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**LOYALTY AND THE ALLIES:
IMPEDIMENTS TO A MILITARY COUP IN NAZI GERMANY**

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ABSTRACT

Organised resistance against Hitler existed throughout the Nazi regime and therefore it is curious why a successful *coup* never took place. Religious, political and military resistance groups were active but by the late 1930s, it was only the military which had the capacity to overthrow Hitler. For a successful *coup*, army generals had to commit treason which meant breaking a personal oath of allegiance to Hitler. With respect to involvement in *coup* planning, generals fell into three broad categories: the loyal, the conspirators, and the uncommitted. It was upon the support of uncommitted generals that success or failure of any *coup* attempt depended. In persuading these generals to participate, a factor which could have swayed them was greater assurance from the Allies about plans for post-Nazi Germany. Four *coup* windows of opportunity existed and the Allies' policy position with respect to the resistance during these varied depending on the political climate at the time. These were: 1938, the 'Phoney War,' the mid-war period from the rise of Churchill until Stalingrad and from the Casablanca conference until the unsuccessful 20 July 1944 *coup* attempt. Analysis of the resistances' response to the Allies policy in each of these window shows that at no time did the Allies' level of encouragement for a *coup* couple with the uncommitted generals' propensity to act. And so, a *coup* never succeeded.

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INTRODUCTION

“In Adolf Hitler’s Third Reich, resistance, save perhaps in the ranks of the SS, sooner or later manifest itself in every quarter and over a range of forms from foot-dragging to outright conspiracy.”¹ By 1943 and after the German defeat at Stalingrad, any realist could see that Germany was going to lose the war and that this was largely a result of Hitler.² Why, therefore, was he not overthrown? The aim of this essay is to explore why a military *coup* did not occur in Nazi Germany. It is not intended to examine the mechanics of the various assassination attempts (most of which failed due to bad luck) but rather to focus on why sufficient potential for a successful *coup* never existed. When conditions seemed to be so ripe, propensity was lacking. Analysing why this was so is the purpose of this essay.

Coups are usually conducted by a nation’s military forces, and in Nazi Germany it was no different. The army was central to all *coup* plans. Focus throughout the essay, therefore, will remain fixed on the army’s general officer corps. This is because by 1933, after Hitler’s consolidation of dictatorial powers, political opportunities for deposing Hitler had virtually ended.³ In the first part of the essay, background on three broad groupings of resistance will be explored; the religious, political and military. In doing so,

¹ Harold C. Deutsch, “The German Resistance: Answered and Unanswered Questions” *Central European History* Vol. 14, Issue 4 (Dec 81): 322..

² Ian Kershaw, *Hitler 1936-45: Nemesis* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), 562.

³ Roger Manvell and Henrich Fraenkel, *The Canaris Conspiracy* (New York: David McKay Company, 1969), xx.

it will be demonstrated why the prospects for a successful *coup* eventually depended so heavily on the military resistance. Army generals' relationship with Hitler and the Nazis will then be examined to show how there were broadly three types of officers: conspirators, the loyal, and those who knew about the conspiracy but remained uncommitted to participation. The uncommitted generals are of the most interest to the thesis of this essay. In their hands rested the success or failure of any potential *coup* attempt. Participation in a *coup* requires officers to commit treason and in Nazi Germany, this meant breaking a personal oath of allegiance to Hitler. The importance of the oath and its relation to treason will be explored to further explain the impediments to achieving a *coup*.

In the second part of the essay, the Allies' policy with respect to the German resistance will be analysed. The aim here will be to examine to what extent the Allies' policy towards and engagement with German resistance affected the decision making of significant uncommitted generals. This method of analysis will be applied to four *coup* windows of opportunity: 1938 (during the Munich crisis) the 'Phoney War' period, the period of Churchill's Prime-Ministership until the battle of Stalingrad, and finally from the Roosevelt-Churchill conference at Casablanca until the 20 July 1944 *coup* attempt. In each instance it will be demonstrated that the Allies' policy towards the resistance was crucial to understanding why key generals were unable to commit treason. It will be demonstrated that had the Allies been more encouraging to the resistance about their intended post-Hitler options for Germany, it might have provided sufficient impetus for the generals to act against Hitler.

Reference to the Allies throughout the essay requires some amplification. By Allies the meaning is the British and the Americans. It was British opinion which mattered at Munich and during the ‘Phoney War’ and to this was added the voice of the Americans after Pearl harbour. The Soviets did not really feature as a force of influence on the resistance. Communication between the resistance and the Soviets was largely limited because of the intensity of the Eastern theatre of war. In essence, the resistance believed the same as Hitler: the Soviets were the real enemy; the Western nations, the accidental ones. Peter Hoffmann, author of *The History of the German Resistance* concurs with this view: He states, “[i]n contrast to their [the resistances’] contacts in Western capitals, those with the East never progressed further than the deliberation stage. No one in the opposition was ‘east-oriented,’ apart of course from the communists.”⁴ Resistances’ accommodation with the Soviets, therefore, was largely impossible. Reference to the Allies from here on means the British (and latterly in the war) the British plus the Americans.

In their often humorous yet deadly serious study of the *coup* entitled: *How to Stage a Military Coup*, David Hebditch and Ken Connor provide a list of eight factors which will “...influence if not absolutely guarantee failure.”⁵ When studying the military

⁴ Peter Hoffmann, *The History of the German Resistance 1933-1945* (London: MacDonald and Jane’s, 1969), 245.

⁵ David Hebditch and Ken Connor, *How to Stage a Military Coup: From Planning to Execution* (London: Greenhill Books, London), 57. The eight factors are:

- Poor planning and execution,
- Lack of training,
- Underestimating the power of the incumbent regime,
- Misreading the popular mood,

contribution to German resistance throughout the Third Reich the one which stands out is: “lack of courage and commitment.” This factor, applied specifically to key generals, was undoubtedly a major contributing factor in the resistances’ failure to overthrow Hitler. In essence, the generals never achieved the required momentum to achieve a *coup*. What could have given the generals greater courage or driven them towards greater commitment to the conspiracy? The answer, to be explored in this essay, is greater encouragement from the Allies.

-
- Failure to take account of international support for the established regime,
 - One or more double-agents within the ranks of the plotters,
 - Sloppy operational security,
 - Lack of courage and commitment

PART ONE: THE GERMAN RESISTANCE

Challenges for German Resistance Movements

Any study of the German resistance must take into account the unique interaction of democracy and nationalism. In the inter-war years, Carl von Ossietzky was the editor of *Die Weltbühne*, a pacifist paper which sought to expose the secret re-armament taking place in the Weimar Republic. Speaking out against his unjust trial and imprisonment for reporting on re-armament, the liberal *Frankfurter Zeitung* editorialised: “It is true we live in a democracy, but anyone who applies its principles,... is punished with imprisonment and – what is worse – with the odium of being branded a traitor”⁶ Hans Mommsen, author of *Alternatives to Hitler*, believes Ossietzky ’s resistance against both the Weimar Republic and the Third Reich characterised the problems all German resistance movements were faced with in that they fought

... against Germany’s persistent belief in the supremacy of the state, against an idealised concept of the state which lay at the heart of German governmental tradition, and which made it impossible to set interests of the individual against a state seen as standing above party politics.⁷

During the war and in the immediate post war period there was a common belief among the victor nations that German resistance to Hitler had been minimal.⁸ The idea

⁶ Hans Mommsen, *Alternatives to Hitler: German Alternatives to Hitler* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 11.

⁷ Hans Mommsen, *Alternatives to Hitler: German Alternatives to Hitler* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 12.

⁸ Terence Prittie, *Germans Against Hitler* (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1964), 15.

of resistance was more often associated with the famous armed underground movements in Poland, Holland, Belgium, Norway and Yugoslavia and above all France where heroes abounded and pitched battles were commonplace.⁹ It was held that the lack of evidence for physical resistance by Germans was explained by the fact that the Germans were somehow ‘different’ and that they chose not to resist because they thoroughly believed in the Nazi regime. Hans Rothfels, author of *The German Opposition to Hitler*, expands on this theme by stating that the Western perception was that resistance was minimal because Germans “...voluntarily associated themselves with or submitted out of cowardice to the tyrannical rule of criminals, either through innate wickedness, or from an acquired habit of blind obedience, or under the influence of some specifically baneful philosophy.”¹⁰

The truth, however, is very different. The power and omniscience of the Gestapo was immense and it made communication and co-ordination between resistance groups was very difficult.¹¹ Consequently, gathering momentum towards a *coup* was difficult to achieve. An indication of the dangerous environment in which resistance movements operated is provided by *Schutzstaffel* (SS) documents which revealed that 21,400 political prisoners were interned at the beginning of the war and that estimates of those held

⁹ Terence Prittie, *Germans Against Hitler* (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1964), 15.

¹⁰ Hans Rothfels, *The German Opposition to Hitler* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1962), 16.

¹¹ Roger Manvell and Henrich Fraenkel, *The Canaris Conspiracy* (New York: David McKay Company, 1969), xxvi.

during the war ranged from 500,000 to 600,000. Of these, 12,000 received death sentences.¹²

Given the lack of physical resistance to Hitler after the Nazi party's dominance from 1933 onwards, the perception held by the war's victors was that an effective resistance only came to maturity once the army perceived the war was lost.¹³ The presumption was that up until then, both the army and citizenry were generally content with Hitler and what he was doing to Germany. To the Allies, the lack of any perceptible resistance action was palpable evidence of complicity or lack of will. Although there was much communication between the resistance and the Allies, including appeals for support, as far as the Allies could see nothing ever happened in Germany. The situation was described as being reminiscent of a "...high tragedy... something that calls to mind Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and *Hamlet*. The conspirators seem to 'talk' more than they 'do.'¹⁴ The myth, therefore, persisted that resistance was, in fact, restricted to the 20 July 1944 bomb plot, and that it came to fruition only after the army became truly concerned about losing the war as a result of Hitler's poor leadership.¹⁵ The reality was that resistance to Hitler ran parallel with Hitler's rise and it had deep roots which permeated all levels of German society. The following overview will examine the extent of the

¹² Hans Rothfels, *The German Opposition to Hitler* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1962), 15.

¹³ Hans Rothfels, *The German Opposition to Hitler* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1962), 16.

¹⁴ Roger Manvell and Henrich Fraenkel, *The Canaris Conspiracy* (New York: David McKay Company, 1969), xxxiv.

¹⁵ Hans Rothfels, *The German Opposition to Hitler* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1962), 15.

resistance movement, both civilian and military, in order to show that it was the military wing of the movement that ultimately mattered for a successful *coup*.

German Resistance Overview

For the purposes of this essay, anti-Nazi resistance will be discussed as three groups: the religious, the political and the military resistance movements. Although it is difficult to reduce each group's motivation to a single category, they were broadly driven to action over concern for Hitler's betrayal of Germany on the moral, political and military planes respectively. Before discussing the groups, it should be recognized that the resistance was very complex. Individual conspirators were often members of more than one group and there were other fringe organisations as well (such as the Communist-Socialist *Rote Kapelle*).¹⁶ As political and religious opposition was neutralised, and as the imperatives of total war allowed Hitler to tighten his grip on power, it became the military resistance alone which held the capacity to achieve a *coup*.

Religious Resistance: 'Kreisau Circle'

Fabien von Schlabrendorff was one of the few senior conspirators to survive the war. He wrote a full account of German resistance and according to him, all Europeans (resistance conspirators included) subscribe fundamentally to a Christian world view

¹⁶ For a graphic description of the various resistance groups and members' interaction, see: Margret Boveri, *Treason in the Twentieth Century* (London: Macdonald, 1961), 208.

which was based on “...man’s submission to the will of God and upon love for ones neighbour.”¹⁷ Virtually all aspects of National Socialism ran counter to these fundamental beliefs. German’s were told they must submit to the will of the state as personified in the Führer. As for neighbourly love, this was reserved for racially pure Germans only. Anti-Nazis, according to Schlabrendorff, therefore, “...found themselves united on the common ground of the old Christian foundations of the Western world.”¹⁸

By 1940, the aforementioned Christian-based resistance came to be centered on two great aristocratic idealists. These were Count Helmuth von Moltke, an aristocrat and a descendent of the Field Marshal Moltke (who led the victorious Prussian army in France’s defeat in 1870), and Count Peter Yorck von Wartenburg, a significant land owning gentleman farmer. The Gestapo referred to the group as the ‘Kreisau Circle’ after Moltke’s estate in Silesia. Its motivation has been described as “...not so much a political ideology as a broad moral attitude...”¹⁹ This is revealed in aspects of the ‘Kreisau Circle’s’ post-Nazi Germany objectives which included: the importance of Christian morals in culture and education, the creation of a new federation of European states, return of the rule of law, legal prosecution of Nazi leaders (without the spirit of vengeance), rejection of totalitarianism and the return of personal freedom.²⁰ In many

¹⁷ Fabian von Schlabrendorff, *The Secret War Against Hitler* (New York: Pitman Publishing Corp., 1965), 33.

¹⁸ Fabian von Schlabrendorff, *The Secret War Against Hitler* (New York: Pitman Publishing Corp., 1965), 33.

¹⁹ Armstrong, ‘*Unconditional Surrender*’: *The Impact of the Casablanca Policy upon World War II* (New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1961), 179.

ways, the 'Kreisau Circle's' objectives were overly idealistic and naive given the enormous strength of Hitler and the Nazi party. Their aim was no less than to "...develop new social and political entities, which would replace the former governmental structures... [and a belief that] with effective support from the Christian churches they could achieve a new beginning for Europe."²¹

Although the 'Kreisau Circle' held within its membership a number of powerful individuals and its ideas helped shape the conspiracy, it was ultimately ineffective in the life and death struggle to unseat the Nazis. Its philosophy was too focused on how the post Hitler world should be designed, leaving little thought to the practicalities of how to bring about Hitler's fall. William Shirerr, the eminent Nazi-era historian commented on the 'Kreisau Circle' thus: "They hated Hitler and all the degradation he had brought on Germany and Europe. But they were not interested in overthrowing him. They thought Germany's coming defeat would accomplish that."²² To end Hitler's reign, practical action needed to come from elsewhere. A more overtly political opposition was necessary.

Political Resistance: Goerdeler and Beck

²⁰ Armstrong, *'Unconditional Surrender': The Impact of the Casablanca Policy upon World War II* (New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1961), 179.

²¹ Hans Mommsen, *Alternatives to Hitler: German Alternatives to Hitler* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 148.

²² William L. Shirerr, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: A history of Nazi Germany* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960), 1016.

