



September 2021

Reframing the Sacred: Valkyrie and the Basis of Resistance

William S. Skiles

Regent University, wskiles@regent.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf>



Part of the [European History Commons](#), [History of Religion Commons](#), and the [Military History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Skiles, William S. (2021) "Reframing the Sacred: Valkyrie and the Basis of Resistance," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 25 : Iss. 2 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol25/iss2/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Religion & Film by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu.

Reframing the Sacred: Valkyrie and the Basis of Resistance

Abstract

The film *Valkyrie* (2008) is a thriller that explores the religious basis of the July 20, 1944 plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler in the last year of the Second World War. While the political motivations are clearly stated in exposition and dialogue, the religious motivations are shown through a series of images, symbols, and dramatic uses of the word “sacred” (*heilig* and its derivatives). The filmmakers focus on Colonel von Stauffenberg’s struggle against the Nazi conception of the sacred, revealing his Christian sense of the sacred as a basis for his resistance. The religious elements in the film provide a pulse to the thriller that enables audiences to understand why the conspirators would risk everything—including their lives, the lives of their loved ones, and their good names after death—to follow their consciences and do the best they could to free Germany from Hitler’s grip. In this way, the filmmakers carefully explore the religious motivations to resist in Nazi Germany, with the minimal use of words, and in a manner that perfectly suited the genre to the thriller.

Keywords

Operation Valkyrie, World War II, German Resistance, Bryan Singer, Christopher McQuarrie

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

Author Notes

William Skiles is Assistant Professor of History at Regent University in Virginia Beach, Virginia. The author wishes to thank the anonymous reviewers for their insights and helpful suggestions.

The film *Valkyrie* has been generally well-received by critics and audiences alike since its release in 2008, and this is in no small part due to its success as a taut thriller.¹ Tom Cruise portrays Colonel Claus Schenk von Stauffenberg, a key player in the German military resistance and the plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler on July 20, 1944. It is a remarkable feat of filmmaking that even though we know how the story ends before we see the film (Hitler survives), the filmmakers continually ratchet up the suspense until the film's conclusion. Unlike most films based on historical events, especially on the Second World War, *Valkyrie* is a thriller. It is not a bio-pic of Claus von Stauffenberg. It is not a historical drama that draws in the audience by exploring the moral dilemmas of the principles—when the film begins, the die has already been cast. The decision to assassinate Hitler has been made; the question is how to do the deed. Thus, *Valkyrie* is a suspense film from start to finish. Each scene, each beat, moves the audience closer to the moment the bomb detonates in the Wolf's Lair, and then, afterward, toward the inevitable consequence, given the plot's failure.

Despite the quick pace of the film, the filmmakers have taken the time to provide a poignant exploration of the sacred as a basis for the conspirators' motivations to resist. Why would military officers in Hitler's Germany choose infamy and dishonor among their own countrymen to assassinate Hitler, thereby committing the taboo crime of regicide? According to the film, the answer lies in their Christian sense of the sacred, the religious, the transcendent reality that

grounds being and moral action. This sense of the sacred informs and shapes the conspirators' moral and political motivations. Screenwriter Christopher McQuarrie commented specifically about this aspect of the film. He argued, "Those matters of conscience the men could not discuss was a huge religious component to all of this. Was it morally correct? Was it legally correct? Was it militarily correct?... It was a real moral-ethical dilemma for the conspirators."²

The filmmakers present the pervasive and overwhelming influence of Hitler and National Socialism as the sources of the sacred in Nazi Germany—as the bases of the sacred in the Nazi state. National Socialism determined the value of human life and the meaning of duty, honor, and sacrifice. It framed the sacred in its own image. Yet the film does not expound on the specific content of the Nazi and the Christian worldviews through dialogue or exposition—as a thriller, it does not have the time to pause for reflection. Instead, the film ushers the viewer into the world of Nazi Germany in 1943 and reveals the worldviews at work. Viewers can readily see the world that National Socialist values—racism, aggression, and drive to power—have created: Germany is struggling violently for *Lebensraum* (living space) and the formation of a *Volksgemeinschaft* (national community).

Yet the filmmakers reframe religion to demonstrate the conspirators' Christian motivations. The film reveals the Christian values, moral norms, and sense of the sacred that motivated and enabled them to conspire to regicide, risking their own lives and the lives and well-being of their loved ones. Specifically, this

reframing of the sacred sets the Christian values of service, hope, and sacrifice in sharp relief against Nazi racial hatred and aggression. I will argue that the Christian sense of the sacred provides an eternal, transcendent ground for moral action in the film, to which Stauffenberg and the conspirators believed they were accountable. This sense of the sacred provides an objective moral standard to anchor Stauffenberg amid the Nazi's reformulation of morality and values. Furthermore, this religious dimension structures the thriller and provides its underlying pulse.

I will begin by presenting the historical context of the film and exploring the complexities of resistance in Nazi Germany. I will then examine how the film presents the moral world of Nazi Germany, with particular attention to the use of symbols, images, and language as a way to reveal the motivations for the conspirators' resistance to Nazi Germany. Finally, I will examine the film's deft use of the German word *heilig* (often translated "sacred" or "holy") as well as its derivatives to elucidate the moral universe of the conspirators in Nazi Germany. My aim is to illuminate how the filmmakers purposefully included elements of the sacred to orient the viewer to the profound meaning of the conspirators' motivations to assassinate Hitler when such an action (treason via regicide) was virtually unthinkable among Germans.

An Introduction

Valkyrie is one of several notable films of Nazi resistance produced in the first decade of the twenty-first century. The long list includes Roman Polanski's Oscar-winning film, *The Pianist* (2002), the story of the Polish pianist Władysław Szpilman's struggle to survive in Nazi-occupied Warsaw; the German family drama *Rosenstraße* (2003), the story of "Aryan" women in Berlin successfully protesting the Nazi incarceration of their husbands until their release in 1943; and the outstanding film, *Sophie Scholl: The Final Days* (2005), depicting the last days of the White Rose group based in Munich, focusing on one of its intrepid leaders (the film was also an Oscar-winner for Best Foreign Film). But not all resistance films were based on historical fact. *Inglorious Basterds* (2009), Quentin Tarrantino's revenge-fantasy of Jewish and Allied resistance, was a critical and box office success—and it won multiple Oscars. While the aughts may appear to be the peak of resistance films set in the Second World War, the 2010s produced noteworthy films as well, such as *Alone in Berlin* (2016), *A Hidden Life* (2019), and *Jo-Jo Rabbit* (2019), among several others. The variety and quality of films depicting resistance to the Nazi regime demonstrate viewers' demand for stories of resistance against all odds. Almost all of these films are based on true stories.

