the legacy of the men involved in the July 20 plot has been raging on ever since.

A controversial new biography about the coup's leader, *Stauffenberg. Porträt eines Attentäters* (Stauffenberg. Portrait of an assassin; Blessing Verlag, 2019) by Thomas Karlauf has caused tempers to flare and reignited the long-running debate.

In the 1950s, the conspirator's reputation was discredited among large groups of the population. This occurred among the remaining proponents of Nazi ideology, but more disturbingly also among former functionaries and passive adherents who wanted to discredit the initiative to end the regime, in part because they felt it was an indictment on their complacency between 1933 and 1945. Authorities denied pensions to many of the descendants of the men involved in the plot. There was also no official acknowledgement of the group of July 20.

Critics from the left have their own list of admonishments, including the following: the conspirators were mostly officers who had adhered to Nazi ideology; they did not begin to oppose Hitler until it became increasingly inconceivable that the war they

had participated in could be won; they were mostly of aristocratic origin, their values not in line with democratic norms. And, in the leftists' view, Germany had to be totally defeated by the Allies to ensure that they would not be spared from facing up to all the crimes and atrocities they committed (most of all the attempted extermination of the Jews).

Beginning in the 1970s, however, a new appreciation emerged. The Bundeswehr, looking for moral legitimization, officially adopted the legacy of July 20 as part of its identity – service men should be *Staatsbürger in Uniform*, citizens in uniform, not slavish adherents to an authoritarian state. The German army traditionally swears in new recruits every year in a big ceremony on July 20.

Now Karlauf has written an erudite and elegant biography, a reexamination of Stauffenberg's life and the formative influences on his thinking while managing to land squarely in the middle between both of today's camps. Those who declare the men of July 20 transcendent heroes as well as the left-leaning critics can read into Karlauf's book precisely what they want to hear.

The author set out to write about Stauffenberg using only sources – documents, letters, memoirs – from before 1945, that is, before the mythmaking began in earnest by both friends and detractors.

Stauffenberg was primarily influenced in his youth by the charismatic spell of the poet and – as he would be deemed today – cult leader Stefan George. George, born in 1868, had gathered around him a group of young men dedicated to poetry and male companionship imbued with at least a hint of homoeroticism. No less radical than Karl Marx, who urged philosophers not only to interpret the world but to be willing to change it, George, albeit with a different world view, spoke of poetry as a revolutionary force with the potential to overthrow existing orders. “George from the beginning considered himself to be a poet of ‘the act,’” Karlauf writes. “Conspiracy and overthrow were central elements of his world view; ‘the act’ became the decisive metaphor of his poetry.”

Karlauf traces Stauffenberg's slowly evolving thinking from romanticizing about a new Germany in the 1920s, welcoming the Nazi regime in 1933 and approving of the war until realizing that Hitler would amount to nothing but Germany's ruin.

Like many of his co-conspirators, once Stauffenberg reached this conclusion, he advanced the planning of the assassination and urged his overly cautious and scrupulous fellow officers and civilians to follow suit. By the summer of 1944, he had become so indispensable to Operation Valkyrie, as the plot was

called, that after taking it upon himself to detonate the bomb at Wolf's Lair, he flew back to Berlin where he was needed to coordinate the plan of arresting the most important Nazi figures such as Heinrich Himmler and Joseph Goebbels.

It is a very distinct point Karlauf is making. Stauffenberg was not the idealist hero his proponents to make him out to be today. His aristocratic upbringing did not imbue him with immunity against the Nazi mob. He did not try to kill Hitler because of Auschwitz, or all the other camps, or the rampant corruption, or the establishment of a police state. He did it because Hitler was losing the war.

Instead, Karlauf credits Stauffenberg with epitomizing Max Weber's concept of *Verantwortungsethik* (ethic of responsibility). After Stalingrad, the gruesome defeat of the Sixth Army in Russia during the winter of 1942–1943, Stauffenberg came to the conclusion that the war could not be won and that Hitler did not have the right to take the entire German people down with him. The man had to go. “This kind of reasoned military and political assessment,” Karlauf writes, “does not jibe with our view of July 20 as a beacon of moral outrage.”

Case in point, Sophie von Bechtoldsheim, granddaughter of Stauffenberg, responded with an impassioned critique of Karlauf's book in a speech in March.

“Categories like morals and conscience cannot be located on this side or that side of political party lines,” she wrote, “but only within a person. It should therefore actually be called an uprising of those who followed their conscience.”

Jens Jessen, also a grandchild of a July 20 conspirator, delivered a very critical and extensive review in *Die Zeit*, but drew some interesting conclusions relevant to the ongoing debate. No earlier biography had brought us so close to Stauffenberg while allowing him to remain the distant figure that he was, Jessen writes. The journalist and descendent reads Karlauf's biography as an attempt to delegitimize Stauffenberg's heroics while identifying a common tendency among Germans, the will to allocate blame equally: “There shall not have been heroes.”

What Jessen fails to grasp is that great historical gray area in which all seemingly larger-than-life yet flawed figures exist. What Karlauf makes patently clear in his copious portrait is that Stauffenberg is part of Germany's history, of both its highs and its lows, and the critical figure in a corresponding debate that cannot and should not be constrained by the affixing of ahistorical slogans.