From the early 1930s, political opposition to the Nazis it was centered on two key individuals: Dr. Carl Goerdeler and Ludwig Beck. Their importance to the resistance was significant. Schlabrendorff described how it was around these two men that the resistance eventually crystallised. He characterised their respective rolls as Beck being the head and Goerdeler being the heart of the organisation.²³

Goerdeler was mayor of Leipzig, a conservative, a monarchist, and a devout Protestant. His disillusionment with the Nazis began in 1936 over the injustice of anti-Semitism.²⁴ He was a renowned writer whose political and economic intellect was fully applied to the design and planning for a post-Nazi Germany. One of his greatest qualities was his ability to persuade powerful individuals to join the conspiracy against the Nazis; often at great risk to himself from the Gestapo. In essence, Goerdeler "...was the engine which drove the resistance movement forward through the depths of disappointment and over mountains of obstacles. He never despaired or doubted."²⁵

Beck had been Hitler's Chief of the Army General Staff from 1935 to 1938. He was a deeply religious man and an ardent opponent of National Socialism. Before 1938,

²³ Fabian von Schlabrendorff, *The Secret War Against Hitler* (New York: Pitman Publishing Corp., 1965), 149.

²⁴ Goerdeler had tried to work with the Nazis as mayor of Leipzig from 1933 until 1936. Ultimately, his distaste for Nazi interference in local affairs led to his resignation. The final straw was a Nazi order that a memorial bust of the famous composer Dr. Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy be removed from the town square because he was Jewish.

²⁵ Fabian von Schlabrendorff, *The Secret War Against Hitler* (New York: Pitman Publishing Corp., 1965), 159.

his consistent military advice was that Germany was not physically ready for war and that Hitler's aggressive foreign policy would lead to a world war and consequent disaster for Germany. In 1938 he resigned over Hitler's Czechoslovakia policy but it was also at that time that he came closest to organising a military *coup*.

After 1938, Beck became the liaison between the political and the military resistance. Although retired from the army he continued to wield significant influence with senior army officers. He did well at recruiting conspirators. Despite the Nazi's best efforts to infiltrate the army, it remained fertile ground for the recruitment because it was essentially a "non-Nazi" organisation.²⁶ From 1938 until his suicide after the failed 20 July 1944 *coup*, General Beck remained a powerful force within the resistance; a point not unnoticed by Hitler himself who said "...the only man I fear is Beck. That man would be capable of acting against me."²⁷ Beck was criticised for being too much of an intellectual at a time when strong leadership and men of action were needed. By 1943, the days of persuasion and talk had been exhausted. His skills in recruitment and planning were crucial, but it would take a different breed of conspirator to achieve the *coup*. Beck's "...reason was his chief weapon..., [but] reason was ultimately to prove quite useless when virtually every member of the high Command was subject to the domination of Hitler's obsessive will."²⁸ A successful *coup* ultimately depended on

²⁶ Armstrong, *'Unconditional Surrender': The Impact of the Casablanca Policy upon World War II* (New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1961), 185.

²⁷ Fabian von Schlabrendorff, *The Secret War Against Hitler* (New York: Pitman Publishing Corp., 1965), 79.

whether or not key powerful army generals could be encouraged to join forces with the resistance. Beck's leadership, therefore, became directly relevant to the potential for a successful *coup* throughout the war. Analysis will now focus on the army and how events transpired such that it became the only hope for a successful *coup*.

Military Resistance: The Army

By the late 1930s, as Hitler's grip on government became absolute, most anti-Nazis acknowledged that opportunities for political regime change had been exhausted and so attention turned to the military. Anne Armstrong, author of *Unconditional Surrender*, the authoritative work on the Allies' war time policy, believes the consequence was that, "...[b]y 1937 the civilian anti-Nazi circles began to talk about "the generals" because by then it was clear that no peaceful or legal change of government was possible."²⁹ It was obvious that a military *coup* was becoming the only option open to the resistance. As Schlabrendorff pointed out, "...only the army had at its disposal the weapons and the power necessary to overthrow the firmly entrenched Nazi regime, which was supported by hundreds of thousands of SS troops. Civilian initiative [therefore] was fettered unless it had strong military backing."³⁰

²⁸ Roger Manvell and Henrich Fraenkel, *The Canaris Conspiracy* (New York: David McKay Company, 1969), 16.

²⁹ Armstrong, *'Unconditional Surrender': The Impact of the Casablanca Policy upon World War II* (New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1961), 185.

³⁰ Roger Manvell & Heinrich Fraenkel, *The July Plot: The Attempt in 1944 on Hitler's Life and the Men Behind it* (London: The Bodley Head, 1964), 77.

It is worth pointing out why it was the army (as opposed to the air force or navy) that mattered for the resistance. There is the obvious explanation: that only the army had the soldiers needed to wrest control of the government from the SS and the Gestapo.³¹ But there were political reasons as well. In comparison to the army, the air force and the navy were far more political in their outlook and therefore more inclined to embrace National Socialism. The navy, dating from the days of William II, was filled with the spirit of post-Bismarck German nationalism which the Nazis were able to fully embrace. The army, in contrast, tended to draw its inspiration from the traditions of pre-German unification Prussia.³² The air force had been banned under the Weimar Republic and was entirely a creation of Nazi Germany. Thus its loyalties were closely connected to the party. For these reasons, little military opposition could be found in the navy or air force which was "...more imbued with Nazism or with a greater spirit of conformity than the "Prussian" army with its "aristocratic" officers' corps."³³ It is for these reasons that military resistance to Nazi Germany is associated with the army alone.

A military *coup* is a serious undertaking for any army, especially one such as the German which was so enamoured with the concepts of nationalism and loyalty. Hitler was well aware of this and took great care to ensure any attempted *coup* would pose an enormous psychological dilemma for potential conspirators. In 1933, after the death of

³¹ Hans Rothfels, *The German Opposition to Hitler* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1962), 64.

³² Hans Rothfels, *The German Opposition to Hitler* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1962), 64.

³³ Hans Rothfels, *The German Opposition to Hitler* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1962), 64.

President Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg, Hitler was able to completely consolidate power in himself by combining the offices of Chancellor and President. At the same time, all members of the armed forces were called upon to swear a personal oath of allegiance to him. This caused great problems when the time came for the army to turn against Hitler for the greater good of Germany. According to Manvell and Fraenkel, authors of *The Canaris Conspiracy*, it was in the army that "...lay what hopes there might be for discovering the men to lead an effective *coup d'état*."³⁴ Attention will now focus on the officer corps of the German army and how important it became for a potential *coup*.

The Army and Treason

The army of the Third Reich will now be examined in order to explain why key officers were so vital to the success or failure of any *coup* attempt. Analysis will first examine the army's relationship with Hitler and the complexities of loyalty and treason. It will then expand to examine three broad types of officers; the conspirators, the loyal and the uncommitted. Focus will then turn towards the uncommitted because it was these individuals who ultimately decided whether or not a *coup* could have succeeded.

The Army and Politics

³⁴ Roger Manvell and Henrich Fraenkel, *The Canaris Conspiracy* (New York: David McKay Company, 1969), xxii.

Politics and the army did not mix well in the Third Reich. At least that is how the army chose to see things. This was good and bad; good because it meant non-interference in democratic government but bad because it prevented the army from intervening to end the corrupt Nazi totalitarian government. Major-General Henning von Treschow was Chief of Staff of Central Army Group, Eastern Front at the time of the 20 July 1944 *coup* attempt. As a principle member of the army resistance, he commented on what he saw as the key shortfall in the German officer. It was "...his narrow military outlook. In his strength lay his weakness. Concentration on military matters made him incompetent in non-military questions, and particularly in politics."³⁵ Army officers were generally content to remain non-political and to concentrate solely on their profession. Armstrong states that this desire to remain wholly aloof from politics was consistent with the traditions of the Prussian-military officer.³⁶ This position was supported in comment by Hindenburg when he dismissed any suggestion that the army might overthrow Hitler in the early 1930s. He stated what he thought obvious, that "...the army's business was military and not political."³⁷

Another example of the 'un-political' soldier is typified by Chief of the Army High Command, Colonel-General Freiherr von Fritsch. In May 1937 during the period

³⁵ Roger Manvell & Heinrich Fraenkel, *The July Plot: The Attempt in 1944 on Hitler's Life and the Men Behind it* (London: The Bodley Head, 1964), 77.

³⁶ Anne Armstrong, *'Unconditional Surrender': The Impact of the Casablanca Policy upon World War II* (New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1961), 272.

³⁷ Anne Armstrong, *'Unconditional Surrender': The Impact of the Casablanca Policy upon World War II* (New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1961), 273.

he was being pressured by Beck to support a generals' revolt against Hitler's reckless foreign policy, Fritsch commented that "I have made it my guiding principle to confine myself to the military domain and to keep aloof from all political activity. I lack all talent for it"³⁸ Army officers remained, on the whole, gentlemen who believed in honour and integrity. But it was these same qualities which prevented the officer corps from taking up arms against the nation's political leadership, however tyrannical it had become.

...[T]he very nobility of spirit in most, if not all, of these highly-placed officers..., their idealism and their Christian beliefs and background, lessened their effectiveness as conspirators. It has often been said that the worst thing about Nazism was that it required Nazi methods to destroy it."³⁹

Of course the alternative view is that the army had no wish to overthrow Hitler. He was serving its wishes just fine. During Germany's re-armament and after the quick victory in Poland, the army was simply being opportunist and pragmatic in accepting that events were moving it in the direction it desired. A comment made by Field Marshall Werner von Blomberg (Hitler's minister of war after 1935 and commander in chief of the *Wehrmacht* until 1938) supports this view. He testified at Nuremberg that, "[b]efore 1938-39 German generals did not oppose Hitler. There was no reason to oppose him, since he produced results as they desired."⁴⁰ But the irony was that it was this very non-political institution, the army, which was desperately needed to forcibly remove Hitler for

³⁸ Joachim C. Fest, *The face of the Third Reich* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970), 240..

³⁹ Roger Manvell and Henrich Fraenkel, *The Canaris Conspiracy* (New York: David McKay Company, 1969), xxiii.

⁴⁰ William L. Shirerr, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: A history of Nazi Germany* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960), 374.

political ends. Most army officers were non-Nazis. When virtually all government institutions had been ‘Nazified,’ the army stood alone. The army, therefore, was the only possible salvation to reverse Nazi tyranny because it was the “...only active force left in Germany not actually created by the Nazis, or fully infiltrated by them.”⁴¹ It was for this reason that Hitler proceeded so cautiously with the army as he tightened his grip on power.

The Concept of Treason

Attention will now turn to the central obstacle to an army led *coup*; the subject of treason. In discussing treason it is important to also discuss loyalty as this is what is broken when treason is committed. Chapman Pincer, author of *Traitors: The Labyrinth of Treason* states that “...loyalty is owed to one’s *country* and this is universally required by law, *loyalty* being derived from the Latin for ‘legal’ (*legalis*).”⁴² He goes on to state that “[t]he legal and moral requirement of loyalty to country is linked with the concept of *patriotism*, love of one’s country, which can be very powerful as a corporate force politically and militarily.”⁴³ The problem with the ideas of loyalty and patriotism is that all individuals in society, whether they are traitors or front line soldiers, invariably believe they are acting out of loyalty and patriotism. In Hitler’s Germany, the most ardent Nazis and the most zealous resistance conspirators could honestly say they were

⁴¹ Roger Manvell and Henrich Fraenkel, *The Canaris Conspiracy* (New York: David McKay Company, 1969), xxi.

⁴² Chapman Pincer, *Traitors: The Labyrinth of Treason* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1987), 1.

⁴³ Chapman Pincer, *Traitors: The Labyrinth of Treason* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1987), 1.

being equally loyal and patriotic to Germany. In being loyal to Hitler, Nazis were also being patriotic to Germany. In contrast, resistance conspirators believed their patriotism transcended loyalty to Hitler and the Nazis. They saw themselves as the "...champions of the 'true Germany.'"⁴⁴ It is for this reason that only through the unfolding of history can true assessments about treason and tyranny be made. In her work *Treason in the Twentieth Century*, Margaret Boveri describes how traitors who take up arms against the state are considered both heroes and villains. She states "[t]he meaning of treason changes as the wheel of history turns. Men, hanged yesterday as traitors, are today's heroes and martyrs."⁴⁵ Consequently, Colonel Count Claus Schnek von Stauffenberg (the officer who planted the 20 July 1944 bomb) is now regarded as a great patriot, but for many years after the war he was regarded by many Germans as a traitor.⁴⁶

As noted above, unlike civilians engaged in the resistance, all officers and men of the *Wehrmacht* were bound by an oath of allegiance to Hitler. Any officer contemplating treason, however subtle, had to contend with the ethics of breaking this oath. On 2 August 1933, the same day Hindenburg died, all members of the armed forces became *Eidträger*, or 'oath-bearers,' after swearing their allegiance to Hitler as follows:

I swear by God this holy oath: I will render unconditional obedience to the Führer of the German Reich and People, Adolf Hitler, the Supreme

⁴⁴ Hans Mommsen, *Alternatives to Hitler: German Alternatives to Hitler* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 181.

⁴⁵ Margaret Boveri, *Treason in the Twentieth Century* (London: Macdonald, 1961), 22.

⁴⁶ Chapman Pincer, *Traitors: The Labyrinth of Treason* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1987), 1.

Commander of the armed forces, and will be ready, as a brave soldier, to stake my life at any time to this oath.⁴⁷

The 1933 oath was different from the oath of the Weimar Republic because it required ‘unconditional obedience,’ not to the state constitution or the office of the president, but to Hitler himself.⁴⁸ Obedience to a named individual had not been required since the days of the monarchy. In the Third Reich, Hitler required the same level of obedience accorded to a king. With the personal oath to Hitler it made it very difficult for an officer to question the legality of orders in terms of their merits for Germany. An order’s moral correctness did not matter so long as it emanated from Hitler. It was for this reason that General Beck called 2 August 1933 the ‘blackest day of his life’ because from that moment on, the army was fully tied to Hitler.⁴⁹

Types of Officers

Analysis will now turn to the oath and how it became an impediment to officers resisting Hitler. Three broad groupings of officers will be analysed to show how each dealt differently with the tyranny of Nazism. These groups were the conspirators, the loyal, and the uncommitted.

⁴⁷ Roger Manvell and Heinrich Fraenkel, *The Canaris Conspiracy* (New York: David McKay Company, 1969), xxii.

⁴⁸ Robert B. Kane. *Disobedience and Conspiracy in the German Army 1918-1945* (London: McFarland & Co. Inc., 2002), p 227.

⁴⁹ Margret Boveri, *Treason in the Twentieth Century* (London: Macdonald, 1961), 51.

