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*The role of the military in political transitions:  
from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the present day*

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## Volume II





# The role of the military in political transitions: from the 18th century to the present day

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# TWO COUPS: 20 JULY 1944 IN GERMANY AND 25 APRIL 1974 IN PORTUGAL

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## Abstract

On 20 July 1944, Wehrmacht officers staged a coup d'état against the Nazi regime. Their aim was to overthrow Hitler's rule and to bring about, as soon as possible, an end to a war which had become hopeless.

Thirty years later, Portuguese officers staged a coup d'état against the *Estado Novo* and what was left of the Salazar regime. They aimed at ending the dictatorship that had lasted since the 1920s and also to end a colonial war in Africa which also had become hopeless.

The Federal Republic of Germany and Portugal were by then allies within NATO, this paper will compare the two events, but will then go on to question why the contemporaries, both in Portugal and in Germany, never drew any parallels between them or else compared them in any way.

## The 20 July Plot

On 20 July 1944, a group of German officers headed by Colonel Claus Count Stauffenberg, planted a bomb under Hitler's map table and afterwards attempted a military coup d'état. The aim had been to effect a regime change and then immediately end the war. Sadly, both the bomb attempt and the ensuing *putsch* failed; the chief conspirators were shot the same night, more than a hundred others, military and civilians from all walks of life, were subjected to show trials and executed later.

What had been the reason for a group of conservative officers, basically loyal to their country, to attempt an overthrow of their political system at the height of a military crisis? A lot has been published about all that,<sup>(1)</sup> and we will limit ourselves to a few points. To keen military observers, it was obvious that the war could no longer be won, and that Germany was wasting thousands of human lives for a lost cause – in the summer of 1944 the strength of an entire regiment every single day. About half of all German fatal losses during the Second World War had occurred during the five years until July 1944 – the other half occurring during the ten months until May 1945. One German city after another was being flattened by Allied bombing raids, but places like Potsdam, Dortmund and of course Dresden had not been annihilated yet. It was a crime to continue.

Hitler, however, was neither willing to make peace – he never concluded a peace with anyone. Nor were the Allies willing to conclude a peace with a man and his regime who were ultimately responsible for war crimes on an unheard-of scale, not least the murder of six million European Jews. It was clear that a peace of any sort required a regime change. The military opposition meant to achieve just this. Also, the conservative officers saw a power struggle coming after the end of the war between the national socialists, themselves as the national conservatives, and possibly the national Bolsheviks supported by the Soviet Union. This would put an end to the proud officer corps' social position. By the summer of 1944, the Army might still be in a position to win this contest; later it might be too late, as the size and power of the SS began to increase beyond measure.

As the attempt on Hitler's life as well as the coup d'état failed, the regime continued the war to its eventual conclusion by an unconditional surrender in May 1945, with Hitler escaping the end by committing suicide.

## West German Military Tradition after 1955

How, then, did this affect post-war German history?

From its very inception in 1955, the new West German military, the *Bundeswehr*, was created as part of an alliance which many perceived as designed to protect democracy. Integrating post-war West Germany and its new military into NATO had been facilitated greatly by the tradition of resistance against Nazi injustice and war:

Foreign misconceptions about the Germans – unreserved faith in authorities, subservience, monolithic cohesion – were thus if not eradicated completely, but at least modified to some extent. ... These decisive corrections of the largely undifferentiated image of Germany abroad were an essential precondition for a future Germany acting within the family of nations.<sup>(2)</sup>

1. See, above all, Winfried Heinemann, *Operation "Valkyrie": A Military History of the 20 July 1944 Plot*, (Berlin: de Gruyter 2022).

2. Norbert Wiggershaus, "Zur Bedeutung und Nachwirkung des militärischen Widerstandes in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland und in der Bundeswehr," in: *Aufstand des Gewissens. Militärischer Widerstand gegen Hitler und das NS-*

An essential element of this new military philosophy was an acceptance of the military opposition against Hitler as one of the egregious examples of German military tradition – not an easy feat at a time when many officers served in leading positions who had decided not to act against the *Führer*. Still, the political leadership imposed itself on the nascent West German military; all officers who had served in the war and who wished to join the *Bundeswehr* had to undergo a vetting process, and the single most important question was whether the applicant had developed at least a tolerant attitude to the resisters. Anyone calling them traitors or claiming that, without the opposition, Germany might have won the war, was rejected immediately.