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LUTZ LICHTENBERGER'S TRANS-ATLANTIC BOOK REVIEW

THE NEGOTIATOR

There is a whiff of Cold War nostalgia permeating Horst Teltschik's book on the geopolitical state of play. But its profound historical underpinnings form the sturdy foundation of *Russisches Roulette. Vom Kalten Krieg zum Kalten Frieden* (Russian Roulette. From Cold War to Cold Peace).

Teltschik spent his formative political years in the 1980s serving as then-Chancellor Helmut Kohl's senior foreign policy advisor. In the 2000s, Teltschik was head of the Munich Security Conference – and his experience in politics, diplomacy and international punditry serves him well in limning the contours of the current lines of conflict between the West and Russia.

It has often been said that the personal relationships between political leaders play an important role in high-stakes negotiations. Teltschik, as one might expect, would seem natural, thinks highly of Kohl; he convincingly recounts how the chancellor quietly put together a string of 27 treaties and accords between the Soviet Union and Germany in 1989 and 1990 alone. Kohl understood the Russians' political and psychological needs for security assurances, the sum of which proved “in the end to be the key to German reunification.”

Teltschik does not spare criticism of today's Russia and its misdeeds and at times nefarious behavior, but his impetus is for the West and NATO to understand how to more effectively deal with Moscow. John F. Kennedy's strategy for peace was based on first “understanding the interests of one's opponents, regardless of what one thought of them. Is there anyone who truly believes Russia will just give in without getting anything in return?”

Some of Teltschik's policy recommendations – dialogue, balancing of interests, building foundations of trust – might come across as diplomatic boiler plate, but his story has compelling historic evidence on its side.

HORST TELTSCHIK

Russisches Roulette. Vom Kalten Krieg zum Kalten Frieden, C.H. Beck, Munich, 2019

BACKWARDS

Wolfgang Schivelbusch is the great other among German historians. The 77-year-old has been living in New York and Berlin for decades; he was never associated with a university, and certainly does not write like a typical college professor. In 2001, he published *Die Kultur der Niederlage* (The Culture of Defeat: The American South 1865, France 1871, Germany 1918) – a military history mixed with an elaboration on the mentalities that dictated how societies learned to cope with military defeat – which has become a minor classic.

Now Schivelbusch has written a prequel of sorts. In his new short book *Rückzug. Geschichten eines Tabus* (Retreat. Histories of a taboo), he examines how a military retreat, whether tactical or forced, can strain armies, generals and, most of all, the public. “The experience of withdrawal sets in once an offensive movement – political, religious, economic, technical, cultural or military – encounters a dominant opponent,” he writes. To persevere would be to risk defeat, but the movement could be mistaken for the extreme version of withdrawal – taking flight.

Schivelbusch looks at Napoleon in Russia, France and the Battle of the Frontiers in 1914 as well as Great Britain at Dunkirk in 1940. His most interesting and consequential chapter, however, deals with the United States and Vietnam. The author recounts how the domino theory became the “theoretical and strategic basis for the Vietnam War” and equates it with the modern version of retreat-phobia. It is an oddity of history, he writes, “retreat-phobia afflicts Goliath, but only seldom David.” The weak are superior to the strong because they can move in any direction and have less to lose. They fight only for themselves, not for the bigger audience – the general public.

Today, in the West, withdrawal has a new name, so as not to hurt national pride. “The term ‘exit strategy’ suggests that everything – including possible failure – had been under control from the very beginning.”

WOLFGANG SCHIVELBUSCH

Rückzug. Geschichten eines Tabus, Carl Hanser Verlag, Munich, 2019

THEORY AND PRACTICE

A *New Yorker* cartoon shows a man is sitting in bed at night with his computer. His wife wakes up and asks what he's doing, typing so late? “Someone's wrong on the internet,” he says.

Werner Plumpe, a professor of economic history at the University of Frankfurt, has written a major work, the product of decades of diligent and insightful scholarship that can only be admired. And yet it reads like an 800-page answer to every not-so-smart opinion ever uttered about capitalism. *Das kalte Herz. Kapitalismus: Die Geschichte einer andauernden Revolution* (The cold heart. Capitalism: the history of an ongoing revolution) strives to distill how an economic system was able to take off after its humble beginnings in 17th-century Holland and England.

Plumpe's book is very German in its undoubtedly sincere attempt to understand capitalism as an idea or concept, not a plea for TINA (Margaret Thatcher's mantra “There is no alternative”). No reform would be possible, he says, without comprehending the foundations of the market economy.

Plumpe ticks off one theory after the next for the creation and sustainability of capitalism – technological logic, intrinsic motivation of individuals, the use of force, geography, climate or soil conditions – and refutes all of them with mountains of historical evidence.

The very short version of Plumpe's very long answer to how capitalism came to succeed: A variety of conditions were met, i.e. private property enabled market activity, and subsequently through variation and selection, created a model for material reproduction spanning the entire globe.

Plumpe is no Randian apologist; he is well aware of all the problems commonly associated with capitalism, like inequality, exploitation and the plundering of resources. If only real-world capitalism would comply more often with his ever-so-profound theoretical rationale for open and free markets.

WERNER PLUMPE

Das kalte Herz. Kapitalismus: Die Geschichte einer andauernden Revolution, Rowohlt Berlin Verlag, Berlin, 2019