The Conspirator

A conspirator breaks his oath of allegiance because he no longer values obedience or because he no longer recognises the legitimacy of his superior.⁵⁰ In Germany's Third Reich, army conspirators believed that Hitler was no longer entitled to allegiance of his officers because he no longer ruled legitimately. It is important to note that this view was more prevalent in younger officers who began their service after the First World War.⁵¹ One of these officers was Stauffenberg. He provides the strongest example of conspirator-officers in the military resistance. A Catholic, an aristocrat and fully moulded in Prussian-military tradition, like many of his fellow officers, Stauffenberg enthusiastically supported the Nazis' rise to power. But by 1938 he became disillusioned by the direction Hitler was taking Germany.⁵² By then he had become a "...violent anti-Nazi..." whose contempt for Hitler sprang from his Christian faith and moral convictions.⁵³ During the war he served with distinction in Poland and North Africa (where he was severely wounded) before joining the staff of the Army High Command in Berlin in February 1943. What distinguished Stauffenberg from army conspirators of the pre-war and early war period that his motive for overthrowing Hitler was borne of pure patriotism. For him there was no desire whatsoever for personal gain and unlike Beck

⁵⁰ Robert B. Kane. *Disobedience and Conspiracy in the German Army 1918-1945* (London: McFarland & Co. Inc., 2002), 16.

⁵¹ Margret Boveri, *Treason in the Twentieth Century* (London: Macdonald, 1961), 54.

⁵² Margret Boveri, *Treason in the Twentieth Century* (London: Macdonald, 1961), 301.

⁵³ Roger Manvell & Heinrich Fraenkel, *The July Plot: The Attempt in 1944 on Hitler's Life and the Men Behind it* (London: The Bodley Head, 1964), 62.

and Halder he was not thinking only about the army's prestige. He saw Hitler as the "Anti-Christ" and fully dedicated his conspiratorial work towards "...the spiritual, ethical and ...social renewal of Germany."⁵⁴ Conspirator-officers like Stauffenberg were patriots first and soldiers second and were therefore deeply interested in politics, a trait which was so unnatural for most Germany officers. Conspirator-officers like Stauffenberg opposed Hitler "...not only because his war policy was bound to lead to an annihilating defeat, but because of a regime of criminals which was destroying the country and its people. On this basic ethical force, on this firmness of soul and strength of mind his resistance was founded."⁵⁵

The conspirator-officer was in no doubt about the seriousness of his activities. In a discussion between a potential collaborator and himself, Stauffenberg stated: "Look, let's get to the heart of the matter. I am engaged by every available means in the active practice of high treason."⁵⁶ He knew his conspiratorial activities were treasonous, but for him, Hitler and his criminal companions were the greater traitors. For Stauffenberg, the necessity for eliminating Hitler was not predicated on any assurance that in doing so Germany could profit by improved peace terms. For him, and other anti-Nazis like him, the assassination of Hitler was a necessity regardless of the eventual outcome for Germany in the war. Stauffenberg's views were similar to those of Major General

⁵⁴ Hans Rothfels, *The German Opposition to Hitler* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1962), 72.

⁵⁵ Hans Rothfels, *The German Opposition to Hitler* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1962), 72.

⁵⁶ Margret Boveri, *Treason in the Twentieth Century* (London: Macdonald, 1961), 209.

Henning von Tresckow, Chief of Staff, Central Army Group Eastern Front. Tresckow was an equally aggressive officer-conspirator who took part in a number of assassination attempts. In his words:

The assassination must be attempted at all costs. Even if it should not succeed, an attempt to seize power in Berlin must be undertaken. What matters now is no longer the practical purpose of the *coup*, but to prove to the world and for the records of history that the men of the resistance movement dared to take the decisive step. Compared to this objective, nothing else is of consequence.⁵⁷

The Loyal

Throughout the war, the vast majority of army officers remained loyal to Hitler. Explanation for this overwhelming propensity for obedience in the armed forces can, to a certain extent, be considered a German characteristic. In Robert Kane's extensive analysis of obedience in the German army, *Disobedience and Conspiracy in the German Army 1918-1945*, believes that "...the German officer, to a greater degree than officers in more democratic societies, had a greater sense of obedience to his commander in chief because of historical and social circumstances that surrounded the development of the Prussian-German Army."⁵⁸ However, this does not mean they were necessarily devout Nazis and in fact, most abstained from politics in order to concentrate on success in their profession.⁵⁹ Loyal officers, whether they knew about the resistance or not, continued to

⁵⁷ Klemens von Klemperer, *German Resistance Against Hitler: The Search for Allies Abroad 1938-1945* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 384.

⁵⁸ Robert B. Kane, *Disobedience and Conspiracy in the German Army 1918-1945* (London: McFarland & Co. Inc., 2002), 33.

support Hitler and lead their forces in battle long after defeat became inevitable. This was not so much because of strict loyalty to Nazism or Hitler, but because they saw no alternative. A good example of the loyal officer's outlook is provided by Colonel General Alfred Jodl, Chief of the Operations Staff of the Armed Forces High Command. During his trial at Nuremberg, when asked about the resistance he stated:

...their chief argument... was that the war was lost and that it could only be ended without Hitler. I had long since thought this, but along with the majority of responsible commanders I saw no way out. Our enemies did not seek the overthrow of the Nazi regime; they had proclaimed the destruction of Germany.⁶⁰

Jodl's statement was very enlightening. He believed that since the Allies were bent on destruction of Germany, there was no incentive to break one's oath and turn against Hitler. In essence he was saying that because no alternative was being offered to Germany (apart from destruction) the majority of officers chose to remain loyal to Hitler and fight on. This issue will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Seven where the Allies' 'unconditional surrender' policy will be analysed.

Another explanation for the loyal officers' position was his fear that participation in a *coup* would generate another 'stab-in-the-back' legend. A common perception in Germany during the Weimar republic era was that the 1918 armistice was a betrayal by politicians and generals in the rear of the undefeated front line soldiers. Although most

⁵⁹ Gordon A. Craig, *The Politics of the Prussian Army 1640-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955). 484.

⁶⁰ Anne Armstrong, *'Unconditional Surrender': The Impact of the Casablanca Policy upon World War II* (New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1961), 277.

generals agreed that Germany's fate was sealed by 1943, there was great fear that suing for peace would lead to a new 'stab-in-the-back' legend. The result would be that the conspirators would then be held responsible for all subsequent political and social difficulties in Germany.⁶¹ Such sentiments were particularly prevalent in older officers who had fought as young men in the Great War.⁶² General Jodl admitted as much in a 1946 letter where he stated: "...[e]ven when I consider the losses which followed until May, 1945, I still believe that the way to the bitter end was better for Germany. It cannot give rise to false legends."⁶³

A third explanation for the army's loyalty is a result of Hitler's powers of manipulation which allowed him to bind the army to him during his rise to power. This started on 16 May 1933 in what became the "pact of the *Deutschland*." It was onboard the cruiser *Deutschland* where the Chiefs of the army and navy agreed to back Hitler in becoming president once Hindenburg died. In return for this support, Hitler promised to remove the *Sturmabteilung* (SA), the 'Brown Shirts' as a rival military force. Hitler also agreed to drastically increase the size of the armed forces once he became President. By agreeing to all this and with the new oath of allegiance, the army had, in effect, facilitated Hitler's dictatorship. Shirer believed this to be true. He stated: "[b]y voluntarily offering to put itself in the unrestrained hands of a megalomaniacal dictator it was selling

⁶¹ D. J. Goodspeed, *The Conspirators: A Study of the Coup d'État* (Toronto: MacMillan, 1962), 213.

⁶² Margret Boveri, *Treason in the Twentieth Century* (London: Macdonald, 1961), 209.

⁶³ Anne Armstrong, 'Unconditional Surrender': *The Impact of the Casablanca Policy upon World War II* (New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1961), 277.

its own fate. As for Hitler, the deal would make his dictatorship supreme.”⁶⁴ The army, therefore, helped Hitler consolidate his power and contributed to the notion that the fate of the army and Hitler were inextricably linked. To reinforce this connection, Hitler took every opportunity to remind his Field Marshals of their personal commitment to him. He was quick to share the spoils of victory and money, promotion and medals were used extensively to dampen any feelings of dissatisfaction. Manvell and Fraenkel support this view. They state:

[e]ven those field-marshals and generals who were convinced by 1943 that the war they were conducting on Hitler’s behalf must ultimately lead to disaster were loath to risk their careers, their honours, their rewards by taking a stand against the Führer. The biggest concession they were prepared to make was to be considered a friend of the conspirators.⁶⁵

The loyal officer was, understandably, of little assistance to *coup* constitutors. Far more important were certain senior officers in command of large numbers of troops, who were sympathetic to the resistance movement but who, for various reasons, vacillated between loyalty to Hitler and commitment to his overthrow. It is on these uncommitted officers that detailed attention will now focus.

The Uncommitted

⁶⁴ William L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: A history of Nazi Germany* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960), 215.

⁶⁵ Roger Manvell and Henrich Fraenkel, *The Canaris Conspiracy* (New York: David McKay Company, 1969), xxvi.

The uncommitted officers are the most important group for the purpose of this essay because it was these officers who could have made the difference between success and failure in any *coup* attempt. How exactly their action or inaction affected history prior to and during the war and how they were influenced by policies of the Allies will be dealt with in Part two of the essay. The aim at this stage is to analyse the general characterises and attributes which typified these officers. Broadly speaking, the uncommitted officer was a powerful commander of active troops, who held sufficient influence within the army that, if he chose to do so, he could have decisively assisted in the execution of a *coup*.

In a chapter entitled ‘General von X’ in his book *The Face of the Third Reich* Joachim Fest examines characteristics of the uncommitted general. When the time came to join and support a *coup* he describes how the uncommitted general would use his oath as an excuse for inaction. He would do this knowing full well that Germany needed to be rid of Hitler for the nation to survive. According to Fest, in the uncommitted general a pseudo-morality had taken hold which enabled him to “...betray his country, his people, his honour and his responsibility for the lives of his subordinates, but not a man to whom he has sworn an oath [Hitler], even if on his side this man has broken his word a thousand times over.”⁶⁶ Such a defence for inaction, he goes on to say, is no more than ‘...a lack of moral fibre, [with] the distinctive mark of weak opportunism...’⁶⁷ The four generals presented below are typical uncommitted officers.

⁶⁶ Joachim C. Fest, *The face of the Third Reich* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970), 244..

⁶⁷ Joachim C. Fest, *The face of the Third Reich* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970), 244..

One of the most important officers of this group was Field Marshal Günther Hans von Kluge. In the latter part of the war Kluge was a powerful field commander, first of Army Group Centre on the Eastern front then, from 17 July 1944, as chief of Western Army Command. Although Kluge had been in touch with the military opposition since 1942, he never fully committed himself to the resistance. This has been attributed to his “...fundamental weakness of character that made him very susceptible, [and] easily influenced.”⁶⁸ His loyalty and sense of obligation to Hitler was strong; a characteristic which was not missed by the Führer who took steps to reinforce this loyalty by granting him numerous honours and decorations. Hitler also made him the recipient of one of his special *stipends* in the amount of 250,000 Deutschmarks. Kluge blew hot and cold with the resistance until the very end. An example of this is provided by Goerdeler who first met him on the Eastern Front in 1942. After the meeting Goerdeler hurried back to Berlin and reported to Beck how he was “encouraged” by Kluge’s support. But no sooner had they digested this news, Kluge sent a messenger by plane to state that “...he wished to disassociate himself from any unwarranted conclusions that might be drawn from such a visit.”⁶⁹ Later in Chapter Seven, it will be seen how Kluge’s indecision on 20 July 1944 directly contributed to the failure of the *coup* attempt that day.

⁶⁸ Pierre Galante, Eugène Silianoff *Operation Valkyrie* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2002), 23.

⁶⁹ Pierre Galante, Eugène Silianoff *Operation Valkyrie* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2002), 149.

Field Marshall Erich von Manstein was commander of army Group Don in the winter of 1942-1943 which included the armies on the Stalingrad salient. Manstein commanded large armies throughout the war and would have been a strong addition to the resistance had he chosen to fully commit. Like all uncommitted officers, Manstein knew full well of the resistances' plans and his recruitment to the cause was attempted on many occasions. All attempts failed. In one of these instances by Stauffenberg, he reacted by saying that he "...would not agree, [to joining]... speciously arguing that he could only act on orders from above. His commander-in-chief was Hitler."⁷⁰

Field Marshall Erwin Rommel, Commander in Chief Army Group B in France after D-Day, was late in joining the *coup* conspiracy. He was a highly popular officer within the army and the populous at large and famous for being Hitler's "favourite" general.⁷¹ His support would have provided great encouragement to the conspiracy had he committed earlier. But for much of the war he unfortunately remained undecided and when he did commit he agreed to conspire only if Hitler's life could be spared.⁷² Rommel was another example of a powerful yet uncommitted army commander upon whose cooperation the success or failure of any *coup* attempt depended. Unfortunately for the resistance he could not play a part in the 20 July *coup* attempt since he was severely injured just three days previously when his car was strafed by an Allied fighter.

⁷⁰ Roger Manvell & Heinrich Fraenkel, *The July Plot: The Attempt in 1944 on Hitler's Life and the Men Behind it* (London: The Bodley Head, 1964), 63.

⁷¹ Peter Hoffmann, *The History of the German Resistance 1933-1945* (London: MacDonald and Jane's, 1969), 352.

⁷² Roger Manvell and Heinrich Fraenkel, *The Canaris Conspiracy* (New York: David McKay Company, 1969), 180..

In 1944, Colonel-General Fritz Fromm was Commander-in-Chief of the Reserve in Berlin. Use of his troops was central to the *coup* plans from 1943 onwards, but his commitment to the resistance was never guaranteed. Aware of the inevitability of defeat and fully aware of the conspiracy, he chose to fall back on his oath to Hitler and not commit to anything until Hitler's assassination was complete. When Hitler survived the 20 July bombing, he immediately expressed his allegiance to Hitler, a move which Wheeler-Bennett described as being "altogether despicable."⁷³ This act of desperation did not save his skin. Hitler had him executed along with captured conspirators in the purge which followed the failed plot.

One of the reasons for the uncommitted generals' wavering support to the resistance was a result of their need for greater certainty about plans for a post-Hitler Germany. To a large extent, they chose to sit on the fence because they had not been given enough assurance that any post-Hitler government would survive.⁷⁴ Entanglement in the uncertain outcome of a *coup*, they believed, was not worth the effort if the outcome could not guarantee an improved situation for Germany. Directly related to this concern was the attitude of the Allies towards negotiating with a post-Nazi regime. Lack of Allied support, therefore, was a significant impediment to their active involvement. Greater encouragement from the Allies, Manvell and Fraenkel believed, might have

⁷³ John W. Wheeler-Bennett, *The Nemesis of Power* (London: MacMillan & Co. Ltd., 1964), 423-424.

