

Countdown to Valkyrie - The July Plot to Assassinate Hitler by Nigel Jones.
Frontline Books 2008

There have been several books about the attempt to kill Adolf Hitler in 1944, and a recent film starring the Hollywood actor Tom Cruise, that tell the story of the ill-fated plot led by a group of aristocratic Wehrmacht officers and its most charismatic member Graf Claus Schenk von Stauffenberg.

Countdown to Valkyrie, by the historian and biographer Nigel Jones, is the latest to detail the plot that came so close to success. His approach to the incident is to set it in the framework of a timeline, with the dates flagged up in bold, commencing, after a foreword, with November 15th 1907, the year that Claus was born to his aristocratic parents in the province of Swabia, and concluding with April 30th 1945, the day that Hitler and Eva Braun committed suicide in Berlin.

Between those dates Jones describes the life of Claus von Stauffenberg, his commitment to a military career, at which he excelled, and his rapid rise up the ranks of the Wehrmacht. Jones also explains the background to the July 1944 plot, detailing the disquiet about the Nazis in general and Hitler in particular among the officer class, especially those of an aristocratic background, of whom there were many.

Nigel Jones also elucidates the disfunctionality at the top of the German Army, largely the result of Hitler's assumption of the role of commander in chief, for which he was singularly ill-suited.

Countdown to Valkyrie catalogues all the plots against Hitler's life, the scheming beginning as early as 1938, and the combination of good luck, and an extraordinary sixth sense that saved him from bomb or bullet on several occasions.

As the July '44 plot swung into action, Jones provides a moment by moment account, showing how close the plan came to success, and how, even after it had failed, the plotters could have succeeded in their putsch against the Nazi state had they not been hamstrung by the pusillanimity of certain senior generals and poor last minute planning and execution.

Jones also catalogues the extraordinary brutality and vindictiveness with which Hitler pursued anyone and everyone associated with the plot, or rumoured to have been, including members of their families who had nothing to do with it whatsoever and some of his most senior officers, including Field Marshal Rommel, who was required to commit suicide to avoid execution.

Countdown to Valkyrie is a riveting read, a fine re-telling of the key events of Nazi history, and a reminder that even during the darkest days of the Second World War there were some 'decent' Germans, patriots who loved their country and hated Hitler who were prepared to sacrifice their lives to bring his terrible war to an end.

If you have seen the film and wish to read one of the available books that flesh out the detail, Countdown to Valkyrie is the one that I would unhesitatingly recommend.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh