

# H-Net Reviews

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*Stauffenberg*. ARD 1, Television Channel.

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On 25 February 2004 German television (ARD Erstes Programm) showed a film entitled “Stauffenberg” in prime time, drawing 22.9% of the viewer “market,” or 7.58 million viewers. This unusually large audience saw the dramatic events of 20 July 1944 re-enacted: Colonel Claus Schenk Graf von Stauffenberg carried out an assassination attempt against Hitler, and then led a coup d’etat to overthrow the regime. The attempt failed and Stauffenberg and three fellow officers were executed by firing squad at about midnight. <p> The 20 July 1944 insurrection is a defining event in German history: as the continuing debate about its meaning illustrates. It is the most visible manifestation of a rare phenomenon: men and women responded to the existential challenge of evil, and made the ultimate sacrifice of their lives, in order to assert the values of life against the forces of destruction and mass murder. It told the world of another Germany besides “Nazi Germany.” <p> Many of those involved in the events of 20 July 1944 had been fighting Hitler and his gang of criminals for years. The leader of the Social-Democratic Reichstag faction, Otto Wels, opposed Hitler’s enabling bill in the Reichstag on 23 March 1933 and said: “We German Social Democrats declare in this historic hour solemnly our commitment to the principles of humanity and justice, liberty and socialism. No enabling act will give you the power to destroy ideas which are eternal and indestructible.” In 1933 Helmuth von Moltke warned his friends that Hitler was going to do what he had threatened to do in his book, and through the 1930s and even during the war he encouraged and helped Jews to escape. The Chief of the General Staff, General Ludwig Beck, who opposed Hitler’s war policy on fundamental principles, attempted to launch a coup to overthrow Hitler and he might have succeeded in August 1938 if the Commander-in-Chief of the Army, General Walther von Brauchitsch, who had accepted financial

aid from Hitler for a divorce, had not sabotaged it. <p> But the viewers of the dramatic and suspenseful events of the film, “Stauffenberg,” saw only a failed military coup. They saw nothing of the essentially civilian nature of the conspiracy against Hitler, of the years of frustrated plans and attempts since 1938, they saw nothing of the intellectual and political foundations of the coup. They were not told that the military men did not propose to govern Germany, but insisted that they would not act unless a political and administrative structure was organized, and ready to take over after, the coup. Viewers also learned nothing of the two hundred executions for complicity in the plot. <p> The viewers are shown an anemic Colonel Henning von Tresckow, the motor of the coup until Stauffenberg was posted to Home Army Command Staff, and a number of equally ill-cast generals who are merely names to all who have not read the history of the insurrection. No civilian leaders are mentioned (such as Carl Goerdeler, Helmuth von Moltke, Dietrich Bonhoeffer), nor are Social Democrats (such as Julius Leber, Carlo Mierendorff, Hermann Maass, Wilhelm Leuschner, Theodor Haubach and others), all of whom (except Carlo Mierendorff, who died in an airraid) were hanged for their part in the plot. Both military and civilian leaders insisted that the practical aim of the coup was the restoration of the rule of law and the restoration of the civil rights in the Weimar Constitution that Hitler had suspended in February 1933. Both military and civilian leaders wanted to negotiate an end to the war. Failing that, both were prepared to sign terms of surrender. The military men as well as the civilians knew in the summer of 1944 that they could save lives by ending the war, but that they could not avert the occupation and territorial amputation of Germany. Both understood that they were sacrificing their own lives and their families’ freedom in order to demonstrate that some Germans dared to op-