⁷⁴ Peter Hoffmann "Peace through *Coup d'État*: The Foreign Contacts of the German Resistance" *Central European History* Vol. 19 Issue 1 (March 1986): 27.

helped. In their view it would have helped "...maintain morale and convince doubters and waverers that removal of Hitler would lead to a somewhat more favourable peace than could be expected while he remained in power."⁷⁵ Analysis to follow in Part Two of the essay will explore this theme in greater detail through an historical analysis of four *coup* windows of opportunity.

PART TWO: COUP FAILURES, 1933-1945

Discussion so far has focused on different resistance movements in Germany's Third Reich and in particular resistance in the army. The importance of uncommitted army officers to the potential success of a *coup* has been described as well as the issues which contributed to the indecisiveness of these individuals. Attention will now turn to the Allies and the impact of their policies on the potential for a *coup*. Study of Allies pre-war and wartime policies' impact on the resistances' *coup* plans will be broken down into examinations of four selected windows of opportunity. The first was prior to the war, during the Munich crisis in 1938. The second was during the 'Phoney War.' The third was during the mid-war period from Churchill's rise until Stalingrad and the final was from the turn of the tide (marked by the Casablanca conference in 1943) until the 20 July 1944 *coup* attempt. These four *coup* windows of opportunity have been chosen because they coincide with four broad Allied policy messages with respect to the resistance. In 1938 it was the Allies policy of appeasement. During the 'Phoney War' it was a 'solemn

⁷⁵ Roger Manvell and Henrich Fraenkel, *The Canaris Conspiracy* (New York: David McKay Company, 1969), xxxii.

obligation' to not rule out a negotiated settlement with a non-Nazi government. From Churchill's rise until the battle of Stalingrad it was 'absolute silence' in response to overtures by the resistance. And finally, from the Casablanca conference until 20 July 1944 it was the acceptance of nothing less than Germany's 'unconditional surrender.'

Each *coup* window of opportunity will be examined under three headings. First the resistance's conspiracy plans will be analysed. Second the Allies' response and interaction with the resistance will be examined. Finally, the impact of the Allies' policy response to the resistance and the army in particular will be reviewed. Using this method of analysis, it will be revealed that when the propensity for a successful *coup* was highest (due to the greatest potential commitment from army generals), success was still denied the conspirators because of little or no encouragement from the Allies about peace terms for a post-Hitler Germany. It will be argued that with greater Allied encouragement those key generals who struggled with full commitment to treason might have become sufficiently emboldened to have precipitated in a *coup* in the first three windows of opportunity, or to have facilitated success in the fourth.

1938: 'Appeasement'

Hitler and the Army

Before discussing the missed opportunity for a *coup* in 1938 during the Munich crisis, it is first necessary to set the scene politically and diplomatically. At this time,

Hitler's relationship with the army was at its lowest point thus far in the Third Reich. This was a result of a number of incidents in early 1938 which enabled Hitler to progressively increase his military influence over the army.

The first incident was the forced resignation of Field Marshal Werner von Blomberg, Minister of War and Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces. This occurred after it was revealed that his new bride, his former secretary, had a previously unknown background as a prostitute. This information was all the more embarrassing because the marriage had been blessed by both Hitler and Göring. Blomberg's resignation, therefore, was intended to redress the embarrassment felt by both the army officer corps and senior Nazi leadership. The second incident involved Colonel General Werner von Fritsch, Commander in Chief of the army. An old-school officer who was the obvious candidate to eventually succeed Blomberg, he showed open hostility to the Nazi party and in particular the SS. For Hitler, he was proving to be the greatest obstacle to the spread of Nazism within the army.⁷⁶ Using false evidence about homosexual activity, Reich Minister Hermann Göring was able to persuade Hitler to force Fritsch's resignation. Fritsch was later fully exonerated but by then it was too late to placate the embarrassed army as the nation was caught up in the *Anschluß* and the Munich crisis. The third incident was the creation of the *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht* (OKW) (Supreme Command of the Armed Forces). On February 4th 1938 Hitler created this new overarching command with himself at its head. The position of Minister of War was abolished and Fritsch was replaced as Commander in Chief of the Army by a more

⁷⁶ Robert O'Neill, *The German army and the Nazi Party, 1933-1939*. (London: Cassell, 1966), 139.

malleable officer; General Walter von Brauchitsch. The creation of the OKW marked a significant reduction in the army's power. It came in the wake of the humiliating Blomberg and Fritsch affairs and increased the process of solidifying pre-war army resistance to Hitler.⁷⁷ At the same time a lightning purge took place throughout the army's ranks in which sixteen generals were dismissed for their lack of enthusiasm for Nazism.⁷⁸

As a result of these incidents, in early 1938 there was a real possibility that Hitler had pushed the army to the breaking point. Shirer recounts that “[t]he capital seethed with rumours. Hitler had dismissed the two top men in the army, for reasons unknown. The generals were in revolt. They were plotting a military *putsch*.”⁷⁹ The *putsch*, however, never came to fruition. Before any move could proceed, Hitler's popularity was to rise still further with the bloodless conquering of Austria. Any possibility of a generals' revolt would be impossible to justify to the public when Hitler's popularity was at its zenith. Ian Kershaw, the preeminent biographer of Hitler, commented that, at the time of the *Anschluss*, “[h]is internal position was now stronger than ever.... ‘[T]he German miracle’ [the *Anschluss*] brought about by Hitler released what was described as ‘an elemental frenzy of enthusiasm’ ...”⁸⁰ It is for this reason that a *coup* was impossible at

⁷⁷ Roger Manvell and Henrich Fraenkel, *The Canaris Conspiracy* (New York: David McKay Company, 1969), 18.

⁷⁸ Walter Goerlitz, *The German General Staff 1657-1945* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1967), 319.

⁷⁹ William L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: A history of Nazi Germany* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960), 318.

this stage. The rank and file were just as enthusiastic about Hitler at this time.

Consequently, Robert O'Neill, author of *The German Army and the Nazi Party* contends that at the time of the *Anschluß*, “[h]ad the generals attempted a revolt against this hero of the masses it is very likely that they would have been leading a force without soldiers.”⁸¹

Circumstances would be much more favourable later in the year.

Halder-Beck Coup Plans

It was in this atmosphere that the Munich crisis occurred. The army remained bitter about the Blomberg and Fritsch affairs but outwardly it appeared to be humbly obedient to Hitler. Hitler was riding a tide of unchallenged territorial and diplomatic success. With Austria secured in March, he immediately turned towards Czechoslovakia, but this time the stakes were much higher. War with the West seemed inevitable. The army was gravely concerned about the outcome of such a war.

[T]he mood of the people and the soldiers was, in general, against war. The generals were in agreement that although the standard of training and equipment of the troops was probably sufficient to defeat Czechoslovakia, it was insufficient for a battle with the powers of Europe.⁸²

⁸⁰ Ian Kershaw, *Hitler 1936-45: Nemesis* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), 86.

⁸¹ Robert O'Neill, *The German Army and the Nazi Party, 1933-1939*. (London: Cassell, 1966), 149.

⁸² Robert O'Neill, *The German Army and the Nazi Party, 1933-1939*. (London: Cassell, 1966), 158.

Hitler's desire to crush Czechoslovakia was the culmination point for both external and internal opposition to him. Throughout the crisis, Beck was instrumental in the orchestration of a generals' "...collective stand against Hitler's plans for aggression. He stressed... that this was perhaps the last opportunity to free Germany and even Hitler himself from tyranny of a Cheka and oppression by party bosses."⁸³ In the spring and summer of 1938, Beck wrote a number of urgent memoranda to Brauchitsch pleading that he persuade Hitler of the folly of his plans for Czechoslovakia. He received no support from Brauchitsch. Beck believed emphatically that Hitler was going to destroy Germany by his expansionist plans because they would engage Germany in a war with Britain, France and eventually the United States. Over this disagreement he chose to resign in protest on 18 August 1938.⁸⁴ His views on their folly of senior officers not standing up to Hitler are captured in his own words:

History will burden these leaders with blood-guilt if they do not act in accord with their specialized political knowledge and conscience. Their military obedience has a limit where their knowledge, their conscience and their sense of responsibility forbid the execution of a command... It is a lack of greatness and of recognition of the task if a soldier in the highest position in such times regards his duties and tasks only within the limited framework of his military instructions without being aware of the highest responsibilities towards the nation as a whole. Extraordinary times demand extraordinary measures.⁸⁵

⁸³ Robert O'Neill, *The German Army and the Nazi Party, 1933-1939*. (London: Cassell, 1966), 158.

⁸⁴ Anthony Cave Brown, "*C*" *The Secret Life of Sir Stewart Graham Menzies*. (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1987), 193.

⁸⁵ Robert O'Neill, *The German Army and the Nazi Party, 1933-1939*. (London: Cassell, 1966), 157-158.

Despite Beck's resignation, preparation for the invasion continued apace. Preparation for the *coup* also continued, led by Beck's successor Colonel General Franz Halder. The *coup* was planned by two key anti-Nazi collaborators, Admiral Wilhelm Canaris, head of the *Abwehr* (the military intelligence service) and his deputy Major General Hans Oster. The plan's name was *Aufmarsch Grün* and it involved a number key generals.⁸⁶ On execution, Hitler was to be arrested and put on trial "...before one of his own People's Courts on the charge that he had tried recklessly to hurl Germany into a European war and was therefore no longer competent to govern."⁸⁷ *Aufmarsch Grün* had a high chance of success, primarily because it had the backing of certain key generals, three of which held commands. Timing would be critical because the moral justification for overthrowing Hitler was the imminent invasion which would result in Germany's ruin in a world war. Given forty-eight hours notice of the invasion, the conspirators believed they could successfully execute the *coup*.

The British Response: Appeasement

Before discussing how the British position affected the Halder-Beck *coup* plans, it is necessary to analyse what was being communicated to them from the conspirators in

⁸⁶ The plan was called *Aufmarsch Grün* and involved the commander of the Wehrkreis III, general von Witzleben; the commander of the Potsdam garrison, Graf von Brockdorff-Ahlefeld; the commander of the First Light Division, General Horpner; General Karl-Heinrich von Stülpnagel, and Beck.

⁸⁷ William L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: A history of Nazi Germany* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960), 375.

Germany. In the spring of 1938, Theo Kordt, German *chargé d'affaires* in London (and a party to the plot) called on Lord Halifax, the British Foreign Secretary. At this meeting, Kordt impressed on Halifax that "...if everyone could be convinced that a German attack on Czechoslovakia would mean war with Britain, then if Hitler continued with his policy the German army leaders would intervene against him."⁸⁸ This was a clear attempt to impress upon the British the importance of a firm position on Czechoslovakia in order to bring about a *coup*. This message was reiterated in late August. Major Ewald von Kleist-Schmenzin, a monarchist and close friend of Canaris and other conspirators, was sent to London as an emissary from the moderates on the German General Staff. His visit was apparently sanctioned by the German War Ministry which shows how deeply ant-Hitler sentiments were in the *Wehrmacht*. In his meeting with Sir Robert Vansittart, Chief Diplomatic Advisor to the government, he explained how the whole of Germany was alarmed by the prospect of war and that the army, including pro-Nazis, were largely against it. He concluded by making "...it abundantly clear... that they [the army] alone could do nothing without assistance from outside..."⁸⁹

The British government's response was muted. Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain was unimpressed by the message being communicated from the Halder-Beck plot. He dismissed the importance of the plot by remarking to Lord Halifax that the prospect of a generals' uprising against Hitler reminded him "of the Jacobites at the Court

⁸⁸ Robert Lee, *Munich: The Eleventh Hour* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1988), 140.

⁸⁹ Roger Manvell and Henrich Fraenkel, *The Canaris Conspiracy* (New York: David McKay Company, 1969), 37.

of France in King William's time... we must discount a good deal of what he [Kleist-Schmenzin] says."⁹⁰ His statement implied that the conspirators were all talk and no action. There is evidence to suggest that British intelligence were also unimpressed with the thoroughness of the *coup* plans. Sir Stewart Menzies, deputy chief of MI-6, wrote in a memorandum (dated 15 November 1938 to General Ismay, Secretary of the Committee of Imperial Defence) about his scepticism regarding a successful *coup*. Menzies commented that "...there was hope that an outbreak of war might lead to the overthrowing of the regime.... But...we had no sure evidence of the existence of any cohesive opposition movement which could have shaken the regime."⁹¹

Appeasement and *Coup*

The response provided by the British to the conspirators, therefore, offered little encouragement. On one level this is understandable because Britain and Germany were not at war in 1938 and supporting German conspirators at this stage would have been a serious infringement of international law. As it happened, in light of Hitler's aggressive intentions, Chamberlain chose to discuss the Sudetenland crisis rather than stand firm and threaten war. The West's appeasement policy was borne. The results for the plotters were significant. In effect, appeasement took the wind out of their sails. They "... were ready to move the moment Adolf Hitler announced mobilisation of the German army, as

⁹⁰ Leonard Moseley, *On Borrowed Time: How World War II Began* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969), 32.

⁹¹ Anthony Cave Brown, "*C*" *The Secret Life of Sir Stewart Graham Menzies*. (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1987), 194.

they thought, on September 16. But on September 14 the British Prime Minister announced... he was leaving the following day to see Adolf Hitler at Berchtesgaden.”⁹² For the conspirators, with war now averted through diplomacy, their *raison d'être* for the *coup* had evaporated. The cause of this was Chamberlain's policy of appeasement. O'Neill supports this position. He states: "...once Chamberlain had announced his intention of having further talks with Hitler, it was painfully apparent that the basis for the popular support necessary for the *putsch* had been pulled away.”⁹³

It is important to understand the motivation behind the 1938 general's plot. Whereas the political and religious resistance wished to rid the nation of Hitler for political ends (and were quite happy to exploit the army's military grievances to accomplish this), the generals, at this stage, were motivated purely by military considerations. This meant that the army was willing to keep Hitler, so long as *Plan Green* (the plan for the invasion of Czechoslovakia) was cancelled. Whereas the political and religious resistance wanted to rid Germany of Hitler, the military resistance wanted to simply avoid military defeat. Commenting on *coup* plans at the time of the Munich crisis, Telford Taylor, states that "Halder and Beck wished to abort Green and stave off military defeat which they feared would otherwise ensue, and, if Hitler were to come around to their view, they would abandon all thought of a *Putsch*.”⁹⁴ The army resistance

⁹² Leonard Moseley, *On Borrowed Time: How World War II Began* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969), 35-36.

⁹³ Robert O'Neill, *The German army and the Nazi Party, 1933-1939*. (London: Cassell, 1966), 165.

⁹⁴ Telford Taylor, *Munich: the Price of Peace* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1979), 716.

would change its tune as the war progressed. It became much more political such that by 1943, like the political and religious resistance, it became focused more directly against removing Hitler for political ends.

Shirer believed that blame for the lost *coup* opportunity in 1938 should not be entirely attributed to the British. He stated that “The Germans... have a weakness for blaming foreigners...[and that]... whatever blame may be heaped on the archappeasers,... the fact remains that the German generals themselves... failed at an opportune moment to act on their own.”⁹⁵ Schlabrendorff responded to Shirer in his book that this over simplified the situation:

Foreign support was vital because the hard core of resolute, determined men within the German resistance was hopelessly outnumbered, and besides was forced to push, pull, and carry along the many lukewarm, hesitant, and vacillating people at the edges of the conspiracy, who were nevertheless needed because of their influential positions. A tough stand against Hitler by the Western Powers would have strengthened our position immeasurably, and would have brought many still undecided or wavering generals and other key figures into our camp. Strong outside opposition to the actions of a tyrannical regime has a tendency to consolidate and encourage internal resistance.⁹⁶

Next to the 20 July 1944 assassination attempt, the 1938 *coup* opportunity was the closest the generals ever came to overthrowing Hitler. In fact, Shirer believed it was the “golden opportunity” which never presented itself again.⁹⁷ In 1938, many generals were

⁹⁵ William L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: A history of Nazi Germany* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960), 414.

⁹⁶ Fabian von Schlabrendorff, *The Secret War Against Hitler* (New York: Pitman Publishing Corp., 1965), 90-91.

on side in support of a revolt.⁹⁸ Their resolve was motivated by a combination of humiliation, loss of power and most importantly valid military concerns for the defence of Germany. The Allies' appeasement policy removed the latter impetus and so a *coup* became impossible. John Wheeler-Bennett, an authoritative historian on the German army aptly summed up the *coup* failure as follows:

The conspirators hesitated to strike... looking for that 51 per cent chance of success without which a General Staff will not operate, but on which revolutionaries can so rarely count at the outset. They hesitated until the visitation of Mr. Chamberlain to Germany cut the ground from under their feet.⁹⁹

The 'Phoney War': 'Solemn Obligation'

Halder's Renewed Plans

The second window of opportunity for a *coup* presented itself between the fall of Poland and the invasion of France. This was the 'Phoney War' when Britain and France had declared war against Germany but when little actual fighting was taking place. It was during this eight month period that many generals again feared for the military survival of Germany because of the impending confrontation with French and British forces on the

⁹⁷ William L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: A history of Nazi Germany* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960), 413.

⁹⁸ John W. Wheeler-Bennett, *The Nemesis of Power* (London: MacMillan & Co. Ltd., 1964), 423-402.

⁹⁹ John W. Wheeler-Bennett, *The Nemesis of Power* (London: MacMillan & Co. Ltd., 1964), 423-424.

Western front. It was at this time that a memorandum entitled *The Threatening Calamity* was drafted by Dr. Erich Kordt of the German Foreign Ministry and a member of the political resistance. In it he explained what could be expected if Hitler invaded France and the Low Countries. He anticipated the offensive would be halted, and the United States would enter the war, Italy would join the Allies, Russia would treat herself to more spoils, bolshevism would take over in Germany, and Germany could expect to be dismembered.¹⁰⁰ He concluded by stating, “Consequently steps must be taken to stop the invasion... This can only be done by an early *overthrow* of the Hitler government.”¹⁰¹ Ironically, virtually all of Kordt’s predictions came to pass after 1945. Kordt’s memorandum, therefore, provides the background on the motivation for the 1939 *coup* plot.

By the autumn of 1939 the plotters were fewer in number and less organised than they had been in 1938.¹⁰² *Coup* plans centred on Halder and involved many of the 1938 conspirators. The culmination point for the plotters was the same as it had been in 1938: they would move the moment Hitler gave the order for invasion. The fateful day this time was to be 5 November 1939, but conditions were not as ripe for a *coup* as they had been in 1938. Orders to launch the *coup* needed to come from Brauchitsch but he was far

¹⁰⁰ Peter Hoffmann, *The History of the German Resistance 1933-1945* (London: MacDonald and Jane’s, 1969), 131.

¹⁰¹ Peter Hoffmann, *The History of the German Resistance 1933-1945* (London: MacDonald and Jane’s, 1969), 131.

¹⁰² Ian Kershaw, *Hitler 1936-45: Nemesis* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), 268.

from committed to the desperate measures needed to depose Hitler.¹⁰³ At a meeting with Hitler, Brauchitsch confronted Hitler with his reasoning as to why the Western offensive must be called off. Hitler, in a characteristic rage, would not listen to Brauchitsch and countered his arguments by saying the army was unprepared because it did not want to fight.¹⁰⁴ Brauchitsch left the meeting a broken spirit. His appetite for initiating a *coup* had been completely quashed by Hitler's forcefulness. The result was that Hitler had finally defeated any possibility of a general lead *coup* for years to come. Kershaw stated that in 1939 "...The chance to strike against Hitler had been lost. Circumstances would not be as favourable for several years."¹⁰⁵

Before the fall of France, the generals came extremely close to overthrowing Hitler. But when the crucial decision was needed, in the end Halder failed to generate both in himself and in his fellow senior officers, the nerve to break the oath to Hitler. In the minds of conspiratorial generals, the motive for treason was based on military imperative. But before they would act against Hitler on this basis, they also wanted greater assurance from the Allies. Peter Hoffman summarises the situation thus:

What was to be done? No *coup* was possible without the army but the army would not march without orders. Only Brauchitsch could give the order; subordinate commanders' ...would not act without orders from

¹⁰³ Ian Kershaw, *Hitler 1936-45: Nemesis* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), 268.

¹⁰⁴ Ian Kershaw, *Hitler 1936-45: Nemesis* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), 270.

¹⁰⁵ Ian Kershaw, *Hitler 1936-45: Nemesis* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), 270.

Brauchitsch. None of them were adventurers; they had to have 'assurance' that the Western Powers would not stab the conspiracy in the back or refuse favourable peace terms after a *coup*.¹⁰⁶

The Allies' Response: 1939

Analyse will now turn to the Allies' response to the idea of a *coup* during the 'Phoney War.' At this time of the war, the British government retained some faint hope that the remnants of the Munich peace agreement could be resurrected. This was the message being conveyed to Germany and was exemplified in the text of one of Chamberlain's speeches on 4 September 1939. In it he implied Britain's conflict was with the Nazi regime and not Germans. He stated "...we are not fighting against you, the German people... but against a tyrannous and forsworn regime which has betrayed not only its own people but the whole of Western civilisation."¹⁰⁷

The implication was that if the Nazis and Hitler were removed from power, peaceful negotiations would be a real possibility. This message was communicated in late 1939 and early 1940 through sources in the Vatican,¹⁰⁸ and direct clandestine arrangements between Berlin and London.¹⁰⁹ What the resistance interpreted as

¹⁰⁶ Peter Hoffmann, *The History of the German Resistance 1933-1945* (London: MacDonald and Jane's, 1969), 144.

¹⁰⁷ John W. Wheeler-Bennett, *The Nemesis of Power* (London: MacMillan & Co. Ltd., 1964), 467.

¹⁰⁸ These meetings were facilitated by the Pope Pius XII, Josef Müller, a lawyer leading Catholic resistance activist and Sir Francis d'Arcy Osborne, Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary to the Holy See.

¹⁰⁹ John W. Wheeler-Bennett, *The Nemesis of Power* (London: MacMillan & Co. Ltd., 1964), 467.

Chamberlain's 'solemn obligation' not to take revenge but to negotiate peace with a new German government was "...regarded as a powerful trump card for removing the inhibitions of the General Staff [to execute a *coup*]."¹¹⁰ As previously mentioned, despite the uncertainty about whether or not the *Wehrmacht* would succeed in the pending offensive in the West, the generals could not follow through with their *coup* plans. In particular, Halder seems to have suffered from a *crise de conscience* about breaking his oath.¹¹¹ The Allies' 'solemn obligation,' therefore, did not provide sufficient impetus for the undecided generals to commit treason.

The Allies' Response 1940

During the latter part of the 'Phoney War,' the British continued to express mild interest in the position being presented by the resistance. This was made clear during an exchange that took place between the British foreign office and a member of the resistance in early 1940. In a meeting in Switzerland on 23 February, Lonsdale Bryans, a British diplomat with direct contact to Lord Halifax met with Ulrich von Hassell (former German ambassador to Italy and an active member of the resistance). According to Hoffmann, Hassell's aim was to "...obtain an official binding declaration from the British government about their attitude in the event of a possible internal German *Coup* and the peace terms which they would regard as acceptable."¹¹² He emphasised that

¹¹⁰ John W. Wheeler-Bennett, *The Nemesis of Power* (London: MacMillan & Co. Ltd., 1964), 468.

¹¹¹ John W. Wheeler-Bennett, *The Nemesis of Power* (London: MacMillan & Co. Ltd., 1964), 469.

¹¹² Peter Hoffmann, *The History of the German Resistance 1933-1945* (London: MacDonald and Jane's, 1969), 156.

time was of the essence and that British assurance (and subsequent generals' *coup*) had to take place before military action in the West. Britain's response was returned to the resistance through secret meetings facilitated by the Pope Pius XII. In what came to be referred to as the 'X report,' Britain had again conveyed to the resistance that a "... 'decent peace' was still perfectly attainable..."¹¹³ On 17 March 1940, Hassell presented the 'X Report' to Halder and Brauchitsch. Halder responded:

... Britain and France had declared war on Germany and the war must now be fought out. The *Wehrmacht* could not act on its own to overthrow the government or at least only in extreme emergency, in other words after severe defeats or in the face of imminent threat.¹¹⁴

In his response, Halder was saying that the *coup* opportunity had been lost. He still struggled with the problem that he had neither the forces nor the necessary backing for a *coup*.¹¹⁵ In addition, Germany was now much more prepared for action in the West than it had been in 1939 and so the army resistance was less interested in rebellion on military grounds.¹¹⁶ Whether or not the Allies were interested in negotiating with the resistance was of little consequence to the uncommitted generals. Military success (or the likelihood of success), therefore, had a great dampening effect on the generals' appetite for a *coup*, regardless of how much encouragement the Allies appeared to be providing.

¹¹³ Peter Hoffmann, *The History of the German Resistance 1933-1945* (London: MacDonald and Jane's, 1969), 165.

¹¹⁴ Peter Hoffmann, *The History of the German Resistance 1933-1945* (London: MacDonald and Jane's, 1969), 166.

¹¹⁵ Peter Hoffmann, *The History of the German Resistance 1933-1945* (London: MacDonald and Jane's, 1969), 165.

¹¹⁶ Ian Kershaw, *Hitler 1936-45: Nemesis* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), 285.

With the fall of Norway, the rise of Churchill as Prime Minister and the defeat of the Allies in France, attitudes in Germany and in Britain towards the possibility of a *coup* began to polarise. For the generals, intoxicated by an easy victory in Norway, and with the new uncompromising stance of Churchill, neither side was in the mood to encourage a *coup*. The mutual understanding between the British and the resistance, where tacit encouragement for a *coup* from abroad had come so close to tipping the generals towards treason, had now vanished. Klemens von Klemperer, an authority on the relationship between Allies and the resistance, commented on the differences in attitudes between the Chamberlain and Churchill governments. Under Chamberlain, where Britain was trying to win the war short of military action, "...the government was reduced to 'hanker,' as Lord Halifax put it, after a German revolution."¹¹⁷ But by 10 May 1940, after Churchill had become Prime Minister, "...the search in Whitehall for the 'other Germany' was over."¹¹⁸

As German State Secretary (Permanent Secretary) Ernst Freiherr von Weizäcker (and political resistance member) said, "[e]ven those generals who before 10 May 1940 had misgivings about the offensive against the West are now convinced of its appropriateness, talk disparagingly of the enemy, and do not like to be reminded of their

¹¹⁷ Klemens von Klemperer, *German Resistance Against Hitler: The Search for Allies Abroad 1938-1945* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 435.

¹¹⁸ Klemens von Klemperer, *German Resistance Against Hitler: The Search for Allies Abroad 1938-1945* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 435.

previous judgements [in favour of a *coup*].”¹¹⁹ The days of Chamberlain’s ‘solemn obligation’ were gone as the intensity of the war increased.

Churchill to Stalingrad: “Absolute Silence”

The third *coup* window of opportunity is the period from the fall of Norway to the battle for Stalingrad. It began with Churchill becoming Prime Minister which marked a more resolute stance by Britain against Germany. Major land combat commenced between the Allies and the Germans the German army began to experience a long run of military successes. Because of this, the period also saw the least amount of activity by the army resistance during the war. This situation is explained by Schlabrendorff who commented after the war:

It was obvious to all of us that to lead the victorious German army against a Hitler appearing as a successful military leader would be psychologically impossible, just as it had been impossible before the war to act against Hitler while he appeared as a successful statesman.¹²⁰

Nevertheless, the political and religious wings of the resistance remained busy.

Discussion to follow will examine resistance activity initiatives by these groups during the mid-war period.

¹¹⁹ Klemens von Klemperer, *German Resistance Against Hitler: The Search for Allies Abroad 1938-1945* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 219.

¹²⁰ Fabian von Schlabrendorff, *The Secret War Against Hitler* (New York: Pitman Publishing Corp., 1965), 116-117.

Allied – Resistance Discussions: 1942

In May 1942, members of the ‘Kreisau Circle’ established contact with the Allies in neutral Sweden. The Germans at this encounter were Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Dr. Hans Schönfeld. Both men were religious resistance activists with connections to the political and military wings of the resistance. They met with George Bell, the Bishop of Chichester, who had connections with Anthony Eden, the British Foreign Secretary. Bell met Bonhoeffer and Schönfeld in Stockholm while he was on a mission to renew contact between Swedish and British churchmen. The Germans explained the current extent of the resistance movement in Germany and its plans for a *coup*. They explained how the resistance spanned all strata of the German government and society and included former state administrators, former trade union leaders, high ranking generals, the police, and leaders of the Catholic and Protestant churches.¹²¹ They also explained the existence intention to overthrow Hitler by an army lead *coup*. Post-*coup* plans included Germany’s withdrawal from occupied countries, the arrest and trial of principle Nazis and the payment of reparations. Europe would be governed, they proposed, by an international federation with an international army.¹²² Schönfeld concluded his interview by emphasising how important outside help was to the success of a *coup*. He emphasised that “[w]ithout encouragement from Britain it might well prove impossible to take action with any likelihood of success...”¹²³

¹²¹ Richard Lamb, *The Ghosts of Peace* (Wilton UK: Michael Russell, 1987), 253.

¹²² Roger Manvell & Heinrich Fraenkel, *The July Plot: The Attempt in 1944 on Hitler’s Life and the Men Behind it* (London: The Bodley Head, 1964), 31.

