

Record: 1

Title: A hero's tragic destiny meets ordinary psychology.

Authors: Krueger, Joachim I.
Rummel, Jan

Source: PsycCRITIQUES, Vol 54(20), 2009.

Publisher: US: American Psychological Association

Reviewed Item: Singer, Bryan (Dir) (2008). Valkyrie

ISSN: 1554-0138 (Electronic)

Language: English

Keywords: Operation Valkyrie; Hitler; assassination attempts; Nazi Germany

Abstract: Reviews the film, Valkyrie by Bryan Singer (2008). Claus Schenk Graf von Stauffenberg was a hero of the 20th century. Long misunderstood and denigrated in his own country and barely known outside of Germany, he fulfilled his destiny on July 20, 1944, when he blew up Hitler's barracks but failed to kill the man himself. Shortly after midnight the next day, he was condemned by a kangaroo court-martial and shot. Operation Valkyrie was a sophisticated contingency plan the Wehrmacht had set up at the beginning of World War II to restore order in case of a breakdown of government and administration. When Stauffenberg arrived in Berlin, he and his conspirators redesigned Valkyrie; in their hands, a mechanism meant to preserve existing executive power became an instrument for a coup d'état. Now, Valkyrie's purpose became the installment of a military-civilian administration that could immediately negotiate with the allies and sue for peace. Stauffenberg and his closest ally, Henning von Tresckow, hoped to end the slaughter and rescue what was left of the nation's dignity. Yet, they were aware of the possibility that their attempt would amount to only a defiant if noble gesture. Even assuming failure, they must have hoped that their story would be told and lessons about human strength and courage be learned. Clinical and personality psychologists will be interested in Stauffenberg's motives and the content of his character. Social psychologists will try to see Stauffenberg in context and ask how the situation drove his actions. There have been other films about Stauffenberg and the events of July 20, 1944, but few had a lasting impact. Valkyrie is another opportunity to bring Stauffenberg's story to the public's attention. (PsycINFO Database Record (c) 2009 APA, all rights reserved)

Subjects: *Fascism; *Government; *Political Assassination; *War

Classification: Social Processes & Social Issues (2900)

Population: Human (10)
Male (30)

Location: Germany

Format Availability: Electronic

Format Covered: Electronic

Publication Type: Electronic Collection

Document Type: Review-Media

Release Date: 20090518

Correction Date: 20091102

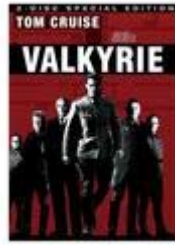
Digital Object Identifier: 10.1037/a0015405

PsycINFO AN: 2009-03935-001

Accession Number: psq-2008-7353-1-2

Number of Citations in Source: 10

Cover Image(s):



Database: PsycCRITIQUES

A Hero's Tragic Destiny Meets Ordinary Psychology

Review By: [Joachim I. Krueger](#)
[Jan Rummel](#)

Review of: Valkyrie

By: Bryan Singer (Director), (2008)

Claus Schenk Graf von Stauffenberg was a hero of the 20th century. Long misunderstood and denigrated in his own country and barely known outside of Germany, he fulfilled his destiny on July 20, 1944, when he blew up Hitler's barracks but failed to kill the man himself. Shortly after midnight the next day, he was condemned by a kangaroo court-martial and shot. According to witnesses, his last words were, "Long live our sacred Germany."

Operation Valkyrie was a sophisticated contingency plan the Wehrmacht had set up at the beginning of World War II to restore order in case of a breakdown of government and administration. When Stauffenberg arrived in Berlin, he and his conspirators redesigned Valkyrie; in their hands, a mechanism meant to preserve existing executive power became an instrument for a coup d'état. Now, Valkyrie's purpose became the installment of a military-civilian administration that could immediately negotiate with the allies and sue for peace.

Decision Making and Rationality

The film is called *Valkyrie*, and not *Stauffenberg*. The choice of title is significant as it emphasizes Stauffenberg's role within the broader context. He was not the lone and lurking assassin that the stereotype of tyrannicide brings to mind. Stauffenberg believed that Valkyrie could succeed, even if the odds were long. To prevail, he had to master an environment so complex that it would humble modern-day students of judgment and decision making. He knew that 14 attempts on Hitler's life had already failed, and he must have thought that the chance of success of yet another attempt was slim.

Stauffenberg faced the daunting task of assessing the plot's chances before making his move. In contrast, modern audiences perceive the events through the lens of hindsight. Today, one is struck by how close Stauffenberg came to success. Several things went wrong on that fatal day; had only one of them gone right, the attempt might have succeeded.

Consider the following: There was only enough time to arm one of the two bombs. The bombs did not have a metal casing and hence produced no shrapnel—only pressure. Hitler's staff meeting was not held in the usual bunker but in a wooden structure that could not contain the blast of the explosion. Someone knocked over the briefcase holding the bomb and then placed it on the far side of the massive oak table's leg. At the moment of explosion, Hitler was bent over the table. It is tempting to ask, "What were the odds that all of these things would go wrong?" when it is so easy to counterfactually imagine that at least one of them could have gone right (Roese, 1997).

This line of reasoning begets regret and perhaps anger at history and fate; yet, it overlooks the fact that some other things went right when they as easily could have gone wrong. No one checked Stauffenberg's briefcase on arrival. Stauffenberg himself was placed close to Hitler, as he had requested. He was allowed to leave the room when he claimed he had to make an urgent call. The armed bomb did go off (in von Tresckow's earlier attempt, a similar type of bomb failed to detonate). Stauffenberg was able to dupe the guards and escape when a lockdown was already in effect. Earlier, he and his conspirators had taken enormous risks in their efforts to recruit new members to their cause. Astonishingly, the Gestapo never caught on.

The movie also adds a scene in which Stauffenberg persuades Hitler to sign the revised Valkyrie plan. This fictitious flourish notwithstanding, it is humbling to contemplate these complexities and to mull the lesson that post hoc probabilistic modeling of historic events often casts more shadow than light (Fischhoff, 1975).

Stauffenberg and his closest ally, Henning von Tresckow (Kenneth Branagh), hoped to end the slaughter and rescue what was left of the nation's dignity. Yet, they were aware of the possibility that their attempt would amount to only a defiant if noble gesture. Even assuming failure, they must have hoped that their story would be told and lessons about human strength and courage be learned.

Stauffenberg may not have been fully rational by utilitarian standards. As we have seen, it would have been extraordinarily difficult to assess all the desired and unintended consequences of the coup along with their probabilities. The ultimate source of Stauffenberg's motivation lay in his sense of duty. Kant (1785/1964) counseled that one's conduct should be an example to others. By this criterion, Stauffenberg was both moral and rational. Indeed, his acceptance of the looming futility of his plan is why his actions and character can be called heroic.

[The Person in the Situation](#)

Clinical and personality psychologists will be interested in Stauffenberg's motives and the content of his character. Social psychologists will try to see Stauffenberg in context and ask how the situation drove his actions. Both perspectives are important but ultimately incomplete. The case of Stauffenberg is an opportunity to get past the shopworn person-versus-situation debate (Krueger, in press). What matters is the person *in* the situation, as Lewin (1936) understood long ago.

If Stauffenberg lived today, he might just be another urbane count. He might be honorable and principled, arrogant yet humane, but he would probably not be significant on a large scale. While this is speculation, we know that others who lived at his time did not rise to the occasion as he did (although one must differentiate between those who had access to Hitler's headquarters and those who did not). In other words, Stauffenberg exemplifies the significance of character in context.

Some of the lesser individuals responded to the situation with canny opportunism. General Fromm emerged as a potentially more disturbing figure than even Goebbels or Keitel (who worked to undo early claims of Hitler's death). Fromm first sent mixed messages to the conspirators, enough to make them hope he would sign the orders to set Operation Valkyrie in motion. Later, he sided with the Nazis and had Stauffenberg and others shot (in the end, he was executed himself). The conspirators misread the intentions of Major Remer, whom they entrusted with the task of disarming the SS in Berlin and arresting Goebbels. When Goebbels handed him the phone and he heard Hitler's voice, he became instrumental in the Nazi backlash and takeover of Stauffenberg's headquarters at Bendlerstrasse. It is interesting to ponder the "rationality" of these individuals. Fromm acted as a sophisticated utilitarian, and that is exactly why he deserves our contempt today.

Like genius, heroism is not necessarily rational by conventional standards, and it can show itself only under challenging circumstances. Academic psychology has made little progress toward a compelling theory of heroism. Current work on the construction of taxonomies (Zimbardo, 2007) or the study of the (non)existence of group differences (Becker & Eagly, 2004) is only a useful first step. In this climate, the figure of Stauffenberg is stimulating. If we understand how a person can be swept up by the current of historic events and at the same time transcend it, we can catch a glimpse of the extraordinary potential of human nature.

[Conclusion](#)

There have been other films about Stauffenberg and the events of July 20, 1944, but few had a lasting impact. *Valkyrie* is another opportunity to bring Stauffenberg's story to the public's attention. Much controversy has focused on the lead actor. Whatever one might think of Tom Cruise, it is our view that he did not abuse his role to come across as an action hero. We were impressed with the skill with which he portrayed Stauffenberg's aristocratic persona. For more background on the movie, its making, and critical acclaim, we recommend the entry in *Wikipedia* (*Valkyrie* [film], n.d.); for more information on Stauffenberg's personal and intellectual development, we recommend *Secret Germany* by Baigent and Leigh (2008); for the history of *Operation Valkyrie*, we suggest the eponymous book by Galante (2002).

[References](#)

- Baigent, M., & Leigh, R. (2008). *Secret Germany: Stauffenberg and the true story of Operation Valkyrie*. New York: Skyhorse Publishing.
- Becker, S. W., & Eagly, A. H. (2004). The heroism of women and men. *The American Psychologist*, 59, 163–178.
- Fischhoff, B. (1975). Hindsight ≠ foresight: The effect of outcome knowledge on judgment under uncertainty. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Perception and Performance*, 1, 288–299.
- Galante, P. (2002). *Operation Valkyrie*. New York: Cooper Square Press.
- Kant, I. (1964). *Groundwork of the metaphysic of morals* [Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten] (H. J. Paton, Ed. and Trans.). New York: Harper & Row. (Original work published 1785)
- Krueger, J. I. (in press). A componential model of situation effects, person effects and situation-by-person interaction effects on social behavior. *Journal of Research in Personality*.
- Lewin, K. (1936). *Principles of topological psychology*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Roese, N. (1997). Counterfactual thinking. *Psychological Bulletin*, 121, 133–148.
- Valkyrie (film). (n.d.). Wikipedia. Retrieved February 23, 2009, from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Valkyrie_\(film\)#cite_note-schickel-80](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Valkyrie_(film)#cite_note-schickel-80)
- Zimbardo, P. (2007). *The Lucifer effect: Understanding how good people turn evil*. New York: Random House.

This publication is protected by US and international copyright laws and its content may not be copied without the copyright holders express written permission except for the print or download capabilities of the retrieval software used for access. This content is intended solely for the use of the individual user.

Source: PsycCRITIQUES. Vol.54 (20)

Accession Number: psq-2008-7353-1-2 **Digital Object Identifier:** 10.1037/a0015405