One reason for the popularity of resistance films is the richness and complexity of the meaning of the term *resistance* in the context of Nazi Germany. What did it mean to resist the National Socialist state? The meaning of resistance

can depend on who is resisting and their context. One may argue that resistance for a Jewish person in Nazi-occupied Europe might mean simply struggling to survive against a regime that sought his or her death, whereas resistance for an “Aryan” in good standing in the *Volksgemeinschaft* might mean actively seeking the overthrow of Hitler’s regime.³ Resistance films explore the motivations that inspired men and women to resist, even when success seemed almost assuredly futile. They explore questions such as: What is the nature, meaning, and cost of resistance in a totalitarian state when any act of non-conformity was conspicuous and could endanger not only one’s self but one’s family, circle of friends and acquaintances, and even strangers? Moreover, these films are opportunities for audiences to consider what they would do in similar circumstances—they provide an avenue for the vicarious living out the moral courage that each of us hopes lies within. Films like these are sure to remain popular, given the multitude of stories of resistance in Nazi Germany and Nazi-occupied Europe.

The filmmakers of *Valkyrie* have clearly attempted to remain true to the historical facts and period while crafting a suspenseful narrative that presents a vision of the hero as one who demonstrates self-sacrifice, confronts evil despite improbable success, and employs ingenuity to defeat a more powerful enemy. The major plot points of the film are historically accurate, as are the production details, from the uniforms, to set production, and even locales. For example, in a few key scenes, the film was shot at the location in which the real-life events transpired,

such as the Bendlerblock in Berlin, where the conspirators were executed. The filmmakers had the full cooperation and support of the German government.⁴ In their concern to get the history correct, the filmmakers took time to discuss the film with the descendants of Stauffenberg, including his daughter, Konstanze von Schulthess, who praised the film.⁵ Even more remarkable, the filmmakers enlisted the help of Stauffenberg's grandson Philipp von Schulthess to play a co-conspirator in the film. Philip plays the adjutant helping Tresckow set a liquor bomb in one of the early scenes of the film. To ensure historical fidelity within the parameters of a Hollywood film, the filmmakers enlisted Professor Peter Hoffmann as a consultant, perhaps the most well-known expert on the German resistance in the Second World War.

While the major contours of the film are true to fact, and the filmmakers took unusual pains to present a historically accurate story—even down to the color tones—the film does take some liberties with the historical record for the purpose of dramatization. The tell-tale signs of a historical film are evident: time is conflated, historical figures are dropped from the story or merged into an amalgam, and facts are altered. The cinematic presentation of history necessarily differs from written history based on primary sources. As Robert Rosenstone has argued, “We come to tell ourselves the past in the stories we tell about it, stories based on the sort of data we call fact, but stories which include other elements that are not directly in the data but arise from the process of storytelling.”⁶ Among the most

significant of the film's deviations from the historical record are that Tresckow did not retrieve the liquor-bottle bomb himself (it was actually his aid, Fabian von Schlabrendorff), and Stauffenberg did not stand before Hitler, waiting for him to sign Operation Valkyrie, the plans for the assassination. But most importantly, the film does not clearly present the details of the various conspirators' support of National Socialism through the early years of the regime and even the war, or the participation of some of them in the massacres on the Eastern Front (although this is alluded to, as will be discussed). In fact, the conspirators of the July 20, 1944 plot held antisemitic beliefs just like the vast majority of Germans at the time, yet they objected to the massacres of Jews.⁷

Some critics have argued that the apparent elision of these facts from the film paints the conspirators, especially Stauffenberg, as "untainted heroes," as righteous judges of National Socialism.⁸ While Hollywood film characterization of historical figures can often lean toward the hagiographic and big-budget films tend to reinforce the values of the intended audiences,⁹ I will argue that *Valkyrie* presents Stauffenberg and at least some of the other conspirators as "tainted" heroes. The film depicts them as men who at one time supported the Nazi regime and participated in its sins in the Second World War; furthermore, their resistance is shaped by a sense of shame and the desire for redemption through honorable service. Other critics have argued that the film does not explore Stauffenberg's motivations, aside from disgust of Nazi crimes committed against Jews and

civilians.¹⁰ In fact, the film subtly presents the religious motivations as foundational for their actions and as necessary for the viewers to make sense of the risks they voluntarily took in the coup d'état.

Surveying the Sacred in Nazi Germany

As opposed to the explicit description of political motivations for resistance in dialogue and exposition, *Valkyrie* presents the religious motivations predominantly in images, symbols, and the clever use of the word *heilig* (“sacred”). At various points early in the film, Stauffenberg’s political motivations are briefly stated, such as in his letter that opens the film, where he speaks of Hitler as the cause of Germany’s shame and destruction. He cites Hitler’s lies and policies of destruction, and he mentions Nazi crimes, including murder, torture and the mass execution of Jews.¹¹ Early explanatory statements help orient the audience to understand the bottom line motivation: Hitler is a cruel and unjust tyrant who will utterly destroy Germany and Europe; therefore, he must be forcibly removed.

Valkyrie portrays Nazi Germany as a nation in the thrall of Hitler as a god-like figure. This portrayal is consistent with Hitler’s own self-presentation to the German people.¹² Consider the opening scene in Leni Riefenstahl’s 1935 film, *The Triumph of the Will*, in which Hitler descends from the clouds upon the city of Nuremberg, a savior and beneficent Führer. Throughout *Valkyrie*, Hitler is only in a few scenes, and yet his presence is ubiquitous. Hitler looms above friend and foe

alike in the form of portraits displayed on walls—from the conspirators’ offices in the Bendlerblock to the halls of the Wolf’s Lair. Hitler is omnipresent in this manner. He looms even as conspirators plot his demise. Indeed, even after the assassination attempt, Hitler and his subordinates serve as “theologians” of the Nazi sacred, interpreting his survival as a miracle and indisputable evidence of the anointing and favor of Providence.

But when Hitler or his likeness is not present, the symbols of his philosophy are on display. The film portrays abundant symbols of the Nazi worldview, including innumerable red Nazi flags and banners with the black swastika against a white circle. As with the images of Hitler, Nazi symbols and images are ubiquitous, even overwhelming and oppressive at times. Vivian Sobchack’s insightful conception of the “cinesthetic subject” is helpful in understanding how *Valkyrie* reveals the transcendent values of Nazism in the details of the material world.¹³ Sobchack writes that films “affect our proprioception and bodily rhythms, arouse or sicken us, make us flinch, gasp, cry, laugh, hold our breath.” She writes that “the transcendent is not reduced to literal content, material forms, and visibility but, rather, expansively emerges from them in an amplified sense of something ‘else’ rather than something ‘other.’”¹⁴ The flags, the swastika, and the German eagle reveal Nazi values that construct a “metaphysical figural economy,” which affect the “cinesthetic subject.”¹⁵

For example, the film opens with an undulating blood-red background as unseen men fervently shout an oath to Hitler. Each line of the oath is presented, one by one, appearing in large letters on the screen. The viewer senses the men all around, shouting loudly in unison as if he or she were among them (and who else would be amidst them than one taking the oath?). The camera slowly zooms out to reveal a massive Nazi flag, red with the swastika on white. But the flag is so immense that only a portion of the swastika is visible. It is as if the viewer—and the German citizen—were engulfed in Nazi symbolism, unable to see the sun beyond the swastika. The swastika is revealed to be a new guiding light—the ancient likeness of the sun for the modern age. Moreover, the German translation of the Sanskrit word *swastika* is *Hakenkreuz* (“hooked cross”). The Nazis present the swastika as a new cross to lead the German people. Thus, at the start of the film, the viewer immediately senses the malevolent nature of the Nazi regime and the evil of its ideology. The Nazi values of aggression, militarism and devotion to Hitler are on full display. The filmmakers use the image of the immense flag and swastika and the sound of zealous men swearing fealty to Hitler to draw the increasingly uncomfortable viewer into the world of the conspirators, surrounded and overwhelmed by Nazism.

