The Social Organization of Treason: Anti-Nazi Networks in The Third Reich

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Abstract

This article brings social network analysis to the study of the illicit social structure of treason. We study a well-documented, arguably paradigmatic case of treason: The anti-Nazi networks among military officers within Nazi Germany. Small and secretive anti-Nazi networks in The Third Reich reveal the interplay of agents (plotters) and their activities (plots), the unfolding strategy and tactics of treason, and the social organization of anti-regime activism from 1938 until 1944. The special features of bipartite and emergent networks are particularly appropriate for the analysis of the plots, plotters, and high-risk covert political action such as treason. The assassination and coup of the Valkyrie plot demonstrates the differential distribution of anti-regime action: that some plotters are more active in lethal, political violence than others, that network ties are centralized on a few higher-degree conspirators. Organizational characteristics of hierarchy and centralization that mobilize and energize this large anti-Nazi Valkyrie network lead to its disintegration and demise as the weapon of assassination fails and military command and control of the coup collapses. Exponential Random Graph Models (ERGM) reveal small configurations of plots and their plotters contributing to the larger network structure of conspiracy and political violence.
From Plutarch, and the assassination of Caesar in 44 B.C., we learn that the course of history often hinges on conspiracy and treason. In Nazi-Germany, on July 20, 1944, the plot to assassinate Hitler and stage a coup d’etat remains one of the most dramatic events of the 20\textsuperscript{th} Century. The assassination of Caesar was successful; the assassination of Hitler was not. Failed conspiracy plots offer many lessons for the study of political lethality as well as the examination of the structure of social networks of treason.

Treason consists of subverting governmental, political and military institutions through coup ‘d’état, insurrection, sabotage, espionage, disclosure of top-secret information, and other means designed to undermine, overthrow and replace the leadership and personnel of a political regime. Because the regime possesses a monopoly of the means of surveillance and violence, a political conspiracy exists in a state of constant potential threat (of attack or accident), and it’s only by making the responses routine that the conspirators can go about their work of orchestrating, concealing, and effectively carrying out high-risk anti-state action. When treason consists of the extraordinary acts of assassination and coup d’état we have a perfect laboratory for the study of a secret society in extremis.

Our context for study is the network of anti-Hitler and anti-Nazi conspirators who created multiple conspiracies or plots. These network structures are dynamic, heterogeneous, and contingent (White 1992). We focus on these three features, especially the contingent, i.e., those features upon which the rise of illegal political networks in an authoritarian regime depend. We provide a sketch of the rise of anti-Nazi networks and a network analysis of the intersection of ties of treason and the overall structure of this secret "social circle" (Simmel [1906]1989, 1950, 1955; see Bendix in Simmel 1955: 125)

We reconstructed the network from biographies, memoirs, and historical sources that include every plotter who participated in every plot from 1938 to 1944. These data also include vital time-varying information on the military and political successes or failures of The Third Reich, the network characteristics of the plot teams, and measures of collaboration on treasonous strategies and tactics. We want to emphasize that by “anti-Nazi” we mean collective beliefs and practices supporting of the primary goal of leader-focused lethality is the assassination of Hitler.

The numerous plots against Hitler and the Nazi regime are among the most famous and well-chronicled subversive activities in Twentieth Century history. Initially, the conspirators hew to pursuing a
coup d’état while opening secret channels of diplomacy with the West. They only fitfully venture into con-
templating plans to murder Hitler and his Nazi leadership. These plans or combinations of plans are kept
within a “secret circle” (Churchill 1948: 311), a “tiny group” (Shirer 2011: 372), with an “innermost circle” of
conspirators (Fest 1994: 89; Reitlinger 1957). Opposition plans are worked out in and across clandestine
meetings of Hitler’s expert advisers and top generals. There is an “intense, unceasing struggle” within the
Army staff that soon moves down the chain of command while spreading into the upper echelons of Ger-
many’s political and diplomatic professions. The assassination of Hitler soon achieves high salience in the
conspiracies. This form of “hot” treason—high lethality—is one among a set of alternative treasonous tech-
niques.