Bell returned to London 11 June 1942 and presented the resistance position to Eden. In a letter to Eden, Bell reiterated the importance of providing encouragement to the resistance as follows:

If you could at some convenient opportunity make it plain that the infliction of stern retribution is not intended for those in Germany who are against the German Government, who repudiate the Nazi system and are filled with shame by the Nazi crimes, it would, I am sure, have a powerful and encouraging effect on the spirit of the opposition... If we, by our silence, allow them [the opposition] to believe that there is no hope for any Germany, whether Hitlerite or anti-Hitlerite, that is what in effect we are doing.¹²⁴

The resistance's message was that the Allies could have a direct impact on the success of a *coup* in Germany. Simple words of encouragement, overtly or behind the scenes, could have inspired wavering collaborators to action. But, as will be seen, such encouragement was not forthcoming

Churchill's Response: 'Absolute Silence'

When Churchill heard about the German resistance's overtures, he wrote to Eden: "I presume you are keeping your eyes upon all this. Your predecessor [Halifax] was entirely misled in December 1939. Our attitude towards all such enquiries should be

¹²³ Roger Manvell & Heinrich Fraenkel, *The July Plot: The Attempt in 1944 on Hitler's Life and the Men Behind it* (London: The Bodley Head, 1964), 32.

¹²⁴ Roger Manvell & Heinrich Fraenkel, *The July Plot: The Attempt in 1944 on Hitler's Life and the Men Behind it* (London: The Bodley Head, 1964), 36.

absolute silence”¹²⁵ Churchill’s response, ‘absolute silence,’ would remain the standard British response to all resistance overtures made during the middle part of the war. It was, in effect, the Allies’ policy statement on the subject up until the ‘unconditional surrender’ policy was adopted by Roosevelt and Churchill at Casablanca. In a speech made in Edinburgh on 8 May 1942, Eden reiterated the intent behind the ‘absolute silence’ policy as follows:

The longer the German people continue to support and to tolerate the regime which is leading them to destruction the heavier grows their own direct responsibility for the damage they are doing to the world. Therefore, if any section of the German people really wants to see a return to a German state which is based on respect for law and for the rights of the individual, they must understand that no one will believe them until they have taken active steps to rid themselves of their present régime.¹²⁶

Thus the British expectation was that before any help for the resistance could be considered, conspirators had to somehow show their metal by helping themselves. This theme characterised Britain’s message to the resistance throughout this period. Bonhoeffer and Schönfeld had their answer: ‘absolute silence.’ Following below is an examination of how this response affected the resistance and in particular the generals in their initiative to launch a *coup*.

‘Absolute Silence’ and *Coup*

¹²⁵ Klemens von Klemperer, *German Resistance Against Hitler: The Search for Allies Abroad 1938-1945* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 218.

¹²⁶ Peter Hoffmann “Peace through *Coup d’État*: The Foreign Contacts of the German Resistance” *Central European History* Vol. 19 Issue 1 (March 1986): 27.

The effect of Churchill's 'absolute silence' policy on the generals during the early part of the period was negligible. Too many of them were caught up in the euphoria of military success of the period. Rothfels explains why the possibility of a *coup* was so remote at this time. By rhetorical question he asks, "[h]ow could the German people and the German army be convinced that Hitler was leading them to destruction while the way to victory still seemed open?"¹²⁷ The reality was that the army's interest in a *coup* was greatly diminished after the fall of France. Consequently, the indifferent support from Britain for the opposition had little impact on military conspirators simply because many of them had become dormant. Kershaw stated that "[a]ll prospects of opposition to Hitler had been dimmed following the astonishing chain of military successes between autumn 1939 and the spring 1941."¹²⁸ It was not until the winter of 1941-1942 that military resistance began to revive itself.

When it did so a year after the invasion of the Soviet Union, it took on a new, younger, more serious look. The revival was led by Major-General Henning von Tresckow, Chief of Staff to Field-Marshal von Beck, commander Army Group Centre on the Eastern front. Born in 1901, Tresckow came from a traditional Prussian-military family. He was characterised as being "... conservative, hard-working, God-fearing, honest and energetic. [Proof that] Prussian officers were by no means always the sabre-clanking cloths-dummies of caricature."¹²⁹ In other words, he represented the younger

¹²⁷ Hans Rothfels, *The German Opposition to Hitler* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1962), 74.

¹²⁸ Ian Kershaw, *Hitler 1936-45: Nemesis* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), 658.

resistance officer who brought a more pragmatic approach to the resistance movement and who had no qualms about assassinating Hitler. Margaret Boveri, author of *Treason in the Twentieth Century* talks about conspirators like Tresckow. She identifies two types of conspirator-officers: the ‘old men’ and the ‘colonels.’ Tresckow was one of the latter. The ‘colonels’ sprang up only after serious military setbacks began on the Eastern front in 1942. She states that:

[b]ehind the indecisive faltering of the commanding generals, a clique of tough, decisive colonels sprang up. In the new conspiracy, a much colder wind blew... Anxieties about avoidance of violence ... were forgotten... the first and crucial step was to kill Hitler.¹³⁰

Tresckow’s motivation for treason was different from that of the conspirator-generals of 1938 and the ‘Phoney War.’ It was not born of a fear that the army was unprepared for an impending military offensive as was the case in 1938 and 1939-40. Rather it was born of fear of impending total disaster for Germany. Kershaw states that for the colonels, “[t]he savagery of the warfare on the Eastern front and, in the light of the winter crisis of 1941-2, the magnitude of the calamity towards which Hitler was steering Germany, had revitalized the notions,... that something must be done”¹³¹ Unlike the ‘old men,’ Tresckow and his younger followers had no fear of engaging in politics. For them true patriotism meant ridding Germany of Hitler. It was this level of commitment which

¹²⁹ Terence Prittie, *Germans Against Hitler* (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1964), 189.

¹³⁰ Margret Boveri, *Treason in the Twentieth Century* (London: Macdonald, 1961), 221.

¹³¹ Ian Kershaw, *Hitler 1936-45: Nemesis* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), 659.

lead the military conspiracy to realise that for sake of Germany, Hitler's assassination would be necessary. Tresckow's views were as follows:

The assassination must be attempted at all costs. Even if it should not succeed, an attempt to seize power in Berlin must be undertaken. What matters is no longer the practical purpose of the coup, but to prove to the world and for the record of history that the men of the resistance movement dared to take the decisive step. Compared to this objective nothing else is of consequence.¹³²

The impact of the 'absolute silence' policy of the interwar period for determined officers like Tresckow and Stauffenberg was negligible. They were interested in the attitude of the Allies about a post-Hitler government, but they were not going to be diverted from their *coup* plans because of it. The problem was 'the colonels' did not command the troops necessary to sweep the Nazis from power once Hitler was assassinated. A successful *coup* continued to rely on the complicity of key unit commanding generals. The uncertainty of their commitment, according to Stauffenberg, continued to be the problem. "He had become convinced that nothing could be expected of the top military leadership in initiating a *coup*. 'They would only follow an order,' was his view. He took it upon himself to provide the 'ignition (*Initialzündung*),' as the conspirators labelled the assassination of Hitler."¹³³ 'The colonels' would provide the spark, but the generals were needed to follow through with the *coup*. The uncommitted generals would become the centre of gravity for the success of a *coup* in the latter part of the war. How this came

¹³² Fabian von Schlabrendorff, *The Secret War Against Hitler* (New York: Pitman Publishing Corp., 1965), 277.

¹³³ Ian Kershaw, *Hitler 1936-45: Nemesis* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), 660.

about and how Allied policy towards the resistance influenced their decisions about participation will now be examined.

Casablanca to 20 July 1944: ‘Unconditional Surrender’

Final historical analysis will cover the period from the battle for Stalingrad and the Casablanca conference until the 20 July 1944 *coup* attempt. It marked the joining together of three factors. These were the continued importance of ‘the colonels’ who were committed to providing the ‘ignition’ for the *coup* by assassinating Hitler, the uncommitted generals who commanded the armies needed overthrow the Nazis regime, and the influence of the Allies’ new ‘unconditional surrender’ policy on the decision making of all conspirators. The third factor had little impact on the colonels - they were determined to assassinate Hitler come what may - but for the uncommitted generals, the impact was significant. This is the opinion held by, Hoffmann. He summarised the period by stating, “[i]n addition to patriotism, nationalism, and the system of military obedience, Allied war aims were a major obstacle to anti-government Resistance action in the interdependent framework of foreign contacts and *coup d’état* planning.”¹³⁴ The following analysis will show how, at the critical moment of the 20 July 1944 *coup* attempt, the Allies intransigence on the ‘unconditional surrender’ policy proved to be a significant impediment to key uncommitted generals’ embracement of treason.

¹³⁴ Peter Hoffmann, “Peace through *Coup d’État*: The Foreign Contacts of the German Resistance” *Central European History* Vol. 19 Issue 1 (March 1986): 3-44.

Coup Plans 1943-1944

The circumstances under which sufficient potential existed for overturning the Nazi regime depended on two factors: the generals' continued belief (or disbelief) in eventual victory and their inclination to commit treason. Prior to the battle for Stalingrad, the former had not fallen low enough for the latter to become viable. The situation changed after Stalingrad. The battle represented a significant defeat for the German army and a great psychological turning point for the nation. It followed the Anglo-American landings in North Africa and Rommel's defeat at El Alamein. Shirer stated that these events marked "...the great turning point in World War II... [From then on] the initiative had passed from Hitler's hands, never to return."¹³⁵ Manstein concurred with this opinion. He stated after the war that "...[b]y the winter of 1942 I knew we could not win. Our line across Russia had by then been so extended that we had not the means to maintain it. I knew that superior Russian numbers must eventually envelop us piecemeal."¹³⁶ It was under these circumstances that military resistance embarked on serious *coup* attempts in 1943 and 1944.

With the enthusiasm of men like Tresckow and Stauffenberg, plans for a *coup* became more elaborate and sophisticated. Under their leadership, the plan to overthrow Hitler and the Nazis coalesced in 1943 with the adoption of Operation *Valkyrie* as the

¹³⁵ William L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: A history of Nazi Germany* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960), 933.

¹³⁶ R. T. Paget, *Manstein: His Campaigns and his Trial* (London: Collins, 1951), 52.

vehicle for taking power. Initially developed in 1941, *Valkyrie* was a plan for the mobilisation of the Replacement army (all the army's units within Germany) to meet the demands of an emergency collapse of the Eastern front. In its 31 July 1943 version, the plan was evolved to meet the threat of 'internal disturbances' such as large scale sabotage or an uprising by the millions of foreign workers in Germany.¹³⁷ The beauty of using *Valkyrie* was that it was a legitimate method for taking command of all forces within Germany with the exception of the SS. "The orders were perfectly sensible and suitable for an emergency; on the face of it they were neutral and non-political...[T]hey only acquired political significance through their object."¹³⁸ For the conspirators, the 'object,' or target for the Replacement army, was to be the SS and Gestapo. Replacement army unit commanders would be ordered to turn against the SS and Gestapo because of an attempted (yet fictitious) *putsch*. The opening lines of the *Valkyrie* Operation Order therefore read: "The Fuehrer Adolf Hitler is dead. An unscrupulous clique of party leaders, who have no feeling for the fighting front, have tried to exploit the situation and to stab the struggling army in the back."¹³⁹ It was through this fiction that Replacement army officers, who were not party to the conspiracy, would be persuaded to take up arms against the SS and Gestapo.

¹³⁷ Peter Hoffmann, *The History of the German Resistance 1933-1945* (London: MacDonald and Jane's, 1969), 302.

¹³⁸ Peter Hoffmann, *The History of the German Resistance 1933-1945* (London: MacDonald and Jane's, 1969), 305.

¹³⁹ Fabian von Schlabrendorff, *The Secret War Against Hitler* (New York: Pitman Publishing Corp., 1965), 254.

Would *Valkyrie* have worked? Manvell and Fraenkel believed it would have.

They stated in *The Canaris Conspiracy* that

...a reasonably effective emergency government had been prepared. Given the backing of a sufficient number of senior officers had Hitler suddenly been killed, there seems no doubt that this government would have been capable of taking temporary control of Germany.¹⁴⁰

The backing of the generals, however, remained crucial. This will be dealt with in more detail below but first it is necessary to examine the interaction between the resistance and the Allies. The colonels were determined to proceed with the *coup* regardless of the Allies' position. But the generals were also needed and for them the Allies' plans for post-Nazi Germany were very relevant.

Resistance Propositions

While the planning for *Valkyrie* continued, resistance contacts with the Allies also continued throughout 1943 and 1944. Two examples of contacts will be described below to show what message was being conveyed to the Allies by the resistance. Both featured covert liaison between men of the 'Kreisau Circle' and Allied representatives in neutral countries. The first 'Kreisau Circle' member was Adam von Trott zu Solz, a Rhodes Scholar and a diplomat with contacts in Britain. In meetings with Allied agents in Sweden and Switzerland in 1943 and 1944 he emphasised the desperate need "...to

¹⁴⁰ Roger Manvell and Henrich Fraenkel, *The Canaris Conspiracy* (New York: David McKay Company, 1969), xxxii.

secure support in the United States and Britain for German Opposition.”¹⁴¹ In one of his meetings he made contact with Allen Dulles of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS). At that meeting he stated that “[t]he opposition urgently needed outside help for their *coup* and without delay; otherwise,... the danger of counter action by the regime and civil war was great. The major obstacle was the demand for ‘unconditional surrender.’”¹⁴² In other words, the message being conveyed was that the resistance conspirators needed reassurance that in the event of a successful *coup* the Allies would be willing to negotiate a peace settlement with the post-Nazi regime. This was necessary in order to bolster the conspirators’ power base sufficiently for them to succeed with the *coup*.

The second ‘Kreisau Circle’ member was Count Helmuth von Moltke, legal advisor to the *Abwehr* and head of the ‘Kreisau Circle.’ In December 1943 and on behalf of the resistance, a memorandum of his made its way to the desk of President Roosevelt. In essence it was a proposal to the Allies from the resistance in the event of the Allies’ landing in North West Europe. It stated that if “... proper agreement about the future of Germany was signed with this group [the army and political opposition] a sufficient number of intact units of the *Wehrmacht* would fight against the Nazis and simultaneously an anti-Nazi Government would cooperate with the Allies.”¹⁴³ The

¹⁴¹ Terence Prittie, *Germans Against Hitler* (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1964), 224.

¹⁴² Peter Hoffmann, *The History of the German Resistance 1933-1945* (London: MacDonal and Jane’s, 1969), 228.

¹⁴³ Richard Lamb, *The Ghosts of Peace* (Wilton UK: Michael Russell, 1987), 250.

message was clear: if the Allies gave assurances that they would talk to a post-Hitler government, the war could be ended early, at least on the Western front.