Indeed, the swastikas are pervasive throughout the film. They are shown as decorations in offices and on Nazi flags outside government buildings, but they are no more ubiquitous than when shown with the German eagle on badges fastened to

soldiers' and officers' uniforms. Even the conspirators wear this emblem as an essential part of their uniform; to refuse to wear it would be a conspicuous and intolerable display of military non-conformity. The swastika as a symbol of Nazi ideology is attached to the majority of characters throughout the film. The pervasive presentation of Nazi symbols affects the viewer as "cinesthetic subject" by creating a sense of foreboding that the conspirators are up against Hitler as Führer of an unholy regime that can find them out at any moment.

Thus, the film presents National Socialism as a political religion with its own savior figure in Adolf Hitler and morality based on blood and soil. While this perspective of National Socialism helps to explain the faith and fanaticism of Nazis, historical research has shown that many Germans, even devout Christians, perceived Nazism as consistent with Christianity.¹⁶ Germany was, after all, comprised of 97% self-identified Christians, and the National Socialists came to power in the Weimar democracy.¹⁷ Yet the filmmakers are concerned to show the resistance of a small group of men who came to see a conflict between Christianity and Nazism. Historians have demonstrated that Stauffenberg was a devout Catholic, and his faith no doubt played an important part in his determination to resist Hitler's regime.¹⁸ Christianity played a role in motivating opposition among resisters as varied as the pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the members of the White Rose student group in Munich, and the members of the Kreisau Circle.

And so from the start, *Valkyrie* presents the viewer with the conspirators' conundrum: If Hitler is a god-like figure in Nazi Germany, then how could one overthrow him? The only institution in Germany powerful enough to topple Hitler and institute a new regime was the German Army, the Wehrmacht.¹⁹ Early in the film, with Stauffenberg on board, the conspirators struggle to find their way forward to design a practical plan to assassinate Hitler. One evening, as the Allies bomb Berlin and the Stauffenberg family takes cover in the basement of their home, Richard Wagner's opera *The Ring of the Nibelung* plays loudly in the family room. Specifically, a piece called the *Ride of the Valkyries* plays from the beginning of the second part, *Die Walküre*. It is the moment when the Teutonic goddesses save the fallen heroes from suffering in death. As Hitler says later in the film, the Valkyries are the "handmaidens of the gods, choosing who will die, sparing the most heroic from an agonizing death."²⁰ Wagner was, of course, Hitler's favorite composer.²¹ As the bombing rattles the Stauffenberg home, the opera restarts and the camera swirls downward from the ceiling as if falling out of control. It is as if the viewer is transported into Stauffenberg's mind as he struggles to find a way to resist the regime meaningfully and effectively.

As the record spins on the turntable, the camera descends in the opposite direction and yet at the same dizzying speed, seemingly out of control. How can Stauffenberg assassinate Hitler and rid Germany of National Socialism once and for all, without another Führer stepping in to fill the void? What can an individual

do against the might of the Nazi state? One feels the disorientation and the struggle for a foothold. Then the moment finally comes as the camera descends and locks onto the record's title: *Die Walküre*. The answer. Stauffenberg's moral conviction aligns with the perfect opportunity to assassinate Hitler: Operation Valkyrie, the regime's plan to thwart rebellion in the capital of Berlin using the Reserve Army. The scene is extraordinary not only for its technical precision but also its ability to demonstrate that Stauffenberg has found the perfect method to dethrone Hitler, using the agents of Valhalla to secure power and peace in Germany. In the film, Hitler's beloved composer becomes the inspiration for his assassination. It is a scene that encapsulates Stauffenberg's resolve and clarity of mission.

Throughout the film Stauffenberg is presented as a man of conviction and conscience. Indeed, the filmmakers symbolize his conscience with his glass eye.²² In April 1943, the real-life Stauffenberg suffered severe injuries in combat in Tunisia, losing his left eye, two fingers on his left hand, and his entire right hand. He was fitted with a glass eye, but he often wore an eye patch. In the Western tradition, the eyes are considered to be the windows into our souls, and they are symbols of intelligence and conscience.²³ Throughout the film Stauffenberg is portrayed as holding the glass eye. He handles it, cleans it, fidgets with it, and even uses it as a calling card to recruit General Fellgiebel into the conspiracy. Wearing it, he looks at himself in the mirror, reflecting on what must be done, and he stares at Hitler in judgment as the latter signs the Operation Valkyrie order. Through the

frequent use of the eye as a symbol, Stauffenberg's moral conscience and conviction are on subtle display in the film. His conscience guides the conspiratorial decisions taken at each step in the film. It is revealing that he often does not wear the glass eye; rather, he keeps it tucked away in a pocket or satchel, as if his conscience may be found out under the watchful glare of the Nazi police state.

In a telling scene, shortly after Stauffenberg has attempted the assassination, General Wilhelm Keitel, one of Hitler's top generals, calls General Fromm in Berlin to inquire about Stauffenberg's whereabouts. Hitler's men found his pistol and cap, both of which he left behind in his rush to escape. They are already onto him. In the scene, there is a close-up on Keitel's left eye—a shot Singer referred to as “the eye shot.”²⁴ As Hitler's bound agent, his eye searches high and low for the perpetrator.

But Stauffenberg's moral vision is clearly shaped by another sense of the sacred. While the images of Hitler and symbols of Nazism are ubiquitous throughout the film, the images of Christianity—the grounding religious framework of the conspirators—are few but significant. In a sequence of two scenes within the first hour of the film, the filmmakers deftly juxtaposed the Christian faith against Hitler's National Socialist ideology. In a bombed-out church, in the dark of night, Colonel Stauffenberg clandestinely meets General Olbricht, who is trying to recruit him to join the assassination plot. Before any of the details are revealed, three images set the scene: first, a close-up of Jesus's face as he is crucified on the

cross; second, the Archangel Michael readied for battle; and third, a skull, with a foot beside it. The images appear merely ornamental at first, as if simply introducing the scene in the church. Yet the images carry tremendous meaning, especially when interlaced with Stauffenberg's voiceover. He says:

I am a soldier. I serve my country [cut to a medium shot of Christ crucified]. But this is not my country. I was lying out there [cut to a medium shot of the battle-ready Archangel Michael] bleeding to death, thinking that if I die now [cut to skull], I leave nothing to my children but shame [cut to a profile of Stauffenberg's face]. I know now there is only one way to serve Germany. In doing so, I'll be a traitor. I accept that.

Jesus is presented as a sacrifice—a model of sacrificial service to inspire the conspirators; Christ is identified with the wounded. And yet he is “King of the Jews” with cosmic dominion.²⁵ The Archangel Michael is a messenger of God, as are all angels.²⁶ He is a victor, not a victim, ready to lead God's armies and confront the demonic, as are the conspirators in their confrontation with Hitler. But the meaning of the death's head may be more mercurial. Is this a foreshadowing of the conspirators' doom? Perhaps. But beside the skull is a foot—a person stands over the skull. Given that this sculpture is in a church, the figure is most likely a saint.²⁷ In Christian art skulls can simply represent the fleeting nature of human life and the vanity of holding on to earthy possessions.²⁸ However, when paired with a saint in Christian art, the skull can represent penitence, the contemplation of death, and, together with the cross of Christ (such as in the first image), “meditation upon eternal life after death.”²⁹ Thus, the skull reveals that Stauffenberg and the

conspirators seek to move forward in the conspiracy with an eternal, not merely temporal, perspective, even as penitents striving for the righteous path. Even in this grim scene, there is the hope of ultimate victory and redemption in the end. Moreover, the cut to Stauffenberg's face in profile after he states he would have left nothing to his children but shame if he had died on the battlefield indicates that shame for past wrong motivates him to resist. In the shadow of the cross, Stauffenberg sees his sin and progresses on the hero's journey. He is not an untainted hero but a hero seeking redemption.





These three images of Christ on the cross, the Archangel Michael, and the skull are particularly resonant because Stauffenberg and Olbricht are meeting in a destroyed but functioning Roman Catholic church. While the Roman Catholic

Church's capacity to offer resistance to Nazi Germany may have been destroyed through its Concordat with Hitler in July 1933, the Christian faithful can still resist. There is still hope, but success requires sacrifice. Stauffenberg's decision to join the conspiracy occurs within the sacred bounds of the church, the sanctuary, reflecting not only the solemnity of the decision but its basis.

Juxtapose this scene with another not 20 minutes later, which presents the religious values of the conspirators in stark relief. This sequence takes place high at the Berghof, the "Eagle's Nest," Hitler's villa in the Bavarian Alps. On a beautiful and sunny day, Hitler hosts his top generals and Nazi officials, including Heinrich Himmler, Joseph Goebbels, Albert Speer, and General Keitel. Hitler reigns from high above the concerns of ordinary Germans in June 1944. Even recent news of the successful Allied assault on the beaches of Normandy does not apparently concern him. This is the day Stauffenberg has arrived to get Hitler to sign a revised order of Operation Valkyrie, the very order that will enable the conspirators to wrest control of Germany from the Nazi grip after Hitler's assassination.

But as this scene at the Berghof opens, three images set the tone, each juxtaposed to the images in the bombed-out church earlier in the film. Hitler provides the voiceover, but his words are indistinct, unclear; the viewer realizes the voice belongs to Hitler only after the three images appear when the camera reveals Hitler's sycophants laughing at whatever he said. The first image shows a tapestry

with a Germanic queen. Her identity is unknown, and yet she clearly represents nobility. The second image is an eagle, again on a tapestry. The eagle is an imperial heraldic symbol common in the German lands since the Middle Ages (derived from the ancient Romans).³⁰ And the third image is a statue of a nude maiden, representing the “Aryan” racial ideal. In Nazi Germany art was ideological, conveying messages that advanced the regime’s racial and territorial goals.³¹ As in the church, these images might first appear merely ornamental, yet they convey significant meaning in the context of the Berghof. The juxtaposition of images in the church and Berghof is clear and unmistakable.





The Church / The Berghof

Jesus as the “King of the Jews” / The Queen as Germanic noble

The angel as a winged messenger of God / The eagle as Germanic imperial herald

The skull as symbol of life eternal / The maiden as image of the earthly ideal

While the three images in the church as sanctuary convey eternal, cosmic, and Christian significance, the three images in Hitler’s sanctum convey temporal, worldly, and Germanic significance. And while Stauffenberg’s voiceover in the church underscores the cosmic meaning of the images, the banality of Hitler’s voiceover in the Berghof only accentuates the temporal meaning of the images. The juxtaposition of these images informs the viewer about the conspirators’ loyalty, work, and vision.

Given the significance of these two scenes in juxtaposing the conspirators’ and Nazis’ perspectives, it is perhaps surprising that there are relatively few other Christian symbols in the film. For example, on a couple occasions the camera pans on Stauffenberg’s cross hanging from a chain around his neck: once when he is re-learning how to button his shirt after his traumatic injuries, and again when he bends down to kiss his son goodnight. In both instances, early in the film, the cross is in the center of the frame, clear to see, as if reorienting the audience to the heart of motivation. Literally bound to the cross in both cases is Stauffenberg’s wedding ring, which he can no longer wear, as he suffered the loss of his ring finger. While

not exclusively a Christian symbol, the wedding ring in a Christian context reflects the spiritual commitment conveyed in the wedding vows, which is grounded upon the transcendent love of God. The ring itself represents eternity, without beginning and end. In the film, the instant after Stauffenberg is injured, as the camera moves in to see the damage done, revealing an unconscious and gruesomely injured man, Stauffenberg's ring is center-screen, laying before him on the desert sand. Amid the ubiquity of Nazi symbols, the subtle occurrences of these Christian symbols are all the more conspicuous and noteworthy given their placement in the frame.

The relatively few but significant displays of Christian symbols and images in the film compared to the pervasive display of Nazi symbols and images gives the sense that German culture has been thoroughly nazified, and that dissidents were few and far between. The Christian faith has been nearly drowned out, and its symbols are scarcely visible to the viewer, and yet it is vital to the motivation of the conspirators.

The "Sacred" as Structure and Religious Framing

While the religious symbols and images are subtle yet striking, the deliberate use of the word "sacred" (*heilig* and its derivatives) at three key moments in the film serves to reveal religious motivation more explicitly. Moreover, the filmmakers use this word in a manner to structure the film. The first deliberate use of the word "sacred" comes in the oath that opens the film, as previously mentioned.

The filmmakers made a bold decision to open the film with a caption of the oath all military personnel were required to take, starting on August 2, 1934, the day the German President Paul von Hindenburg died. Invoking God, soldiers and officers, including Stauffenberg and his co-conspirators, took a “sacred oath” of loyalty to the person of Adolf Hitler, not simply to the German state (which had previously been the case, and which is typical in modern Western states). The themes of honor and duty are bound to Hitler in the new “sacred oath.” Thus, one must overcome the redefined Nazi conception of honor and duty simply to take the first step to join the resistance movement. The oath was as follows:

Ich schwöre bei Gott diesen *heiligen* Eid,
daß ich dem Führer des Deutschen Reiches und Volkes
Adolf Hitler, dem Oberbefehlshaber der Wehrmacht,
unbedingten Gehorsam leisten und als tapferer Soldat bereit sein will,
jederzeit für diesen Eid mein Leben einzusetzen.