In the initial stages, the networks are not aligned into a focused organization (Feld 1981). They are
not yet a “going concern.” There is disunity with “perhaps only a number of functionaries set to cooperate in
prescribed ways at a certain conjuncture” (Sumner in Hughes 1971b: 53). An active nucleus forms with a
“defined situation” of how and when they are to act (Hughes 1971b: 54-55). Yet, as noted above, in over-
coming objections to treason, and in working out focused definitions of it disjunctures appear. There is a
“gap between the military and civilians” (Shirer 1990: 374-375) and a gap between the persistent core and
the precarious periphery of the conspiracies, characterized by the following cleavages and misunderstand-
ings: (a) about how formal and hierarchical the conspiratorial plots should be; (b) over the proper role of the
military officers (Generals, Lieutenants, Corporals) and civilians (diplomats, lawyers, pastors, intellectuals)
in treason; (c) about killing others and the specific direction and timing of proposed murders and coup; (d)
about who can be depended on to simultaneously implement the Berlin, Paris, and Prague takeover of the
SS and Gestapo; and (e) about time. By the summer of 1944 the plotters know time was closing in on Hitler
and on them. Allied and Russian troops invade the homeland. Deadlines loom. Deadlines create “over-
load.” Misunderstandings and overload push the plotters into impatience (Weiner 1976; Gibson 2012). The
bomb failure in the 1945 Valkyrie plot is an accident. It ignites a catastrophic breakdown of coordination
and quickly results in the collapse of hierarchy, cohesion, efficient decision-making and role responsibil-
ity (Perrow 1999; Vaughan 1996). Misunderstanding, deadline, and accident feed directly into the tragedy that
was to come.
As we know, Valkyrie as assassination and coup fails. The violent murder and the non-violent putsch collapse. The bomb placed by Stauffenberg in the briefing room at the Wolfs Lair (Wolfschanze) detonates but does not kill Hitler. While the cadre of plotters refined Valkyrie, they made no allowance for Hitler surviving an assassination attempt (Jones 2008: 287). The coup in Berlin wastes valuable time awaiting confirmation of Hitler’s assassination; the core cannot mobilize the top levels of the military and police forces upon which it depends; promises and expectations of combat readiness for military seizure of power quickly evaporate; key plotters fail to cut the communication lines from Hitler’s headquarters to the centers of power. At the nerve center of the coup at Home Army Command on the Bendlerstrasse we find only uncertainty, hesitation, and inaction. Hitler’s propaganda chief steps into the void and takes over. The four core activists are arrested, taken out into the courtyard in Berlin’s war ministry and shot by a firing squad. Orders to murder them are issued by a General who knew about and “wavered” in his support of the coup. Opportunism and defection set in. The conspiracy is now in disarray. The Nazis pounce and restore order. The Fuehrer orders lethality and retribution. Show trials and execution of central and peripheral conspirators unfold.

Yet in the run up to Valkyrie, and despite the distrust, impatience and differences in tactics, meeting after secret meeting take place. Often the same people show up at the meetings. There is a chain of repeated ties (Simmel 1989). Programs of action are proposed, choices dissected, tactics mapped out, problems ejected, forks in the road reached, decisions made, promises announced, and personnel mobilized. The course of treason, worked out in its skeletal form in 1938, ebbs and flows, begins to take shape in 1943 and 1944. The objectives are to kill Hitler, cordon off the main centers of power, isolate and disable Hitler’s SS, seize the government through a non-violent coup and form a provisional government. The conspirators coalesce around a core or nucleus of highly active and zealous plotters. Organizational command shifts from older-line Generals—Beck, Goerdeler, Hassell and Popitz—to a network of middle level Colonels, key civilians and police and urban control personnel with reputations for dependability.

To foreshadow our themes, the plotters vary in their connectedness, their persistent attendance in plot events, endorsement of assassination and coup, and commitment to treasonous action. Within political
conspiracies, under constant threat of detection and death, lack of persistence in group ties, mistrust of colleagues, misalignment of objectives, and impatience with achieving them not only impede concerted action, they can be fatal.

Exogenous Social Ties and Network Construction

Anti-Nazi plotters actively opposing the regime drew on preexisting association ties to mobilize for treason. Social ties form among senior army officers concerned about what they saw as Hitler’s rashness in risking a general European war by invasion of Czechoslovakia. A worried Former Ambassador to Italy, Ulrich von Hassell, brings together a small number of like-minded Foreign Ministry officials, including State Secretary Ernst von Weizsacker, Adam von Trott zu Solz and Hans-Bernd von Haeften staff officers (Evans 2008). Specialized cavalry officers, superintendents of police, for example, become a basis for recruitment of “like-minded men who would put the moral duty of ridding Germany of Hitler ahead of their professional job as soldiers” (Jones 2008: 123). Prior professional, occupational, and social associations among pastors, justice officials, lawyers, and intellectuals become cooptable associational ties—a resource for plotters in creating and organizing sustained anti-regime action. In short, prevailing legal social ties provide opportunities for organizing secret meetings, airing grievances, focusing anger, and hatching illegal plans against Hitler and The Third Reich. However, prevailing professional and military roles can inhibit treason against their country. Prussian officers abhor disobedience to authority and to their superior’s orders; Protestant and Catholic ministers and pastors abhor murder; diplomatic foreign officers detest and resist clandestine and dangerous negotiations with Britain. These tensions exert a push-pull dynamic on the plotters and their plots.