By 1943, overtures being made to the Allies after Stalingrad became less demanding with respect to the territorial and political integrity expected for Germany after the war. Another characteristic of these overtures was that many of them were an unabashed attempt to offer peace with the Western Allies so that the war could continue against the Soviets. According to Goerdeler, by 1943 the resistance leadership “...favoured the idea of an immediate occupation of Germany by the combined force of the Western Allies and the German army itself before the Russians reached the Eastern frontiers and began their own invasion of German territory.”¹⁴⁴ Talk of post war reparations and occupation armies featured in virtually all proposals whereas earlier in the war the aspiration had been to bargain for preservation of Germany’s 1937 borders. Goerdeler was fully aware that his hopes of preserving the concept of a ‘Greater Germany’ were rapidly diminishing. Because “...military strength alone no longer afforded Germany a strong bargaining position Goerdeler and his group put their hopes in the latent tension between Russia and the West.”¹⁴⁵ Would Britain and the United States be interested in such an offer? An analysis of their ‘unconditional surrender’ policy provides the answer.

¹⁴⁴ Roger Manvell and Henrich Fraenkel, *The Canaris Conspiracy* (New York: David McKay Company, 1969), 80.

¹⁴⁵ Paul Kecskemeti, *Strategic Surrender: the Policies of Victory and Defeat* (Stanford CA, USA: Stanford University Press, 1958), 127.

The Allies' Response: 'Unconditional Surrender'

The Allies' response to the resistances' overtures was consistent from the Casablanca conference until end of the war. Only Germany's 'unconditional surrender' would be accepted. Roosevelt remained unmoved by the resistances' appeal for help in overthrowing Hitler. His comments on Moltke's memorandum indicate what he thought about entering into any sort of negotiations with resistance leaders: he "...flatly decline[d] to negotiate with these East German Junkers."¹⁴⁶ In response to Trott's propositions, he responded that "...there could be no deviation from the principle of total victory over Germany... The Germans should be allowed to live, he said, and should quietly place their trust in the generosity of the Americans..."¹⁴⁷ This view was echoed by Churchill who was equally determined not to talk with the resistance. "Although the idea ['unconditional surrender'] was Roosevelt's, Churchill became keener on it than the American President. He would not tolerate any departure from the principle."¹⁴⁸ In a Note to the British War Cabinet he explained why 'unconditional surrender' was more palatable to the Germans than the full details about what was going to happen at the end of the war. Knowing Allied intentions for occupation, disarmament, and dismemberment, Churchill said, "...would not necessarily have a reassuring effect upon

¹⁴⁶ Peter Hoffmann, *The History of the German Resistance 1933-1945* (London: MacDonald and Jane's, 1969), 227.

¹⁴⁷ Peter Hoffmann, *The History of the German Resistance 1933-1945* (London: MacDonald and Jane's, 1969), 228.

¹⁴⁸ Richard Lamb, *The Ghosts of Peace* (Wilton UK: Michael Russell, 1987), 223.

the German people and that they might prefer the vaguer terrors of ‘unconditional surrender’ ...”¹⁴⁹

There were two main rationales for the Allies ‘unconditional surrender’ policy. The first was borne out of the necessity of Alliance cohesion and the other was aimed at preventing the possibility of future German militarism. Understanding these motives is important because it helps explain why the Allies remained so attached to a policy which do directly affected the generals’ ability to participate in a *coup*. These will be dealt with in turn below.

‘Unconditional Surrender’ and Alliance Cohesion

After Stalingrad there was great relief in Britain and the United States that the Soviets would survive in the long run. The key issue between the three nations’ leaders became when, where and how a second front would be opened against Germany. The ‘unconditional surrender’ policy featured in this debate. It was intended to reassure Stalin that the Western Allies remained committed to an eventual second front.¹⁵⁰ In effect, the ‘unconditional surrender’ policy became a common denominator they could all agree on; if for no other reason than because of its vagueness.¹⁵¹ On this point,

¹⁴⁹ Richard Lamb, *The Ghosts of Peace* (Wilton UK: Michael Russell, 1987), 227.

¹⁵⁰ Hans Rothfels, *The German Opposition to Hitler* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1962), 144.

¹⁵¹ Anne Armstrong, *‘Unconditional Surrender’: The Impact of the Casablanca Policy upon World War II* (New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1961) 39.

Hoffmann believes that “[p]rosecution of the war until the total defeat and ‘unconditional surrender’ of Germany was the only aim common to all the Allies. It was the condition *sine qua non* of the war coalition, as was the exclusion of separate armistice or peace agreements...”¹⁵² This view was aptly captured at the time by United States Secretary of War, Henry Stimson who said, “Together they [the Allies] could not loose. Apart or at cross purposes they could hardly win.”¹⁵³

An example of why the ‘unconditional surrender’ policy became the all important glue holding together the Allies is provided by Roosevelt’s response to one of Trott’s overtures in the spring of 1944. Trott requested a modification of the ‘unconditional surrender’ policy and Roosevelt responded by proposing to make a proclamation to the German people after the invasion of Europe in which he would state that the Allied aim was not “total destruction of the German people [but] total destruction of the philosophy of those Germans who have announced that they could subjugate the world.”¹⁵⁴ Such a declaration would have been highly encouraging for the Germans.¹⁵⁵ It would have sent a message that ‘unconditional surrender’ applied to the Nazi regime and not the German people. For the resistance this would mean that if they could replace the Nazi government, ‘unconditional surrender’ would no longer apply. But Roosevelt’s

¹⁵² Peter Hoffmann, “Peace through *Coup d’ État*: The Foreign Contacts of the German Resistance” *Central European History* Vol. 19 Issue 1 (March 1986): 10..

¹⁵³ Anne Armstrong, *‘Unconditional Surrender’: The Impact of the Casablanca Policy upon World War II* (New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1961), 35.

¹⁵⁴ Peter Hoffmann, *The History of the German Resistance 1933-1945* (London: MacDonald and Jane’s, 1969), 229.

¹⁵⁵ Peter Hoffmann, *The History of the German Resistance 1933-1945* (London: MacDonald and Jane’s, 1969), 230.

proclamation was never sent. Churchill opposed it because he and his cabinet could not condone such a “tone of friendship” just as troops were about to engage the enemy.¹⁵⁶ Stalin too expressed concern that it would encourage the resistance towards a *coup*. The new Germany, he feared, would then sue for peace in the West in order to continue the war in the East.¹⁵⁷ Both the British and the Soviets, therefore, refused to water down the ‘unconditional surrender’ policy. They each had different reasons, but ultimately the policy stuck because it was the only one the three could agree upon. Peter Hoffmann’s opinion supports this view: “The difficulties were insuperable. There could be no argument between the Allies and the German opposition because of mutual suspicions between the Allies...”¹⁵⁸

‘Unconditional Surrender’ and German Militarism

Roosevelt and Churchill wanted to make it clear that ‘unconditional surrender’ meant the end the Nazi ideology of militarism and subjugation of other nations and peoples. The Allies would be unwilling to terminate the war unless it could be done with guarantees that the world would never again be subjected to German aggression. At the Casablanca conference, Roosevelt was clear about this. He stated:

¹⁵⁶ Peter Hoffmann, *The History of the German Resistance 1933-1945* (London: MacDonald and Jane’s, 1969), 230.

¹⁵⁷ Peter Hoffmann, *The History of the German Resistance 1933-1945* (London: MacDonald and Jane’s, 1969), 230.

¹⁵⁸ Peter Hoffmann, *The History of the German Resistance 1933-1945* (London: MacDonald and Jane’s, 1969), 230.

The United States have no intention to enslave the German people. We wish them to have a normal chance to develop in peace, as useful and respectable members of the European family. But we most certainly emphasise the word “respectable,” for we intend to rid them once and for all of Nazism and Prussian militarism and the fantastic and disastrous notion that they constitute the “Master Race.”¹⁵⁹

For many Americans, the Second World War was being fought for moral reasons. The German people needed to be not only defeated but also reformed. With this objective in mind, any remnants of the existing Nazi Germany had to be first wiped out. A negotiated settlement, like that at the end of the First World War, would have put this plan at risk. Roosevelt believed that the war must end with ‘unconditional surrender’ “...because the war was dedicated to a moral purpose and its results must teach a moral lesson...Germany must be taught the cost of waging aggressive warfare.”¹⁶⁰ Both Churchill believed there was something unique about Germany which led the nation inevitably towards aggression. In a speech delivered in September 1943, Churchill charged that “...twice within our lifetime and three times counting that of our fathers the German people have plunged the world into their wars of expansion and aggression.”¹⁶¹

The belief that an innate propensity towards militarism was the root cause of Germany’s aggression in the Second World War, is what stood behind the ‘unconditional surrender’ policy. The Allies reasoned that if the world was to be spared the threat of

¹⁵⁹ Winston S. Churchill *The Second World War: The Hinge of Fate* (Cambridge MA, USA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1950), 688.

¹⁶⁰ Anne Armstrong, ‘Unconditional Surrender’: *The Impact of the Casablanca Policy upon World War II* (New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1961) 20.

¹⁶¹ Anne Armstrong, ‘Unconditional Surrender’: *The Impact of the Casablanca Policy upon World War II* (New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1961) 28.

German aggression in the future, Germany must be "...totally defeated so that territorial and constitutional changes could be effected with the aim of weakening or destroying the Prussian [military] spirit."¹⁶² By adhering to this policy the Allies were ruling out a negotiated ending to the war. Only 'unconditional surrender' could guarantee there "...would be no negotiated peace, no compromise with the Nazis and Fascism, no 'escape clauses' provided by another Fourteen Points which could lead to another Hitler."¹⁶³ This, unfortunately for the resistance, meant the Allies were unwilling to make the distinction between 'good' and 'bad' Germans. For the Allies, all Germans were grouped "...in the same boat."¹⁶⁴ Of course this interpretation was not entirely true. As has been shown, there were many 'good' Germans who were opposed to Hitler's wars of aggression.¹⁶⁵

The 'unconditional surrender' policy, therefore, was intended to crush German militarism forever. But by misinterpreting the foundation of this problem as being innately German rather than a result of Nazism, the Allies missed the opportunity to exploit the latent conflict that existed between the army and the Nazis throughout the war.¹⁶⁶ The consequence was that the Allies were disinclined to see the resistance as

¹⁶² Anne Armstrong, *'Unconditional Surrender': The Impact of the Casablanca Policy upon World War II* (New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1961) 31.

¹⁶³ John L. Chase, "'Unconditional Surrender' Reconsidered," *Political Science Quarterly* Vol. 70, No. 2 (June 1955): 263.

¹⁶⁴ Hans Rothfels, *The German Opposition to Hitler* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1962), 145.

¹⁶⁵ Ian Kershaw, *Hitler 1936-45: Nemesis* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), 90.

¹⁶⁶ Anne Armstrong, *'Unconditional Surrender': The Impact of the Casablanca Policy upon World War II* (New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1961) 33.

representing anything but a different brand of the same militarism that caused the First World War. Whether or not the Allies were right is not important here. What is important is how this idea was strong enough to sustain the ‘unconditional surrender’ policy until the end of the war. This happened despite the resistances’ pleading that there was an alternative to Hitler, ready and willing to commit treason on behalf of the ‘good’ Germany.

‘Unconditional Surrender,’ the Generals and the 20 July *Coup* Attempt

Two great impediments affected the undecided generals’ decision making about participating in the 20 July 1944 *coup* attempt. The first was the dilemma created by the ‘unconditional surrender’ policy. The second was the oath of allegiance to Hitler. An author on the subject of *coup d’état* theory, D. J. Goodspeed states that success in a *coup* is dependent on conspirators having a sound appreciation of “objective conditions – those circumstances beyond the immediate control of the conspirators which have a direct bearing on their enterprise. [These are] ..., the state of public opinion, and the international situation, and the sympathies of the nation’s armed forces”¹⁶⁷ The extent to which the conspirators satisfied these conditions sheds some light on reasons for the 20 July *coup* failure. They will be examined in turn below.

¹⁶⁷ D. J. Goodspeed, *The Conspirators: A Study of the Coup d’État* (Toronto: MacMillan, 1962), 210.

‘Public opinion’ was not such a concern for the conspirators. This was largely because the public had become so accustomed to living under the heel of the Nazi regime that a new regime would have been welcome provided it could have ended the war with some semblance of honour. There was the risk of creating a new ‘stab-in-the-back’ legend, but the conspirators were willing to take this risk.¹⁶⁸ By 1943, the colonels were intent on proceeding with the *coup* regardless of support from outside Germany, so in a sense the conspirators had managed the ‘international situation’ as well. In meeting the third condition, that the ‘sympathies of the armed forces’ be favourable, the conspirators failed. This was because key generals remained uncommitted to the cause at the crucial moment. Once again, this was because the arguments in favour of deposing Hitler were not strong enough to break their bonds of loyalty to Hitler. One factor which might have tipped the balance in favour of supporting a *coup* was reassurance from the Allies about the post-war treatment of Germany. Decisions by key uncommitted generals before and during the 20 July *coup* will now be analysed to show how this was true.

After Stalingrad, the conspiracy leaders exerted a great deal of energy trying to persuade influential generals to commit themselves and their troops to *Valkyrie*. It was a constant struggle for men Beck and Goerdeler because all too often the generals’ withheld their commitment because of concerns about the position being taken by the Allies’ with respect to the war’s termination. Goerdeler’s predicament with the generals was as follows:

¹⁶⁸ D. J. Goodspeed, *The Conspirators: A Study of the Coup d’État* (Toronto: MacMillan, 1962), 213.

He had been bombarding [the generals]... with messages urging them to intervene against Hitler's reckless policy of aggression, whereas *they* were putting pressure on *him* to come up with assurances that the Allies would not take military advantage of a toppling of the Nazi regime.¹⁶⁹

The generals wanted to know that treason would result in a greater good for Germany. Colonel-General Heinz Guderian provides a good example of the sort of officer who firmly believed loyalty, as confirmed by the oath, had to be maintained in part because of the Allies' 'unconditional surrender' policy. Although not a commander of forces in 1944 (he was Inspector-General of Armoured Troops) his views in his memoirs provide insight into generals' problem with 'unconditional surrender.' According to Guderian, its effect on the army was "brutal."¹⁷⁰ It was "...an absolute barrier to any action which would undermine German military resistance and lead to total defeat at the hands of an enemy who demanded Germany's destruction."¹⁷¹

Dilemma: Treason and 'Unconditional Surrender'

Guderian's words capture what can be considered the generals' 'dilemma.' In essence, the generals remained unwilling to turn against Hitler because the Allies were offering no better future for Germany than Hitler was. This meant that "[t]he army was

¹⁶⁹ Hans Mommsen, *Alternatives to Hitler: German Alternatives to Hitler* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 184.

¹⁷⁰ General Heinz Guderian, *Panzer Leader* (London: Michael Joseph, 1952), 284.