[“I swear to God this *sacred* oath:
That I shall render unconditional obedience to Adolf Hitler
Führer of the German Reich and people,
Supreme commander of the Armed Forces,
And that I shall at all times be ready, as a brave soldier,
to give my life for this oath.” (Emphasis added)]³²

The opening lines of this film, along with Stauffenberg’s explanation of his treasonous position, reveal not only political motivations—the destructiveness of the war and the barbarous treatment of Jews and civilians—but more profound religious motivations. Stauffenberg explicitly rejects the *heiligen Eid*, the sacred oath, as unholy, as a fetter Hitler has used to bind the German military, compelling

it to evil ends. In leading with the oath, the film immediately presents Stauffenberg and his co-conspirators as traitors in Nazi Germany, as heretics in the National Socialist *Volksgemeinschaft*.

The scene situates the audience in the morally topsy-turvy world of Nazi Germany, where loyalty is used to murder and treachery is used to liberate. The irony is that Hitler demanded the loyalty of his own military while he himself, as a National Socialist propagandist in Weimar Germany, acted to undermine his own government. For example, in October 1923, just a month before he staged the Beer Hall Putsch, he counseled a group of Infantry Academy cadets to undertake treason: “Your highest obligation under your oath to the [Weimar] flag, gentlemen, is to break that oath.”³³ One gets the distinct impression that he instituted this oath to himself personally instead of the state, knowing the human propensity to violate sacred oaths.

Furthermore, opening the film with this oath places the audience in an unusual position. On the one hand, most viewers would likely agree with Stauffenberg’s opposition to Hitler, and yet on the other hand, they may not understand why he took the oath in the first place. The officers were in a sense duty-bound by their nation to take the oath, and yet they were duty-bound by their faith to break it. Right from the start, the film complicates the meaning of duty—the duties to leader, nation and God may not align and may even conflict. Thus, the

film begins with an explicit rejection of the “sacredness” of the oath to Adolf Hitler—the Nazi “sacred” meant destruction and death.

The second instrumental use of the word *heilig* occurs exactly at the midway point through the film. But instead of explicitly rejecting the “sacredness” of the Nazi ideology, Stauffenberg employs irony to poignantly undermine it. The conspirators planned for an attempt on Hitler’s life in the bunker at the Wolf’s Lair on July 15, but they called it off because Himmler could not attend the same meeting. The conspirators even called the Reserve Army, under General Fromm, to stand by. They called off the attempt, and, as a result, Fromm gave Olbricht and Stauffenberg a good tongue-lashing. But he dismissed them with a “Heil Hitler!” expecting a reply in kind. As they get up to leave, Olbricht obliges, but clearly without conviction, and Stauffenberg merely mumbles incoherently. Fromm retorts, “I’ll hear you say it, Colonel.” Stauffenberg, stops, turns around, straightens, raises his right arm—amputated above the wrist—and says with verve, “Heil, Hitler!” The scene is profoundly ironic, given that Stauffenberg is conspiring to assassinate Hitler. But there is more to the meaning of Stauffenberg’s salute.

While it is commonly known that the *Hitlergruß* (Hitler greeting: “Heil Hitler!”) was a standard greeting in Nazi Germany, most are unaware that the greeting derives from a sacred tradition. The word *Heil* as a noun means “salvation,” and the greeting invokes God’s blessing. This is a wish and a salutation that dates back centuries in the history of German-speaking lands, and it is based

on various Scriptural passages.³⁴ By the later eighteenth century, *Heil* was widely used as an adjective and as an “emphatic expression of wishes and greetings,” meaning that the speaker desired salvation and health for the person he or she was greeting.³⁵ Into the twentieth century, one might hear “Heil Kaiser and Reich,” “Heil my fatherland,” and into the 1920s, “Heil Ludendorf” and “Heil Hitler.”³⁶ In the context of National Socialism, the greeting “Heil Hitler” not only expresses hope for the health of Hitler, but it also infers that he is the one through whom blessings and healing come.³⁷ Stauffenberg’s greeting is not only ironic given his injuries—clearly Hitler is not a source of healing or salvation—but his hyperbolic response is clearly a judgment of damnation on the one who was supposed to bring blessing but has only brought catastrophe and death. It is the very reason Stauffenberg and his co-conspirators have plotted Hitler’s assassination.

I would add that this scene is purely fictional and that we do not have a record of Stauffenberg responding in this way. In fact, Stauffenberg would have been excused from using the Hitler greeting due to his injuries, and it would likely have been interpreted as disrespectful if he had done so (which Fromm seems to infer immediately afterward).³⁸ But the filmmakers made the decision to include this moment precisely at the midway point through the film, again, to orient the audience to the nature of the sacred in Nazi Germany, where words like “salvation” and “healing” have been twisted and corrupted. Indeed, every conspirator’s ironic “Heil Hitler!” is a subtle reframing of the sacred. But with Stauffenberg’s greeting

mid-way through the film, the viewer is powerfully reminded that National Socialism is based on a sense of the sacred that brings destruction and death and that the conspirators are fighting for a vision of the sacred that brings healing and life.

This point brings us to the third and last key use of the word *heilig*, which occurs in the very last moments of the film. These words are taken almost verbatim from the historical record. After the failed coup d'état, Stauffenberg, his adjutant Werner von Haeften, Mertz von Quirnheim, and Olbricht were taken outside at 12:30 am, into the courtyard of the Bendlerblock, illuminated by headlights from army vehicles, and executed. As he stood before a firing squad of ten soldiers of the Grossdeutschland Guard Battalion, Stauffenberg exclaimed, "Long live sacred Germany!" (*Es lebe das heilige Deutschland!*), mere seconds before he was executed.³⁹

There is some debate among historians about whether Stauffenberg actually said, "Long live *secret* Germany [*Geheimes Deutschland!*]" a possible reference to a group led by Stefan Georg, to which Stauffenberg belonged as a young man. But historians predominantly agree that Stauffenberg most likely said, "Long live *sacred* Germany," given that this is what eyewitnesses first reported, and it makes more sense given the context of his execution.⁴⁰ The statement refers to Stauffenberg's hope in a Germany that would be the beneficiary of God's blessings. While he betrayed Nazi Germany and its god-figure, Adolf Hitler, he invokes God

to bless the sacred German state. To refer to a created thing as *sacred*, such as a nation, people, or community, in the Christian context indicates one's belief that God works through that thing to bring blessing, healing, and salvation to God's people, within Germany and without. The exclamation powerfully reveals Stauffenberg's view of the world and God's involvement in the good of human societies. His last words are an invocation to God to use Germany as a sacred structure or order to bless the German people and to make Himself known. It is an expression of hope that Germany would outlive the catastrophe of Hitler and the Third Reich. Moreover, the screenwriter Nathan Alexander said that based on his own conversation with a descendant of Stauffenberg, the meaning of the line is that "[The conspirators] weren't fighting for the Germany that was or the Germany that had been. They were fighting for the Germany that could be."⁴¹

Thus, the end of the film profoundly reframes the sacred as Stauffenberg proclaims his hope for Germany based on the Christian sense of what that word means. We are shown, not told, how Nazism is a worldview that leads to destruction and catastrophe. And we are shown that Christianity is a worldview that demands sacrifice—even the ultimate sacrifice—in the hope for new life and renewal.