While this was politically opportune, the new German military's modern concept of "Internal Leadership" did not meet with the approval of all Allied officers.<sup>(3)</sup> Some found the limitations placed on military discipline and obedience problematic, others would object to a positive appreciation of the military resistance against Hitler. Adelbert Weinstein, the military correspondent of the prestigious *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, recounted a meeting with French officers:

"Some officers mention the 20 July to us. They believe that the German officers' actions cannot be condoned, as Germany was at war at the time, and during a war an attempt on the life of the supreme commander is a crime."<sup>(4)</sup>

## The Carnation Revolution

On the other hand, there were several uprisings by the military in countries that were Germany's allies in NATO, such as in Turkey, Greece, and Portugal.

On 25 April 1974, the Portuguese Army overthrew the remains of the reactionary-authoritarian regime of the Estado Novo which António de Salazar had created in the 1920s, but which was obviously in decline since his death in 1970.

The young officers – some referred to them as "the captains" – wanted more than just a regime change; they called for an immediate end to the colonial wars in Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea-Bissau, not least because the continuation of these wars threatened to isolate Portugal internationally.<sup>(5)</sup> Another point was that when the

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*Regime 1933-1945*, (Herford: Mittler) 41994, 465-491, 470.

3. Georg Meyer, "Zur Situation der deutschen militärischen Führungsschicht im Vorfeld des westdeutschen Verteidigungsbeitrages 1945-1950/51," in: *Anfänge westdeutscher Sicherheitspolitik, vol. 1: Von der Kapitulation bis zum Plevan-Plan*, (Munich: Oldenbourg 1982), 579-735, 670-671; Wilhelm Meier-Dörnberg, "Die Planung des Verteidigungsbeitrages der Bundesrepublik Deutschland im Rahmen der Europäischen Verteidigungsgemeinschaft 1950-1954," in: *Anfänge westdeutscher Sicherheitspolitik 1945-1956, vol. 2: Die EVG-Phase*, (Munich: Oldenbourg 1990), 605-756, 681-688; Günter Fröhling, *Innere Führung und Multinationalität. Eine Herausforderung an die Bundeswehr*, (Berlin: Mies 2006), 149-150.

4. Adelbert Weinstein, "Köpfe einer Armee. Französische Offiziere in Algerien", in: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 11 July 1959.

5. António de Spínola, *Portugal e o futuro*, (Lisbon: Arcádia 1974), 61-102.

Portuguese Army had had to surrender to vastly superior Indian troops attacking the Portuguese possession of Goa in 1961, the military's public and social reputation had suffered considerably.<sup>(6)</sup> The inevitable defeats in Africa would likely multiply that effect. Another parallel to the 20 July plot can be seen in the fact that the huge losses in Africa had forced the Estado Novo regime to open officering to a broader social spectrum, thus placing the privileges of the proud professional officer corps in question – also a form of elite manipulation.<sup>(7)</sup>

Following the initial coup of April 1974, struggles for power erupted for more than a year, but eventually the military handed over power to the civilian politicians.<sup>(8)</sup>

Obviously, there are similarities with the German attempted coup of 1944, but neither did the Portuguese officers overthrowing the regime refer at any time to the German example, nor did German observers draw the parallel.<sup>(9)</sup>

The book which had helped trigger the Portuguese revolution, General António de Spínola's *Portugal e o futuro*, was soon after published in a German edition.

Professor Hans-Adolf Jacobsen of Bonn University, who was also the convenor of the Ministry of Defence's advisory board for questions of "Internal Leadership," wrote a foreword. In 1984 he was to edit a re-publication of the Gestapo reports to Hitler about the 20 July plot, probably the most important source we have. Yet, not once in 1974 did he mention the German military resistance, although only a few weeks later, Germany and the Bundeswehr celebrated the thirtieth anniversary of the 1944 events.<sup>(10)</sup> Again, it fell to Adelbert Weinstein to establish a link: he referred to the Portuguese officers' putsch as a "revolt of the conscience of many officers," using exactly the term by then common for the German military opposition; Weinstein also gave the "dirty war" on both sides in Africa as one of the reasons for the military revolt.<sup>(11)</sup>

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6. Michael Wenzel, *Die Vorgeschichte der Portugiesischen Revolution vom 25. April 1974*. Unpublished Manuscript (Thesis, Free University Berlin), (Berlin 1987), 52.

7. Aniceto Afonso, "Caracterização sociológica do movimento dos capitães (Exército)," in: *Militares e Política. O 25 de Abril*, ed. by Luísa Tiago de Oliveira, (sine loco: Estuário) 2014, 21-39 21-22; Colette Braeckman, *Portugal. Révolution surveillée*, (Brussels: Ed. Rossel 1975), 72-73; Wenzel, *Die Vorgeschichte*, 54. As opposed to that, Ronald H. Chilcote, *The Portuguese Revolution. State and class in the transition to democracy*, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield 2010), 91, sees the "highly politicized university students drafted as junior officers" as the driving force of the revolutionary movement within the Army.