¹⁷¹ Anne Armstrong, *'Unconditional Surrender': The Impact of the Casablanca Policy upon World War II* (New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1961) ix.

bound to the Führer by the enemy's insistence of 'unconditional surrender.'"¹⁷² Ian Kershaw commented on the 'dilemma' in the following passage: "...the war itself, the lack of alternative posed by 'unconditional surrender,' and the fear of a victorious Soviet Union provided continuing negative bonds between regime and society."¹⁷³ By negative bonds he meant the generals, and the German people as a whole, found themselves attached to Hitler until the very end. If Hitler fate was ultimate destruction, so it would be for the German people. Although firmly committed and loyal to Hitler¹⁷⁴ (even though aware of the conspirators' plans) Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt provides additional insight into the 'dilemma' faced by many of the uncommitted generals in his testimony the Nuremberg trials in 1946. He said:

Even if I, perhaps with the aid of the Allies, had brought about an overthrow, the fate of the German people, according to the famous statement of the Big Three ['unconditional surrender'], would have been exactly what it is now [partition, occupation etc.], and I would have emerged and been considered for all time as the greatest traitor to my fatherland.¹⁷⁵

In the latter part of the war, the thinking of many generals was that there was no use in turning on Hitler; and that this situation was partially the Allies' fault. The generals did not act against Hitler because they felt trapped by the constraints imposed by the

¹⁷² *Germany and the Second World War Volume IX/I* ed. Jörg Echternkamp (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2008), 873.

¹⁷³ Ian Kershaw, *The Nazi Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives of Interpretation* (London: Arnold, 1985), 215.

¹⁷⁴ Charles Messenger, *The Last Prussian: A Biography of Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt 1875-1953* (London: Brassey's, 1991) 182.

¹⁷⁵ Charles Messenger, *The Last Prussian: A Biography of Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt 1875-1953* (London: Brassey's, 1991) 201.

‘unconditional surrender’ policy. This is backed up by a survey conducted on a number of prominent generals after the war. They were asked: ‘why did you not act against Hitler?’ Their answer amply captures the ‘dilemma’ they felt burdened with. “With virtually a single voice, Manstein, Halder, Heusinger, Geyr von Schweppenburg, Manteuffel, and Warlimont protested in a 41-page chorus: ‘we did nothing because nothing could be done.’”¹⁷⁶

Loyalty: Treason and the Oath

To ‘the dilemma’ problem must be added the issue of the oath. The background to the oath has already been discussed, but it is particularly important to understand how it related to the issue of Hitler’s assassination. For the generals who refused to entertain any thoughts of supporting the *coup*, there were just as many who intended to do so once Hitler was dead. The idea was that if the oath could be broken (by Hitler’s death) the individual officer would be free to partake in the post-assassination *Valkyrie* activities. The oath, therefore, was a problem. Wheeler-Bennett believed that only “...if confronted with a *fait accompli* of a dead Hitler the *Generalität* would feel themselves, with relief, freed from their allegiance.”¹⁷⁷ This caveat made *coup* planning very difficult for the conspirators.

¹⁷⁶ Harold C. Deutsch, “The German Resistance: Answered and Unanswered Questions” *Central European History* Vol. 14, Issue 4 (Dec 81): 330.

¹⁷⁷ John W. Wheeler-Bennett, *The Nemesis of Power* (London: MacMillan & Co. Ltd., 1964), 466.

The most poignant example of this situation is provided in the decision making by Kluge on 20 July 1944. As a major theatre commander who was sympathetic to the resistance, had he wished he could have ended the war early by signing an armistice with the invasion forces.¹⁷⁸ However, he would not take action so long as Hitler was alive. On the evening of 20 July 1944, when he had finally discovered that Hitler was alive, Kluge stated to his Chief of Staff General Günther Blumentritt that "...if it [the assassination] had succeeded, his first step would have been to order the discharge of V1s against England to be stopped, and his second step would have been to get in touch with the Allied Commanders."¹⁷⁹ On the news that Hitler was dead, he was committed to the resistance and to ending the war in the West. On the news that he was alive, he reverted to unreserved loyalty to Hitler. On the evening of 20 July, General Heinrich von Stülpnagel, Military Governor of France was with Kluge. Stülpnagel had already begun to execute *Valkyrie* - the SS and Gestapo in Paris were in the process of being rounded up. He pleaded with Kluge to reconsider where his loyalties lay and told him that the fate of the nation lied in his hands. In reply Kluge, entirely bound by his oath, said "It would be so if the swine [Hitler] were dead."¹⁸⁰

A similar scene played out in Berlin in Fromm's headquarters. For a few hours on 20 July he too held the fate of Germany in his hands because forces under his command were the ones designated to execute *Valkyrie*. Under Fromm's command was

¹⁷⁸ Margret Boveri, *Treason in the Twentieth Century* (London: Macdonald, 1961), 323.

¹⁷⁹ B. H. Liddell Hart, *The Other Side of the Hill: Germany's general Their Rise and Fall, with their Own Account of Military Events 1939-1945* (London: Cassell, 1948), 433.

¹⁸⁰ Anthony Cave Brown, *Bodyguard of Lies* (Toronto: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1975), 768.

Major-General Friedrich Olbricht, Chief of Supplies for the Reserve army and “...principle organizer of the July plot.”¹⁸¹ Both men were conspirators. Olbricht was a fully committed one, but with no troops under his command. Fromm was an uncommitted one, with the entire Reserve army under his command. Like Kluge, because of his oath of loyalty, Fromm would not act once he found out Hitler had survived the bombing. When the time was ripe to seize power in the capital, he turned “...savagely against the conspirators...” the moment he realised Hitler was not dead.¹⁸²

Captain Hermann Kaiser, a conspirator on Treschow’s staff, commented on the fundamental problem of *Valkyrie*. He believed it relied too heavily on the decisions of a hand full of uncommitted generals. In Berlin, Fromm was needed to give the order for operation *Valkyrie* but he would not do so if Hitler was alive. Olbricht wanted to implement *Valkyrie*, regardless of whether or not Hitler was alive, but did not have the authority to order the execution of *Valkyrie*. On this situation Kaiser commented: “One wants to act when he gets the order [Olbricht], the other [Fromm] wants to give the order when someone else has acted.”¹⁸³ Because of men like Kluge and Fromm, therefore, the *coup* attempt failed largely because of the “...refusal of key generals to commit themselves until they knew for sure that Hitler was dead.”¹⁸⁴

¹⁸¹ Roger Manvell and Henrich Fraenkel, *The Canaris Conspiracy* (New York: David McKay Company, 1969), 141.

¹⁸² Roger Manvell and Henrich Fraenkel, *The Canaris Conspiracy* (New York: David McKay Company, 1969), xxvii.

¹⁸³ Peter Hoffmann, *The History of the German Resistance 1933-1945* (London: MacDonald and Jane’s, 1969), 298.

Hitler survived the bomb planted by Stauffenberg on 20 July 1944. This event was to be the ‘spark’ which would set off the military revolts in Berlin, the provinces and the occupied territories. The spark failed, but could the *coup* have proceeded regardless? Goodspeed believed this to be so, provided the conspirators not wasted the three hours between the bomb blast and the execution of Operation *Valkyrie*.¹⁸⁵ The other requirement was that more key generals committed themselves to breaking their oath. Goodspeed aptly captures the problem of the oath and the uncommitted generals. He states: the *coup* was stalled by “... a melancholy list of men like Fromm, von Kluge and Guderian who asked only one thing before they would give their support to the *coup d’état* – that it should have succeeded.”¹⁸⁶ What could have persuaded them to break their oath of allegiance knowing full well Hitler was alive? One possible answer is greater assurance from the Allies as to their post war plans for Germany. In other words, a watering down of the ‘unconditional surrender’ policy might have made the difference.

CONCLUSION

Had the war ended in July 1944 with a *coup* overthrowing Hitler and the Nazis, undoubtedly lives would have been saved. Estimates suggest 500,000 Germans and an

¹⁸⁴ Brigadier Shelford Bidwell, *et al*, *Hitler's General and their Battles* (London: Salamander, 1977), 39.

¹⁸⁵ D. J. Goodspeed, *The Conspirators: A Study of the Coup d'État* (Toronto: MacMillan, 1962), 205.

¹⁸⁶ D. J. Goodspeed, *The Conspirators: A Study of the Coup d'État* (Toronto: MacMillan, 1962), 204.

equal number on the Allied side could have survived.¹⁸⁷ Had the war ended earlier, or perhaps had it never been embarked upon all because of an earlier *coup*, even more lives might have been saved. Of course this is all historical speculation. For any of these alternative histories to have played out after 1933, successful action against Hitler and the Nazis by German resistance movements would undoubtedly have been necessary.

Resistance against Hitler existed in Germany from the earliest days of the Nazi regime. It spanned all aspects of German society but generally fell into religious, political and military groupings. By the late 1930s, after any meaningful political opposition to Hitler had finally been quashed, it was only the military resistance which had the capacity to overthrow Hitler. A military *coup*, therefore, became the only way in which an alternative to Hitler could to be achieved. Such a *coup* required army general officers to commit treason which, in Nazi Germany, meant breaking a personal oath of allegiance to Hitler. Willingness to break this oath depended on an officer's ability to see how overthrowing Hitler would be fulfilling a higher patriotism which transcended loyalty to Hitler. Some, the loyal, could never consider this. Others, the conspirators, were fully committed to this course of action. For a third group, the uncommitted, treason was sometimes and sometimes not an option. It was upon these uncommitted generals that prospect of overthrowing Hitler depended before and during the war.

¹⁸⁷ D. J. Goodspeed, *The Conspirators: A Study of the Coup d'État* (Toronto: MacMillan, 1962), 205.

Four *coup* windows of opportunity occurred. These were: just prior to the Munich crisis in 1938, during the ‘Phoney War,’ during the period from the rise of Churchill until Stalingrad and finally from the Casablanca conference until the 20 July 1944 *coup*. These four periods coincided with four broad Allied policy positions with respect to the German resistance. In each period the resistances’ overtures to the Allies for support and the Allies’ reaction was examined. The Allies’ response to the resistance in these four windows varied depending on the political climate at the time. In 1938 it was the Allies policy of appeasement. During the ‘Phoney War’ it was the allies ‘solemn obligation’ to not rule out a negotiated settlement with a non-Nazi government. From Churchill’s rise until the battle of Stalingrad it was Churchill’s response of ‘absolute silence’ in response to overtures by the resistance. Finally, from the Casablanca conference in 1943 until 20 July 1944 it was the acceptance of nothing less than Germany’s ‘unconditional surrender.’

At no time did the combination of the Allies’ encouragement for a *coup* and the generals’ propensity act build enough potential for a successful *coup* to occur (see figure 1 below). For the uncommitted generals to fully join with the conspirators in acts of treason, they had to generate sufficient willpower to break their oath of allegiance to Hitler - a very difficult undertaking for officers raised in the Prussian-military tradition. Throughout the war, therefore, dedicated conspirators expended a great deal of energy trying to encourage uncommitted generals to join their ranks. Their efforts were in vain. Their hard work has been described as “..a veritable labour of Sisyphus: the stone kept

rolling down the hill again.”¹⁸⁸ Greater assurances from the Allies might have made the difference.

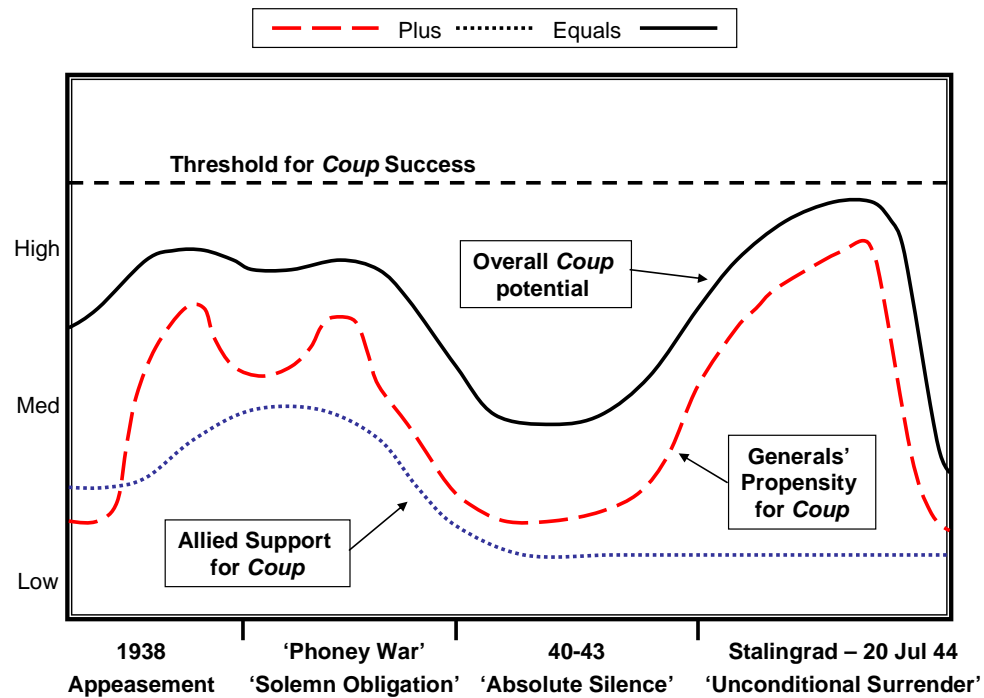


Figure 1: Coup Potential

It has been suggested that the Allies would have been wise to recognise the German resistance as a fourth “Ally” and therefore a “...legitimate aspect of the war against the Third Reich.”¹⁸⁹ In doing so, the war might have been shortened. Assessing the merits of Allied policy towards the resistance was not examined as part of this essay. Only the effects of these policies on the resistance, and in particular the generals, was the interest of this essay. A *coup* never occurred because for the conspirators “...when it

¹⁸⁸ Hans Rothfels, *The German Opposition to Hitler* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1962), 74.

¹⁸⁹ Klemens von Klemperer, *German Resistance Against Hitler: The Search for Allies Abroad 1938-1945* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 438-439.

came to the point of no return the great majority of the field-marshals and generals refused to act, fell back upon their oath of loyalty...”¹⁹⁰ Greater assurance from the Allies about post-war Germany could well have made the difference by convincing these officers to break their oath of loyalty and support the *coup*.¹⁹¹

¹⁹⁰ Roger Manvell & Heinrich Fraenkel, *The July Plot: The Attempt in 1944 on Hitler's Life and the Men Behind it* (London: The Bodley Head, 1964), 59.

¹⁹¹ Peter Hoffmann, “Peace through *Coup d' État*: The Foreign Contacts of the German Resistance” *Central European History* Vol. 19 Issue 1 (March 1986): 40.

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