An overlap between legal associational ties and illegal ties may facilitate the rise and persistence treasonous groups; however, at the same time an overlap between official roles and unofficial roles may inhibit treason, “whose whole raison d’etre is deception, disobedience and defiance” (Jones 2008114). Yet despite the paralysis and lethargy that may set in, a “tiny nucleus” (Shirer 2011: 374) of plotters forms. In these fledgling anti-regime networks--called “circles,” “cells,” “nests,” “rings,” or “plots”—a small set of conspirators overcome their ambivalence, even abhorrence towards anti-regime action.
Plotter Orientation and Network Construction

The anti-Hitler conspirators differ in their commitment to holding and attending secret meetings. They have different interests, voices, stakes, focal concerns, and competencies in maneuvering themselves and others into implementing a strategy of treason by violent or non-violent means. One important source of the plotters variation is their individual beliefs in appropriate strategic action to successfully overthrow the regime. Some of the plotters saw assassinating Hitler as a necessary action to overthrow the regime; others were opposed to assassination on moral grounds. Some of the plotters were zealots so committed to the overthrow of the regime by means of assassination that they offered to sacrifice their life in various scenarios of suicide missions, from suicide bombs hidden in overcoats to proposing smuggling bombs on planes to be detonated while flying with Hitler. The necessity of a coup d’etat was a widely held strategic view. Other plotters saw sharing war secrets with the Allies and the Soviets as part of the key to plots success. Still others believed in the importance of diplomacy with the Allies and Soviets as part of plot success. These strategic orientations were not mutually exclusive and many of the plotters held multiple plot strategies as part of their outlook of the ingredients for success.

Hypotheses

The historical record indicates that actor social attributes such as membership in the military, civil service, religious organizations, or as members of the aristocracy were resources for the plotters in the initial formation of the anti-Hitler networks. We draw from research that implies that locations in social institutions are resources for network mobilization (Gould 1991, 1996) to formulate the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis One: Plotters’ exogenous social attributes such as being a civilian or military officer partially explains the formation of the anti-Hitler networks within the Third Reich.*

The historical record also shows that the anti-Hitler plotters were oriented to five basic strategies: (1) coup d’etat, (2) assassination, (3) assassination with zealotry, (4) diplomacy and (5) espionage. We hypothesize that these strategic orientations form an endogenous cultural code within the conspiracy that plays an important role in network formation.
Hypothesis Two: Plotters actor attributes such as their plot orientation partially explains the formation of the anti-Hitler networks within the Third Reich.

Sources and Data

It should be emphasized that we are studying clandestine plots and their plotters. These are of course not public events, such as petitions, legal briefs, public demonstrations by regime opponents, and violence by police or counter demonstration tactics by armed squads of state actors. We are not studying protest activities and social movement events that are accessible through newspapers of record, such as The New York Times or, in this case, the Berlin, Paris, or Prague press. To be sure, the show trials of the plotters were public and famously recorded events; they too, however, are not a focus of our data collection. We seek to illuminate a dark corner of Twentieth Century Europe. Our principal sources of data about anti-Nazi plot events in a six-year time period culminating in the Valkyrie debacle are numerous, multi-layered, and wide-ranging—from memoir to archive. The data sources are: Plotting Hitler’s Death (Fest 1996); They Plotted Against Hitler (Kahle 1944); Target Hitler: The Plots To Kill Hitler (Duffy 1992); Killing Hitler (Moorhouse 2006); Kill Hitler (Short 2013); Kill The Fuhrer (Astride 2009); To Kill The Devil (Mason 1978); The Secret Plot to Kill Hitler (Noach 2005); The Men Who Tried to Kill Hitler (Manvell and Fraenkel 2008); and Hitler Must Die (Mason 1985).

Supplementing the “kill Hitler” genre is the “plan hatching” and “plot unfolding” genre chronicled in the following books: The Conspirators (Manvell 1971); No Ordinary Men (Sifton and Stern 2013); Valkyrie: The Story of The Plot to Kill Hitler, By Its Last member (Boeselager 2009); Valkyrie: An Insider’s Account of The Plot to Kill Hitler (Gisevius 2009; 1947); Operation Valkyrie: The German Generals’ Plot Against Hitler (Galante 2002); Codename Valkyrie (Schrader 2009); The Canaris Conspiracy (Manvell and Fraenkel 2008); Hitler’s Spy Chief: The Wilhelm Canaris Mystery (Bassett 2005); and The Oster Conspiracy (Pars-sinen 2012 [1992]).