Heroism in Nazi Germany

The reframing of the sacred in *Valkyrie* serves to explore the meaning of heroism in Nazi Germany. The film presents a religious conception of heroism in which the individual bases his actions on a transcendent moral law, against which he will be judged and held accountable. The hero is one who sacrifices himself for the good of the community and in service to God. But the film also distinctly hallows the heroic individual and Germany through pervasive references to German nationalism, Richard Wagner, and the Valkyries. Wagner was a tremendously influential German nationalist and antisemite, and references to his name or work (including the title of the film, the name of the operation to assassinate Hitler, and his music in the film) indicate the conspirators hold to a conservative view of German nationalism.⁴² The film thereby explores a vision of the heroic ideal in Nazi Germany, one informed by German nationalism. The hero is defined in part by how he or she fights for the good of the German nation, specifically.

Indeed, one may wonder if the reframing of the film is not so much from Nazism to Christianity, but Nazism to a vision of a purified and conservative German nation-state. But these are not mutually exclusive alternatives. Wagner, of course, combined themes of German nationalism and Christianity in his later operas, even basing his last opera *Parsival* explicitly on Christian themes and motifs (i.e., the grail myth).⁴³ So also in the film, Stauffenberg and the conspirators base their resistance on the Christian conception of the sacred and yet still remain

conservative German nationalists, albeit nationalists diametrically opposed to the Nazi regime. The film offers a complex reflection on heroism in a world at war.

Throughout its treatment of the sacred, *Valkyrie* addresses the problem of how good men, officers in the German Army, became compromised by their oath to Hitler. Fighting for Nazi war aims, their honor turned to dishonor; their duty advanced death. As Stauffenberg says to Fellgiebel in the film, “You were involved in a crime against your country long before you met me. There may still be time to redeem yourself. Only God can judge us now.”⁴⁴ The shift in the last line from second-person singular to first-person plural indicates he is speaking just as much to himself as to Fellgiebel. And his lowered tone reveals shame in what he has done. They are all tainted heroes. The viewer gets a sense of this as well in a scene earlier in the film when Stauffenberg and his wife Nina watch their children play at war—in what would otherwise be an ordinary family scene. But Stauffenberg’s smile quickly fades as his youngest daughter salutes him in playful imitation of a soldier. Interestingly, his face is not etched with anger at the Nazi regime for cultivating a militarist culture to which he may have to sacrifice his children in the coming years, but rather shame at the possibility that they may grow up to be soldiers in Germany, like him.⁴⁵

The particular evil of the Nazi regime was that it twisted virtue to serve evil ends, and it took a form of heroism to break free. The regime compelled neighbors to inform on neighbors as a service to the health of the national community. It

demanded Jewish leaders in the ghettos to serve on Jewish Councils—in the interest of their community—to decide on the names for deportation to concentration and extermination camps. *Valkyrie* remarkably shows how Stauffenberg and his co-conspirators broke through this process of manipulating virtue to serve death. The sacred had to be reframed. Duty and honor had to be unbound from the name of Hitler. These men violated their oaths to Hitler and became traitors—whereupon their reoriented sense of duty and honor compelled them to participate in a conspiracy. Only through the film’s reframing of the sacred as a metaphysical struggle can the audience understand why Stauffenberg and his co-conspirators engaged in a physical struggle to become regicidal. They risked everything in the temporal realm to serve the eternal sacred.

One may object and argue that Stauffenberg’s motivations do not differ significantly from pro-Nazi Christians who envisioned a Germany that is blessed by God, and that Stauffenberg simply disagrees with Hitler’s reckless methods and policies. Or to put it succinctly, as presented in the film, one may say that Stauffenberg’s motivations are predominantly moral and political rather than religious. This objection conflicts with the film’s reflections on the sacred. The film presents the Christian view of the sacred as the source of the true and the good, that which realigns honor, duty, and sacrifice to constructive (not destructive) ends. This is in direct contrast to the Nazi view of the sacred, which is the foundation of the Nazi drive for conquest and a “pure” national community. This sense of the sacred

shaped the moral and political motivations of Germans that ultimately resulted in the devastation of the Second World War. But Stauffenberg's Christian view of the sacred convinces him that he is accountable to God and will be judged for his actions (as he states to Fellgiebel in the men's room). This sense of the sacred convinces him that if he fails, his sacrifice is still meaningful and restorative. In other words, the religious motivations provide the basis and the foundation of Stauffenberg's moral and political action; they inform and give shape to his moral and political motivations. Unlike pro-Nazi Christians who accepted National Socialism as a valid source for understanding the sacred, as presented in the film, Stauffenberg wholeheartedly rejects Nazism as a source of sacred truth and the ground of his moral and political motivations. This rejection is evident from the first scene of the film. The rest of the film reveals the true ground of his motivations.

Conclusions

Instead of exploring the religious motivations principally through exposition and dialogue, the filmmakers thoughtfully integrated images, symbols, and the evocative use of the word *heilig* (and its derivations) to reorient the audience to the sacred. Almost overwhelmed by Nazi symbols and images, these few but profound references to the Christian faith indicate that another perspective of the sacred existed in Germany, but one that was nearly overwhelmed by a destructive National Socialist worldview.

Moreover, this approach of exploring and reframing the sacred works so well because good and evil are profound concepts that can be difficult to express eloquently and concisely in dialogue, yet they can be conveyed thoughtfully with images. Instead of using exposition to tell the audience that Hitler is a cause of disaster and a curse on his people (something the audience surely already knows), the filmmakers, for example, craft a scene on the Hitler greeting that speaks volumes.

The reframing of the sacred is so effective, in part, because of how efficiently the filmmakers convey meaning and motivation that directly fuels the relentless drive to the coup d'état. It is the recurring theme that keeps the thriller moving without the need to stop for exposition or dialogue. Certainly, a solid action film could portray the men equally as brave, ingenious, and stalwart as in this film, and yet without the depth of meaning provided in this sacred reframing we would never understand why Stauffenberg thought his mission so vital that he would countenance being considered a traitor by his own people or leave his family behind to an uncertain fate. These sacred images, symbols, and usages of *heilig* provide the consistent heartbeat of motivation that runs through the film, carrying profound meaning that makes sense of their sacrifice and service. The filmmakers sought to tell not only a remarkable story of heroism in Nazi Germany but to demonstrate that to overcome and defeat Hitler, the conspirators required a more compelling, life-giving sense of the sacred than National Socialism provided.

¹ According to IMDb, the film grossed approximately \$280,000,000 worldwide. See IMDb, “Valkyrie,” accessed May 30, 2021, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0985699/?ref=fn_al_tt_1. The film garnered the praise of Stauffenberg’s daughter Konstanze von Schulthess-Rechberg and even the German government. See “Stauffenberg’s Daughter Praises ‘Valkyrie,’” in *Der Spiegel International*, January 20, 2009, accessed March 30, 2021, <https://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/reaction-to-hitler-plot-film-stauffenberg-s-daughter-praises- Valkyrie-a-602336.html>.

² *Valkyrie*, directed by Bryan Singer, featuring Tom Cruise, Kenneth Branagh, Bill Nighy, Terence Stamp, etc., (United Artists, 2008), DVD (20th Century Fox, 2009), 00:21:02.

