

Valkyrie: A thriller, but not a historical film

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Directed by Bryan Singer, screenplay by Christopher McQuarrie and Nathan Alexander.

Valkyrie is a thriller, but it is not a historical film. Director Bryan Singer, screenplay writers Christopher McQuarrie and Nathan Alexander, and lead actor Tom Cruise have utilized the July 20, 1944, assassination attempt on Hitler as the basis for a story that has more to do with the ideological stereotypes of the Bush era than the realities of Germany in 1944.

Formal details—the physical appearance of the protagonists and particulars of the assassination attempt—have been copied from history with great care, skill and all the means at Hollywood’s disposal. Their ideas, motives, political convictions and social backgrounds, however, remain in the dark. There is good and evil, heroes and criminals, black and white, but no intermediate tones, no contradictions, no development, no social context.

Tom Cruise has slipped into the uniform of the Hitler assassin Claus Schenk von Stauffenberg in order to play one of those positive heroes of which there are dozens in the cinema. He portrays Stauffenberg as a spotless figure, determined to eliminate Hitler and his regime. “You can serve Germany or the Führer, but not both,” he proclaims in the first scene, which takes place in the African desert. Shortly thereafter he is wounded and returns to Germany.

This is sufficient to explain Stauffenberg’s motives. The authors consider anything more to be superfluous.

This depiction has little to do with the real Stauffenberg—an opponent of democracy, an anti-Semite and an initial supporter of the war. Stauffenberg’s political and ideological conceptions would fit badly into an epic about a hero, and are therefore excluded.

In an article for the *Süddeutsche Zeitung Magazin*, historian Richard J. Evans, a specialist on the Third Reich, described the convictions of the Hitler assassin as follows: “Stauffenberg’s moral outlook was a multi-layered assortment of Catholic teachings, an aristocratic code of ethics, the ethos of old Greece and German romantic

poetry.” Under the influence of the poet Stefan George, Stauffenberg aspired to “an idealized medieval empire” through which “Europe, under the leadership of Germany, would acquire a new measure of culture and civilization.”

These conceptions were compatible with the goals of the Nazis. Although Stauffenberg never joined Hitler’s party, whose plebeian character contradicted his own elitist proclivities, he supported Hitler in the 1932 elections for Reich president and celebrated his appointment as Reich chancellor in 1933. He saw in the Nazis a “movement of national renewal that would put an end to the shabby parliamentary compromises of Weimar.” And he “believed that a policy of cleansing the German race and of eliminating Jewish influences from it had to form a crucial part of this renewal,” writes Evans.

Stauffenberg welcomed the war as a crucial step on the road to the creation of a great European empire under German supremacy. Only when defeat loomed did he become an opponent of Hitler. Although he rejected the mass murder of civilians, Jews and prisoners of war that accompanied the German offensive in the East, he did this less on moral grounds than out of strategic considerations. In his view, Germany’s great power plans could be realized only if it succeeded in winning a section of the civilian population. He wanted to provoke a civil war against Stalin’s regime, rather than turning the entire population into an enemy through terror.

The transformation of Stauffenberg from an enthusiastic Hitler supporter into a Hitler assassin could have made an interesting film. But such a movie would not contain the immaculate hero which Tom Cruise presents to us. It would have to show a considerably more complex character and raise questions that *Valkyrie* deliberately evades—questions about the political goals of the opposition, about its social composition, its relationship to other social layers, the condition of German society, etc.

The film does no such thing. It restricts its view to the narrow, military-aristocratic section of the resistance that Stauffenberg had joined. And even these figures appear schematic and flat, despite an outstanding cast.

In order to let Stauffenberg’s star shine more brightly, the

other protagonists are presented as waverers, cowards or opportunists—powerless older gentlemen who argue loudly about their plans and, in bureaucratic fashion, issue identification cards for the conspirators—an absurd depiction in view of the massive network of surveillance maintained by the Nazi state.

The film-goer learns even less about the background of these men than it does about Stauffenberg's. To a large extent, they were determined opponents of equality and democracy. Stauffenberg had them swear an oath despising "the lie of equality" and submitting themselves to the order of "natural rank." Most had supported Hitler when he smashed the workers' movement and re-armed Germany to avenge the "shame" of the Treaty of Versailles. They decided upon resistance only when they recognized that the war was lost and its continuation would lead to total defeat.

Civilians and ordinary people appear only peripherally in the film. The only exceptions are Stauffenberg's aristocratic wife Nina and Carl Friedrich Goerdeler, an arch-conservative, nationalist German politician whom the conspirators planned to make the future chancellor.

Clichés predominate here, as well. Nina is the pretty, loving spouse, accompanied by four sweet children, and Stauffenberg the caring father, all living in luxury and harmony. The picture is one of an idealised American family rather than a German officer's family in the midst of war.

Goerdeler represents "the politician" per se, and as such represents a disruptive influence. The overthrow of the Nazi dictatorship is not posed as a political problem, but as a purely military one, very much centred on the technical matter of explosives. This is the film's real credo. It is impossible not to see parallels to the contemporary ideology of the "war against terrorism," which defines socially and politically motivated conflicts as purely military ones and "resolves" them accordingly.

One conspirator announces: "There is no problem that cannot be resolved through the careful application of explosives." Stauffenberg himself insists: "This is not a political, but a military operation." He asserts that no civilians should be involved in the coup attempt. Control should remain in the hands of the officers, the "essential pillars of the state and the real embodiment of the nation."

There is a kernel of truth in this representation, but the film deals with it completely uncritically and even exaggerates it. In reality, the conspirators around Stauffenberg did maintain contacts with politicians, including some within the camp of the Social Democrats and the trade unions, such as the Social Democrat Julius Leber, whom they intended to be interior minister in their government.

However, they had no intention of unleashing a popular rebellion against the Nazis. Their political opinions and

social position forbade such a thing. Such a rebellion would not only have been directed against the Führer and his closest followers, but also against Hitler's backers in big business and in the military-aristocratic circles from which they themselves originated. Therefore they planned the revolt as a military conspiracy, in which political and social factors played only a subordinate role. This accounts for the dilettantish execution and failure of the conspiracy, which is portrayed in the film but not given a plausible explanation.

In reality, in Germany in 1944 there existed a widespread hostility to the Nazi regime. Twelve years earlier, in the last quasi-free elections, millions of workers had voted for the Social Democrats and the Communists. Many were ready to oppose the Nazis with weapons in their hands. But the failure of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and German Communist Party (KPD) leaders averted this, and the subsequent Nazi terror prevented any organized resistance. The majority of these communist and social democratic workers never supported the Nazis. They lived with their fists clenched in their pockets and would have supported any serious rebellion. Moreover, there were broad social layers that were disillusioned by the defeats and privations of the war and longed for its end.

But nothing of this can be seen in *Valkyrie*. The film presents Stauffenberg as a heroic lone fighter, upon whose energy, skill and determination the fate of Germany depends. The tension in the film comes exclusively from the course of the events depicted. Here, director Bryan Singer (*X-Men*, *Superman Returns*) knows his trade. The spectator is kept in suspense by the direction, camera work, editing and dramatic music. But this is not sufficient for a historical understanding of the 20 July plot.



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