Invaluable background on The Third Reich is found in Kershaw’s book on Hitler (2000), Michael Burleigh’s The Third Reich: A New History (2000), and Shirer’s The Rise and Fall of The Third Reich (2011 [1959]) as well as incisive writing of Nigel Jones (2008). Shirer and Jones, among the other writers cited
above, provide uneven but thick detail on what we have called the first stage or the “birth of a conspiracy against Hitler” (Shirer 2011: 372-382; Jones 2008: 42-93), the middle stage conspiracies (Shirer 2011: 647-659; Jones 2008: 112-144), as well as the assassination and coup plots of 1942 (Shirer 2011: 1018-1028) and 1944 (Shirer 2011: 1044-1082; 2008: 172-235). Nearly all these sources take note of the “bloody vengeance” that followed the fall of Valkyrie. Sweeping historical treatments reveal the hidden traces of the regime's depravity and the roads to resistance (Ainsztein 1974; Churchill 1948; Gallin 1961; Grunberger 1971; Hoffmann 1988, 2008, 2011; Remak 1969; Rothfels 1962; Schlabendorff 1965; Suhl 1968; Thomsett 1997; Wheeler-Bennett 1953).

**Coding Co-conspirators and Keywords**

An heroic resistance narrative deployed by writers on Germany under The Third Reich emphasizes the collective exploits and courage of Oster, Caranis, Tresckow, Schlabendorff, Hassell, Goerdeler, Dohnanyi, Bonhoeffer, and Stauffenberg, to name a few. For purposes of content analysis and keywords, names overlap, connections and keywords duplicate one another. A similarity of links among conspirators across conspiracies facilitates the compilation and mapping of linkages between them (Sparrow 1991; Krebs 2001). This in turn facilitates inter-rater reliability in depicting the plot paths to Valkyrie. It multiplies redundancy among the historical sources, over-representation of highly visible military and civilian plotters, and tolerable levels of low overlap for one-shot or low visibility participants. Plot veterans exhibit low Rashomon scores and were properly assigned to their plots and plot stages. Their less active and low frequency colleagues are more difficult to observe, i.e., for coders to agree on and assign to an M x N matrix and hence to their network position. Our errors, therefore, are in underestimating, undercounting, and correctly matching those on the periphery, especially those outside the Valkyrie conspiracy, those one-shot plotters in the 1938-1939 Stage 1 period, and those with unknowable treason orientations. Low frequency plotters impact on the structure of the observed network is modest, since if present, they do not link nodes in the overall plot networks.

Where high Rashomon effects appear, and disagreements are difficult to resolve, we discard the plotter from the data set. We begin our independent coding with 171 names of plotters (potential and real), 24 plots, and 7 realistic combinations of treasonous (assassination, coup, diplomacy). Fortunately, the
threat of missing information and low overlap among both sources and coders is not severe. A final data field is 160 plotters, 22 plots, and 4 master plans. We discarded two plots because they involved a lone bomber; despite decades of speculation by scholars, we could find no evidence that a plot event was at work in these two solo assassination attempts. Finally, our inter-rater reliability for the remaining plots and their plotters using Cronbach’s alpha is .82.

**Coding Plotter Orientations**

Anti-Hitler plotters had a variety of conceptions of how a plot against Hitler might be successful. We judge that there were five major plotter orientations among the plotters in the anti-Nazi networks. The five plotter orientations described below are not mutually exclusive; conspirators often espoused multiple of these orientations, while some only espoused one.

Some of the plotters met and discussed their beliefs in turning over war plan secrets to the Soviets or Allies to hasten the inevitable defeat of the Third Reich was a viable component hastening the Nazis’ and Hitler’s control of Germany. We code these anti-Nazi plotters with the label “espionage.”

Some of the plotters met and discussed their belief that secretly meeting with the Allies or Soviets to organize a diplomatic solution to the war’s end, without the consent of the official Nazi government, was a necessary strategy to either ending the war or resisting Nazi rule, or both. We code these anti-Nazi plotters with as “diplomats.”

Some of the plotters met and discussed their support for a coup d’etat. These plotters believed arresting Nazi government leaders and forming a new German government out of anti-Nazi high ranking military leaders was a necessary strategy to ending Nazi rule. We code these anti-Nazi plotters with the label “coup.”

Some of the plotters met and discussed their beliefs that assassinating Hitler was a necessary strategy to ending Nazi rule. Some of the religious civilian plotters were opposed to assassination. We code the anti-Nazi plotters favorable to Hitler’s assassination with the label “assassination.”