³ A few excellent sources on resistance in Nazi Germany include Ian Kershaw, *The Nazi Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives of Interpretation, Third Edition* (New York: Arnold, 1993); Peter Hoffmann, *The History of the German Resistance, 1933-1945, Third Edition* (Ithaca: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1996); Joachim Fest, *Plotting Hitler’s Death: The Story of the German Resistance*, translated by Bruce Little (New York: Metropolitan, 1996); Michael Ceyer and John W. Boyer, eds., *Resistance against the Third Reich, 1933-1990* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); and Hans Mommsen, *Germans Against Hitler: The Stauffenberg Plot and Resistance under the Third Reich*, translated by Angus McGeoch (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2009).

⁴ The German Commissioner for Culture Bernd Neumann said upon the film’s release that it “contributes successfully toward making this little-known chapter of German history known to an international audience.” See *Der Spiegel*, “Stauffenberg’s Daughter Praises ‘Valkyrie.’”

⁵ *Der Spiegel*, “Stauffenberg’s Daughter Praises ‘Valkyrie.’”

⁶ Robert Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History* (New York: Pearson, 2006), 154.

⁷ See Fest, *Plotting Hitler’s Death*, 150; Theodore Hamerow, *On the Road to the Wolf’s Lair: German Resistance to Hitler* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 226; Hoffmann, *The History of the German Resistance*, 318; Robert Michael, *Holy Hatred: Christianity, Antisemitism, and the Holocaust* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 165; and Louis Eltscher, *Traitors or Patriots? A Story of the German Anti-Nazi Resistance* (Bloomington, IN: iUniverse: 2013), 64-66.

⁸ See for example Manohla Dargis, “Mission Imperative: Assassinate the Führer,” in *The New York Times* on December 28, 2008, accessed on May 6, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/25/movies/25valk.html>; Bennington Grant, “Just How Historically Accurate Was Tom Cruise’s Valkyrie,” in *WatchCharge*, May 21, 2018, accessed on May 6, 2021, <https://watchcharge.com/just-how-historically-accurate-was-tom-cruises- Valkyrie/>; and Stefan Bornost, “The Truth behind Valkyrie and the coup against Hitler,” in the *Socialist Worker*, accessed May 6, 2021, <https://socialistworker.co.uk/art/16670/The+truth+behind+Valkyrie+and+the+coup+against+Hitler>.

⁹ See Robert Burgoyne, *The Hollywood Historical Film* (New York: Blackwell, 2008); and John Lyden, *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals, Second Edition* (New York: New York University, Press: 2019).

¹⁰ See for example, Peter Rainer, “Review: Valkyrie” in *The Christian Science Monitor*, January 2, 2009, accessed on May 6, 2021, <https://www.csmonitor.com/The-Culture/Movies/2009/0102/p25s02-also.html>; Dan Groves, Valkyrie Review, *SBS.com*, May 27, 2009, accessed on May 6, 2021, <https://www.sbs.com.au/movies/review/valkyrie-review>; and

Chris Tookey, "Has Tom Lost the Plot?" *DailyMail.co*, January 22, 2009, accessed on May 6, 2021, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/reviews/article-1126800/Valkyrie-Has-Tom-lost-plot.html>.

¹¹ *Valkyrie*, DVD, 0:01:35.

¹² Ian Kershaw, *Hitler: 1889-1936, Hubris* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998), 483-486.

¹³ Vivian Sobchack, "Embodying Transcendence: On the literal, the material, and the cinematic sublime," in *Material Religion*, 4 (2), 200.

¹⁴ Sobchack, "Embodying Transcendence," 200.

¹⁵ Sobchack, "Embodying Transcendence," 200.

¹⁶ See for example, Richard Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich: Nazi Conceptions of Christianity, 1919-1945* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 223.

¹⁷ Ernst Christian Helmreich, *German Churches under Hitler: Background, Struggle and Epilogue* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1979), 93.

¹⁸ See Nigel Jones, *Countdown to Valkyrie: The July Plot to Assassinate Hitler* (London: Frontline, 2008) Kindle location 506, 2841; Ian Kershaw, *The Luck of the Devil: The Story of Operation Valkyrie* (New York: Penguin), 9-10.

¹⁹ Peter Hoffmann, "Problems of Resistance in National Socialist Germany," in *The German Church Struggle and the Holocaust*, edited by Franklin H. Littell and Hubert G. Locke (Detroit: Wayne State University, 1974), 105.

²⁰ *Valkyrie*, DVD, 00:41:23.

²¹ Kershaw argues that "Hitler's passion for Wagner knew no bounds," likening the effects of attending a performance of an opera as akin to a "religious experience, plunging him into deep and mystical fantasies" (*Hitler*, 21).

²² *Valkyrie*, DVD, Commentary of Tom Cruise, Bryan Singer, and Christopher McQuarrie.

²³ *Dictionary of Symbols*, "Eyes," University of Michigan, accessed March 28, 2021, <http://umich.edu/~umfandsf/symbolismproject/symbolism.html/E/eyes.html#:~:text= Eyes%20are%20probably%20the%20most,a%20western%20custom%20of%20honesty>.

²⁴ *Valkyrie*, DVD, Commentary of Tom Cruise, Bryan Singer, and Christopher McQuarrie.

²⁵ According to Scripture, the inscription "King of the Jews" was written in Latin, Hebrew, and Greek, and placed above Jesus's head on the cross (John 19:20).

²⁶ The New Testament word for "angel" (ἄγγελος) means "messenger."

²⁷ The foot does not show the stigmata, which indicates it is not the resurrected Christ.

²⁸ George Ferguson, *Signs and Symbols in Christian Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), 50.

²⁹ Ferguson, *Signs and Symbols in Christian Art*, 50.

³⁰ More generally, the eagle is a heraldic symbol found in cultures around the world. See Arthur Charles Fox-Davies, *A Complete Guide to Heraldry* (London: T.C. & E.C. Jack: Edinburgh: 1909).