8. Maria Inácia Rezola, *Os Militares na Revolução de Abril. O Conselho da Revolução e a transição para a democracia em Portugal (1974-1976)*, (Lisbon: Campo da Comunicação 2006), 125.

9. For the Portuguese historiography, see Rezola, *Os Militares na Revolução*; for a Marxist interpretation see Manuel Loff, "A Memória da Ditadura e da Revolução," in: *O Regresso das Bandeiras*, (Barreiro: Câmara Municipal de Barreiro 2016), 15-17. For a military history approach, David Martelo's Blog *A Bigorna* is invaluable: <https://www.a-bigorna.pt/>.

10. António de Spínola, *Portugal und die Zukunft*, (Düsseldorf: Droste 1974), 5-18.

11. Adelbert Weinstein. "Portugals Putsch gegen den Krieg. Die Streitkräfte fürchteten einen Verfall ihres Ansehens." *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 27 April 1974, 10.

Apart from all the similarities, there were marked differences as well: While the German population had still largely backed Hitler and his war even in the summer of 1944, Salazar's Estado Novo had lost popular support, particularly in urban areas. The military's action was aimed solely against the regime, and it met with widespread popular support. Also, Portuguese military history was rich in examples of mutinies and insurrections,<sup>(12)</sup> and the 1974 revolution did not have to start with an assassination attempt. In short, the young Portuguese officers of the *Movimento das Forças Armadas* had no reason for such moral and religious qualms as those that had plagued men like the Protestant Helmuth James Count Moltke or the Catholic Major Ludwig von Leonrod, who had consulted their respective pastors about whether it was morally admissible to commit tyrannicide.

### The Failed Coup d'État in Turkey

Let us look at another, more recent example. On 15/16 July 2016, the Turkish military attempted a coup, aiming to overthrow the Erdogan government which it felt had departed from the laicist Kemalist tradition the Turkish Army stood for. The details need not interest us here, as we all now the attempt eventually failed. But what was the German public's reaction.

Instinctively, the coup's failure was welcomed – anything would be better than a military government.<sup>(13)</sup> Although the anniversary of the 20 July events followed only days later, none of the commentators drew a comparison – even if only to highlight the differences.

### Memory as an Empty Shell

My contention is that the traditional, ritualized memorialization of the events of the summer of 1944 in Berlin seems to stand in the way of any lessons to be learned for evaluating current political developments. In 1989, the then Polish Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki and the German Chancellor Helmut Kohl had attended a "Mass of Reconciliation" in Krzyżowa (the former Kreisau in Silesia, Poland), one of the best-known meeting points for the opposition movement. At the time, this Mass had had significant political relevance as an indication of improved German-Polish relations at a critical juncture in history.<sup>(14)</sup>

Today, the political relevance of memorializing the resistance seems to have dwindled noticeably. The forms of collective memorialization that developed in West Germany

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12. Michael Harsgor, *Portugal in Revolution*, (Beverly Hills: Sage 1976) (=The Washington papers, vol. III, 32), 11.

13. See, e. g., Gerd Appenzeller. "Die Türkei – ein Unruheherd." In *Der Tagesspiegel*, 16 July 2016, <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/putsch-gegen-erdogan-die-tuerkei-ein-unruheherd/13885552.html> , accessed 6 September 2018.

14. Krzysztof Ruchniewicz, *Kreisau neu gelesen*, (Dresden: Neisse 2018), 107–112.



after the Second World War are in themselves the product of their times and need to be seen in the light of their political context. Accepting fundamental opposition against a regime as part of its tradition sets the Bundeswehr apart from their international partners – just as the German public's attitude to the history of the Second World War is different from that of others.

The *Bundeswehr* still has barracks named after officers who lost their lives fighting Hitler, and every year on 20 July, there is a big military ceremony and parade in the courtyard of the very building where the conspirators had worked. Usually, a high-ranking politician will speak – this year, it was Chancellor Olaf Scholz himself. At first sight then, it seems that the German military and political elites still staunchly support the memorialization of the resistance movement. Yet, when it comes to this memorialization having concrete political consequences, there have been none for many years.

This ritualized memory is an empty shell – whereas in Portugal, it seems to the observer that the events of 50 years ago are vividly remembered, are still politically relevant and its memory and meanings apparently shared by the vast majority of the Portuguese. One might just remember the mass participation and the socially and politically comprehensive demonstrations that brought to the streets crowds of Portuguese celebrating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the *Movimento das Forças Armadas*; they ended up being much more than that.

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## Author's short CV

Secretary General of the German Commission for Military History, is Professor of History at the Cottbus University of Technology and a retired Bundeswehr colonel.

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