Finally, some of the plotters met and discussed their beliefs that assassinating Hitler was a necessary strategy to ending Nazi rule could be distinguished from the other “assassination” code discussed above because they were willing to die in the act thought necessary to kill Hitler. There was variation in
the ways that the conspirators conceived of their own death if it meant the death of Hitler -- from detonating their bomb loaded overcoats in Hitler's presence to exploding bombs on airplanes while mutually traveling with the Fuhrer. We code these anti-Nazi plotters with the label “zealots.”

The Kreisau Circle

The so called Kreisau Circle is mentioned, even highlighted, in virtually every book on resistance to Nazi-regime, and than includes Shirer, Jones, Evans, and all our sources (which we have in the reference section). It is important because in 1938 and even before it was a social circle that informally brought together the cream of the Prussian aristocracy, young Prussian officers, intellectuals, and others who were disenchanted with Hitler and the Nazi-regime. Nigel Jones is particularly insightful and forceful on its role. Others like Evans pick up the circle's role later on, but Jones claims it was in its nascent form early on. Kreisau is named after the estate on which they held their meetings.

Two coders went through the sources and listed the names of those nominated as being in the circle--Hofacker, Schulenberg, Trott, Schwerin, Yorck, Moltke, Uxkull, Qirnheim, Harnacks (husband and wife), Schlabrendorff, Father Delp, and then Finckh. And of course both B. Stauffenberg and C. Stauffenberg. There was high inter-rater agreement with the except of Harnack (the wife), Finckh (who arrives later), and UxKull (due to confusion over the name and spelling of Uxkull-Gyllenbrand (full name).

We were also intrigued by the number of "vons" and Barons in the composition of the circle. This was an unanticipated discovery. It lead to a coding of conspirators by their title.

The Kreisau circle is heterogenous in its composition, it contains impatient and action oriented actors like Stauffenberg (who later became the proponent of assassination ) and those opposed to any form of killing such as Father Delp.

Data

The above codes led to a series of sociomatrices and sociographs that form the data for the analysis. The sociomatrices are bipartite matrices where the columns of the matrix represent the fifteen (15) major plots during the years 1938 through 1945 and the rows are the 163 plotters involved in attempts to assassinate Hitler, overthrow the Nazi regime, or both. A one (1) in the intersection of the $i^{th}$ row and $j^{th}$
column means that the $i^{th}$ plotter collaborated on the $j^{th}$ plot. A zero (0) in the intersection of the $i^{th}$ row and $j^{th}$ column means that the $i^{th}$ plotter did not collaborate on the $j^{th}$ plot. We present all data in the form of graphs, or sociomatrices. The line in the graph, or sociomatrix, in a bipartite graph means that a plotter collaborated on a plot. In our graphs we depict the plotters as circles and the plots as squares.

Figure 1 depicts the social organization of the fifteen (15) anti-Hitler plots. The appendix lists the plotters listed in the graph. Figure 1 forms the dependent variable for this study. Figure 1 is comprised of 163 anti-Hitler plotters and fifteen (15) anti-Hitler plots. There are 337 lines or “edges” in the graph—or, in other words, there are 337 connections between plotters and plots. The research question is: What accounts for the social formation of the network shown in Figure 1. One of our hypotheses is that exogenous social attributes such as military rank, civilian status or membership in the aristocracy accounts for the formation of Figure 1. A second hypothesis is that the plotter orientations account for the social formation of network shown in Figure 1.

[Figure 1 about here]

Figure 2 shows the distribution of degree centrality for each plotter. For these data, degree centrality for the plotters is simply the count of the number of times a plotter participates in the plots. Figure 1 shows that 90 conspirators only collaborated on one (1) of the plots; twentysix (26) conspirators collaborated on two (2) plots; twentythree (23) plotters collaborated on three (3) plots; all the way down until we see that one (1) plotter collaborated on a total of nine (9) anti-Hitler plots. Figure 2 shows that the plotters in Figure 1 were not evenly distributed, with a few of the plotters participating in much more of the plots than others, with the majority of the plotters involved in just one, two or a few number of plots.

[Figure 2 about here]

Figure 3 shows the distribution of degree centrality for each plot. For these data, degree centrality for the plots is simply the count of the number of plotters who collaborated on a plot. Figure 2 shows that the first plot had nine (9) plotters; the second had fortythree (43) plotters; the third plot had twentyone (21)
plotters; all the way up until the final Valkyrie plot, which has a degree centrality (frequency) of seventy-eight (78) plotters. The number of plotters per plot ranges from a low of nine (9) plotters to a high of seventy-eight (78) plotters.