-
- ³¹ George Mosse, *Nazi Culture: Intellectual, Cultural and Social Life in the Third Reich* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1966), xxv. It must be acknowledged, however, that Hitler also privately enjoyed art that did not align with Nazi standards art, such as Hollywood films.
- ³² The German text is from *Deutschland unter der Herrschaft des Nationalsozialismus* (1933-1945), “Vereidigung der Reichswehr auf Adolf Hitler am Todestag Hindenburgs (2. August 1934),” accessed March 22, 2021, https://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/sub_image.cfm?image_id=1982&language=german. The English translation is from the opening scene of the film, starting at 0:00:48.
- ³³ Joachim Fest, *Hitler*, translated by Richard and Clara Winston (New York: Harvest, 1973), 177.
- ³⁴ Cornelia Schmitz-Berning, *Vocabular des Nationalsozialismus* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2000), 299.
- ³⁵ Schmitz-Berning, *Vocabular des Nationalsozialismus*, 299.
- ³⁶ Schmitz-Berning, *Vocabular des Nationalsozialismus*, 299.
- ³⁷ Tilman Allert, *The Hitler Salute: On the Meaning of a Gesture* (New York: Picador, 2009).
- ³⁸ *Valkyrie*, DVD, Commentary of Christopher McQuarrie and Nathan Alexander.
- ³⁹ Ian Kershaw, *Luck of the Devil*, 56. Some present at the execution claimed that Stauffenberg said “secret Germany” rather than “sacred Germany,” the former meaning simply his desire that the Germans resisting in the shadows of the Nazi state might outlive the Nazi menace.
- ⁴⁰ Hoffmann, *History of the German Resistance*, 508; Jones, *Countdown to Valkyrie*, Kindle edition, 5040; and Roger Moorehouse, *Killing Hitler: The Plots, the Assassins, and the Dictator Who Cheated Death* (New York: Bantam Books, 2006), 268.
- ⁴¹ *Valkyrie*, DVD, Commentary of Christopher McQuarrie and Nathan Alexander.
- ⁴² In real life the conspirators were predominantly conservative and nationalist. See Kershaw, *Luck of the Devil*, 25-26; Jones, *Countdown to Valkyrie*, Kindle edition, location 4845; and Moorhouse, *Killing Hitler*, 276.
- ⁴³ Friedrich Nietzsche famously called *Parsifal* a Christian work and subsequently broke with his friend Wagner for selling out to Christianity. See Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Nietzsche Contra Wagner*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, translated and edited by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin, 1982).
- ⁴⁴ *Valkyrie*, DVD, 00:32:25.
- ⁴⁵ While one may argue that Stauffenberg’s emotion in this scene may simply reflect sadness or worry rather than shame, I would argue that shame makes the most sense given Cruise’s performance. In addition, this scene is linked to the previous scene in the church where Stauffenberg explicitly connected his sense of shame to his legacy for his children. It is this strong emotion of shame (as opposed to a generalized sadness or worry) that propels him forward to orchestrate Operation Valkyrie.

References

- Allert, Tilman. *The Hitler Salute: On the Meaning of a Gesture*. New York: Picador, 2009.
- Bennington Grant, Bennington. "Just How Historically Accurate Was Tom Cruise's *Valkyrie*," in *WatchCharge*, May 21, 2018, accessed May 6, 2021, <https://watchcharge.com/just-how-historically-accurate-was-tom-cruises-valkyrie/>.
- Bornost, Stefan. Review in the *Socialist Worker*, accessed May 6, 2021, <https://socialistworker.co.uk/art/16670/The+truth+behind+Valkyrie+and+the+coup+against+Hitler>.
- Burgoyne, Robert. *The Hollywood Historical Film*. New York: Blackwell, 2008.
- Ceyer, Michael and John W. Boyer, eds., *Resistance against the Third Reich, 1933-1990*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.
- Dargis, Manohla. Review in *The New York Times*, December 28, 2008, accessed May 6, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/25/movies/25valk.html>.
- Der Spiegel International*, "Stauffenberg's Daughter Praises 'Valkyrie,'" January 20, 2009, accessed March 30, 2021, <https://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/reaction-to-hitler-plot-film-stauffenberg-s-daughter-praises-valkyrie-a-602336.html>.
- Deutsche Geschichte in Dokumenten und Bildern (DGDB)*, "Vereidigung der Reichswehr auf Adolf Hitler am Todestag Hindenburgs (2. August 1934)," accessed March 22, 2021, https://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/sub_image.cfm?image_id=1982&language=german.
- Dictionary of Symbols*, "Eyes," University of Michigan, accessed March 28, 2021, <http://umich.edu/~umfandsf/symbolismproject/symbolism.html/E/eyes.html#:~:text=Eye%20are%20probably%20the%20most,a%20western%20custom%20of%20honesty>.
- Eltscher, Louis. *Traitors or Patriots? A Story of the German Anti-Nazi Resistance*. Bloomington, IN: iUniverse: 2013.
- Ferguson, George. *Signs and Symbols in Christian Art*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1961.
- Fest, Joachim. *Plotting Hitler's Death: The Story of the German Resistance*, translated by Bruce Little. New York: Metropolitan, 1996.
- Fox-Davies, Arthur Charles. *A Complete Guide to Heraldry*. London: T.C. & E.C. Jack: Edinburgh: 1909.
- Groves, Dan. Review on *SBS.com*, May 27, 2009, accessed May 6, 2021, <https://www.sbs.com.au/movies/review/valkyrie-review>.
- Hamerow, Theodore. *On the Road to the Wolf's Lair: German Resistance to Hitler*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997.
- Helmreich, Ernst Christian. *German Churches under Hitler: Background, Struggle and Epilogue*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1979.
- Hoffmann, Peter. *The History of the German Resistance, 1933-1945, Third Edition*. Ithaca: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996.
- Hoffmann, Peter. "Problems of Resistance in National Socialist Germany," in *The German Church Struggle and the Holocaust*, edited by Franklin H. Littell and Hubert G. Locke. Detroit: Wayne State University, 1974.

-
- IMDb, "Valkyrie," accessed May 30, 2021, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0985699/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1.
- Jones, Nigel. *Countdown to Valkyrie: The July Plot to Assassinate Hitler*. London: Frontline, 2008.
- Kershaw, Ian. *Hitler: 1889-1936, Hubris*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1998.
- Kershaw, Ian. *The Luck of the Devil: The Story of Operation Valkyrie*. New York: Penguin.
- Kershaw, Ian. *The Nazi Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives of Interpretation, Third Edition*. New York: Arnold, 1993.
- Lyden, John. *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals, Second Edition*. New York: New York University Press, 2019.
- Michael, Robert. *Holy Hatred: Christianity, Antisemitism, and the Holocaust*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.
- Mommsen, Hans. *Germans Against Hitler: The Stauffenberg Plot and Resistance under the Third Reich*, translated by Angus McGeoch. New York: I.B. Tauris, 2009.
- Moorehouse, Roger. *Killing Hitler: The Plots, the Assassins, and the Dictator Who Cheated Death*. New York: Bantam Books, 2006.
- Mosse, George. *Nazi Culture: Intellectual, Cultural and Social Life in the Third Reich*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1966.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Nietzsche Contra Wagner*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, translated and edited by Walter Kaufmann. New York: Penguin, 1982.
- Rainer, Peter. Review in *The Christian Science Monitor*, January 2, 2009, accessed May 6, 2021, <https://www.csmonitor.com/The-Culture/Movies/2009/0102/p25s02-almo.html>.
- Rosenstone, Robert. *History on Film/Film on History*. New York: Pearson, 2006.
- Schmitz-Berning, Cornelia. *Vocabular des Nationalsozialismus*. New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2000.
- Sobchack, Vivian. "Embodying Transcendence: On the literal, the material, and the cinematic sublime," in *Material Religion*, 4 (2), 194-203.
- Steigmann-Gall, Richard. *The Holy Reich: Nazi Conceptions of Christianity, 1919-1945*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- Tookey, Chris. Review on *DailyMail.com*, January 22, 2009, accessed May 6, 2021, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/reviews/article-1126800/Valkyrie-Has-Tom-lost-plot.html>.
- Valkyrie*, directed by Bryan Singer, featuring Tom Cruise, Kenneth Branagh, Bill Nighy, Terence Stamp, etc. United Artists, 2008. DVD, 20th Century Fox, 2009.