pose Hitler and the most monstrous crimes ever committed in German history. Instead of being given the information that would help them understand what they were seeing, viewers are misled in not very subtle ways into thinking that the German Armed Forces (Wehrmacht) was a Nazi organization: in the events leading up to the collapse of the coup, military officers in the film constantly jab out their arms for the "Heil Hitler" salute. That salute was not introduced in the Wehrmacht until 21 July 1944, the day after the coup. In the film a drunken general is shown lying on his back on the floor of a men's room. After he has been helped onto his feet he identifies himself, still in the men's room, by introducing himself to then Lieutenant-Colonel von Stauffenberg as "Fellgiebel." It would never have occurred to a general at the time to introduce himself to an officer below general rank. There is not a shred of historical evidence for any other part of this repulsive scene. The tendency is obtrusive. The Wehrmacht, including the resistance, is portrayed in a negative light. The leading character, Stauffenberg, appears in the film without more than the barest hints of a development, and some of the hints that are there are forgeries. Stauffenberg is shown in the days between 16 and 20 July 1944 as having visited his family in Bamberg. The visit is portrayed as the last encounter between Stauffenberg and his wife Nina, and as resulting in a bitter conflict which ended with Nina leaving the room in anger and Stauffenberg, who was going to return to Berlin two hours thence, not even getting up from the table to follow her. Nothing of this is true. Stauffenberg did telephone his wife on 17 or 18 July to ask that she postpone the family's departure on school holidays because he wanted them to remain in telephone contact for a last farewell, but he could not tell her his reasons over the telephone. Nina knew that Stauffenberg was plotting against Hitler, but she did not know the details or why she should change her plans. But all this was done over the telephone. Stauffenberg had last visited his family in Bamberg on the weekend of 24-26 June, when it had not even been decided that he was himself to carry out both the assassination in Hitler's headquarters and the subsequent coup in Berlin. The invented scene in Bamberg in the final days before the 20 July coup is an unjustifiable portrayal of Stauffenberg and his wife in a negative light which cannot but cause the surviving widow and family personal anguish. An even worse historical distortion is the suppression of Stauffenberg's condemnation of the 1938 pogrom, of his rejection of Hitler's plans to make war in 1939, of his verdicts against Hitler because of the crimes against the Jews, civilians generally, prisoners of war. There is not even a hint of Stauffen-

berg's one-man campaign in 1942, long before the defeat of Stalingrad, to win over army commanders on the eastern front (including Fieldmarshal von Manstein) for the overthrow of Hitler. With complete disregard for the historical record, Stauffenberg is portrayed as approaching a decision to move against Hitler only after the Stalingrad defeat and after having been badly wounded in Tunisia. The only thing the viewers learn on the central issue of Stauffenberg's reaction to the persecution and mass murder of the Jews is that Stauffenberg wrote to his wife in 1939 that the inhabitants were "an unbelievable rabble, very many Jews and very much mixed population." It is obtrusively obvious what this quotation is meant to suggest. The next time the issue is touched upon obliquely is in a meeting the script author and director imagined might have taken place between Stauffenberg and Colonel Henning von Tresckow in 1942. In the film, Tresckow has a local woman report on a massacre of the population, whereupon the film's Stauffenberg cites his military oath and casts down his eyes. This does not remotely correspond to the real Stauffenberg's character or temperament. The real Stauffenberg reacted with furious anger to reports of mass shootings which he then asked a co-worker in the General Staff in 1941, the historian Walter Bussmann, to compile. Bussmann was a second lieutenant in the Quartermaster-General's War Administration Branch. When an eyewitness told him in May 1942 of SS massacres of Jews Stauffenberg replied that Hitler must be removed—not because of his incompetence as a military leader, but because of the crimes against the Jews, civilians generally, and the prisoners of war. In August 1942 he told another co-worker: "They are shooting Jews in masses, these crimes must not continue." And again in August 1942 he told Joachim Kuhn, who became a fellow-plotter, that the treatment of the Soviet population, particularly of the Jews, proved that Hitler's war was monstrous, that Hitler had lied about the necessity and just cause of the war, and that Hitler must be removed. Stauffenberg gave voice to other motivations, too. He said on one occasion that he would not be able to face the widows and orphans after the war if he did not do everything in his power to end the killing and destruction. He naturally hoped, as late as 1943, that Germany's territorial integrity might be preserved. But again and again he referred to the monstrous crimes of the regime including the murder of the Jews. In every important respect, this film suppresses historical information that would truthfully characterize the 20 July 1944 uprising. It misrepresents and trivializes the historical record.

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