[Figure 3 about here]

Measures: Actor Social Attributes as Independent Variables

Figure 4 presents the plotters who were civilian members of religious organizations or state bureaucracies in black. Our hypothesis is that the civilian social attribute of the plotters show in Figure 4 is an independent variable that is statistically related to the formation of Figure 1.

[Figure 4 about here]

Figure 5 presents the plotters who were members of the Kreisau circle in black. Our hypothesis is that the Kreisau social attribute of the plotters shown in Figure 5 is an independent variable that is statistically related to the formation of Figure 1.

[Figure 5 about here]

Figure 6 presents the plotters who were military officers in black. Our hypothesis is that the military officer social attribute of the plotters shown in Figure 6 is an independent variable that is statistically related to the formation of Figure 1.

[Figure 6 about here]
Figure 7 presents the plotters who were military officers, specifically generals and field marshals, in black. Our hypothesis is that the General or Field Marshal social attribute of the plotters shown in Figure 7 is an independent variable that is statistically related to the formation of Figure 1.

![Figure 7 about here](image)

Figure 8 presents the plotters who were military officers other than general or field marshal in black. Our hypothesis is that plotters with the social attribute of being a military officer other than general or field marshal, as shown in Figure 8, is an independent variable that is statistically related to the formation of Figure 1.

![Figure 8 about here](image)

*Plotter orientation attributes as endogenous independent variable*

Figure 9 presents the plotters who were oriented toward the strategy of a coup d’etat. Our hypothesis is that plotters with the attribute of being oriented to the plot strategy of coup d’etat, as shown in Figure 9, is an independent variable that is statistically related to the formation of Figure 1.

![Figure 9 about here](image)

Figure 10 presents the plotters who were oriented toward the strategy which we coded “diplomacy.” Our hypothesis is that plotters with the attribute of being oriented to the plot strategy of diplomacy, as shown in Figure 10, is an independent variable that is statistically related to the formation of Figure 1.

![Figure 10 about here](image)

Figure 11 presents the plotters who were oriented toward the strategy which we coded “espionage.” Our hypothesis is that plotters with the attribute of being oriented to the plot strategy of espionage, as shown in Figure 11, is an independent variable that is statistically related to the formation of Figure 1.
Figure 12 presents the plotters who were oriented toward the strategy which we coded “assassination.” Our hypothesis is that plotters with the attribute of being oriented to the plot strategy of assassination, as shown in Figure 12, is an independent variable that is statistically related to the formation of Figure 1.

Figure 13 presents the plotters who were oriented toward the strategy which we coded assassination with “zealotry.” Our hypothesis is that plotters with the attribute of being oriented to the plot strategy of assassination with zealotry, as shown in Figure 13, is an independent variable that is statistically related to the formation of Figure 1.

Figure 14 presents the normalized degree centrality for plotters with specific plot orientations. Figure 14 shows considerable variation in the plotter orientations across time. The first plot is characterized with high centrality scores for coup d’etat (in black) and diplomacy (in red). Interesting scores run throughout Figure 14. A few interesting notes: coup has its highest centrality score with the fifth plot – a period just before the war. Assassination is at a low at the ninth plot, the height of Hitler’s military successes where the anti-Hitler plotters faced a most unfavorable environment. The fifteenth plot – Valkyrie – marks the combination of assassination (green) and coup d’etat (black) as the dominant, most central, plotter orientations.
Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations of the degree centralities of plotters with specific plotter orientations. We see that coup has the highest mean degree centrality across the fifteen plots of .51, indicating that “coup” was the most central plotter orientation over the fifteen (15) plots. The second highest degree centrality plotter orientation is “assassination” with a mean degree centrality of .38. The other plotter orientations – diplomacy, espionage, and zealotry – are very similar, ranging from a low of .22 (zealotry) to .26 (diplomacy).

Table 1 about here

Figure 15 presents the normalized degree centrality for plotters with with specific social attributes. Figure 15 also shows considerable variation in the plotter social attributes across time. The first plot is characterized with high centrality scores for civilians (in green) and military officers (in yellow). Interesting scores run throughout Figure 15. A few interesting notes: all military officers (yellow) achieve their highest centrality score with the fifth plot – a period just before the war. Generals and Field Marshals (red) also score their highest centrality scores at the fifth plot. Civilians (green) achieve their highest centrality score in the ninth plot – a period of Hitler’s military success. The fifteenth plot – Valkyrie – is high on military officers (yellow), which is mostly driven by the high degree centrality of military officers who were not generals or field marshals (black). Civilians have their second lowest degree centrality “turn out” in Valkyrie. In short, Valkyrie is largely driven by the military officers, and by and large, those officers who were captains, lieutenants, lieutenant colonels and colonels.

Figure 15 about here

Table 2 shows the means and standard deviations of the degree centralities of plotters with specific social attributes. We see that Civilians has the highest mean degree centrality across the fifteen plots of .45, indicating that Civilians was the most central plotter social attribute over the fifteen (15) plots. The second highest degree centrality plotter social attribute is All Military Officers with a mean degree centrality of .44. The other plotter social attributes – general or field marshal, officers not general or field marshal, and
the Kreisau circle – are much lower, ranging from a low of .12 (Kreisau circle) to .25 (officers not general or field marshal).

Exponential Random Graph Modeling

Exponential Random Graph Models (ERGMs) are used to model endogenous network effects, exogenous actor attributes and exogenous network effects on the likelihood of an edge in a dyad among conspirators. ERGMs can be thought of something like general linear models with the important distinction that ERGMs model network dependency, whereas general linear models (like logistic regression) assume independence. (See Lusher, Koskinen, and Robins 2013 for a discussion of ERGM modeling.)

For the analysis here, the edges in Figure 1 form the dependent variable. The social attributes of the plotters shown in Figures 1–8 are the independent variables and are entered into the ERG-model as 0,1 indicator variables. Further, the plotter orientations as shown in Figures 9–13 are also treated as independent variables and are entered into the ERG-model as 0,1 indicator variables.

ERGM Findings

Table 3 presents the coefficients for the ERG-model. Table 3 shows a negative and statistically significant estimate for the “edges” coefficient. The edges effect can be thought of a baseline to which all the other coefficients either raise or lower the baseline probability. The negative value for edges can be interpreted to mean that the sociomatrix of the anti-Hitler plotters and plots shown in Figure 1 has fewer edges (lines) in the graph than we would expect if the graph were just random. This makes sense: Secret societies that must be small to contain their secrecy would have an incentive to have fewer edges to maximize concealment (Baker and Faulkner, 1993).

Table 3 presents a positive coefficient for diplomacy, but the effect is insignificant. However, for espionage the coefficient is positive and statistically significant, indicating that espionage increased the
likelihood of a tie in the Figure 1 sociomatrix of anti-Hitler plots and plotters, net the effects of the other independent variables.

Table 3 presents a positive coefficient for zealotry, but the effect is insignificant. However, for coup d’etat the coefficient is positive and statistically significant, indicating that plotter orientation of coup increased the likelihood of a tie in the Figure 1 sociomatrix of anti-Hitler plots and plotters, net the effects of the other independent variables.

Table 3 presents a negative coefficient for assassination, but the effect is insignificant. However, for Kreisau circle the coefficient is positive and statistically significant, indicating that plotters social attribution of being a member of the Kreisau circle increased the likelihood of a tie in the Figure 1 sociomatrix of anti-Hitler plots and plotters, net the effects of the other independent variables.

Table 3 presents a negative coefficients for both civilians and for generals and field marshals, but the effect for both of these coefficients is insignificant. However, for military officers not generals nor field marshals, Table 3 shows the coefficient is negative but not impressively statistically significant, indicating that plotters social attribution of being an officer, but not a general nor field marshal, may decrease the likelihood of a tie in the Figure 1 sociomatrix of anti-Hitler plots and plotters, net the effects of the other independent variables.

Conclusion

The ERG-model shows that the plotters plot orientations and pre-existing social attributes partially contributed to the formation of the anti-Hitler networks of 1938 through 1945. Net of the effects of the other variables, plotter orientations of coup d’etat and espionage significantly increased the ties in the sociomatrix of anti-Hitler plots and plotters as shown in Figure 1. Moreover, the pre-existing social attribute of being
a member of Germany’s aristocracy – a member of the Kreisau circle in this case – had a positive and significant effect on tie formation of anti-Hitler plots and plotters shown in Figure 1.

Discussion

We chose the network of a political conspiracy that failed. This famous debacle reveals in retrospect the career of the conspiracy as well as its collapse, a topic of interest to not only historians and biographers but also to social scientists, game theorists, and even film and television writers-producers-directors. In the post mortem that accompanies any political or military disaster, a post-factum narrative misses an important point: conspiracies are mysteries wrapped inside institutions. Breakdown and failure reveals: (a) the institutional context in which illegal or covert networks unfold; (b) the ways plotters coordinate and organize their covert plots; and (c) the external and internal dynamics of network destabilization.

Why did Valkyrie collapse? The answer now widely accepted but clearly not appreciated sufficiently is that the July 1944 crisis and plot was made possible by an extremely fragile treasonous network in which military and civilian plotters indulged in too much reliance of the military chain of command as well as hazardous reliance on a hastily rebuild network of plotters, along with lax supervision by its leaders. That there is wide agreement on the causes of the breakdown following the failed assassination attempt should not be surprising. It is hardly novel to recognize, for example, that dismantling an illegal or “dark” network from the outside can result in the destruction or impairment of persons, group arrangements, facilities, and the like. It is less well acknowledged that covert network ties can be affect from both without and from within—a phenomenon we call “co-dismantling.” Conspiratorial group arrangements, planned plots, and their network ties can be delayed, impaired or severed. Erosion and replacement of key conspirators inside the plots affect the internal organization of anti-Nazi networks leading to operation Valkyrie. The basic problem, however, was not ignorance of such dangers, but that the plotters in the crucial stages of assassination and coup were not sufficiently vigilant in anticipating and controlling them.

We draw on historical sources and network analysis to identify structural conditions that lead to social order and the persistence of ties across secret plots or to their breakdown and collapse. First, we show that anti-regime networks are not static, but dynamic and have a set of conspirators strongly connected to one another and only weakly connected to other conspirators. We reconstruct the covert network core or
center of the anti-Hitler and anti-Nazi Valkyrie plot. The conspirators on the periphery by contrast have few connections to one another and weak connections to the core.

Second, this political conspiracy is structurally fragile. The plots and their plotters are capable of being disrupted and destroyed from the outside by arrest, detention, and imprisonment by the regime’s internal security forces and the Gestapo. They are capable of being dismantled from the inside as conspirators avoid one another to enhance secrecy and replace their older and more cautious colleagues. “Co-dismantling” from the inside and outside, by conspirators and Gestapo, effectively undermines the cohesion of the conspiracy in stage three. Not only was The Gestapo was closing in, but Himmler had warned Canaris and others that the SS knew that a rebellion was being planned. Gestapo pressure against anti-Nazi plotters left deep fissures inside those secret bodies, sowed the seeds of suspicion and distrust, squeezed out formerly influential plotters, and led to an internal shake up on the eve of operation Valkyrie. Close surveillance was soon followed by arrest of “the old guard” and key plotters such as Beck, Goerdeler, Hassell, Witzleben. Plotters started to implicate one another. Moltke fingers Kiep; Canaris implicates Dohnany. This dual-dismantling—internal forces followed by internal changes—had an immediate and “chilling effect” on the other plotters and their plans.

The diffusion of context of suspicion (Glaser and Strauss 1964) spread within the conspiracy. Secrecy is heightened, caution is raised and fear of detection dampens coordination by making plotters more and more cautious about meeting with one another to plan assassination and coup attempts.

Third, external and internal forces combine to disrupt the persistence of plot meetings and interrupt the continuity of treasonous plans. These changes begin to disrupt the internal social organization, revealing how small changes in local network structure (delaying plot meetings, squeezing out “old line” influential plotters, shifting the center of gravity from upper level military to a middle level military officer) has profound effects at the organizational level of the overall network.

Finally, in June 1944 in the run up to bomb and putsch attempts, the plotters saw that time was running out (Shirer 2011: 1035-1036). Concealment was more and more difficult to achieve. The anti-Nazi plotters became increasingly impatient: with Stauffenberg, with his tight-core of mid-level military followers, with the sidelining and replacement of the “old guard,” with civilian envoys and their peace attempts with
the Allies, and with leftists and their deteriorating alliances with the communists. Combined, these directions heightened tensions and increased mistrust. Impatience under conditions of secrecy undermine collective action.

Political and economic conspiracies are wrapped inside institutional contexts. Anti-Nazi networks as political conspiracies should be seen as small-scale secret societies (Simmel 1906, 1950) embedded in a particular type of society—a highly militarized dictatorial state. The conspiracies’ structure was driven by both the need to maximize secrecy or concealment while adapting to a hierarchical authoritarian system. On the one hand the plotters had to coordinate their plots and constantly solve complex, non-routine, rapidly changing and dangerous “problems” of assassination, coup, and covert diplomacy. On the other hand they had to prevent discovery of these treasonous plans, to stay hidden from the regime (The Third Reich’s Gestapo, SS, and its nest of informers), and to maximize the security of their “secret society.” They faced the constant danger of becoming targets of suspicion and objects of detention, arrest, torture, and execution.

References


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Table 2: Means and Standard Deviations of Degree Centralities of Plotters with Specific Social Attributes

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Table 3: Exponential Random Graph Model (ERGM) Coefficients

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Appendix

Actor Key for All Plot by Anti-Hitler Plotter Graphs