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### Tentative Fiction: The Illicit Marvels and Reports of Field Marshal Rommel's Nazi Loyalty

You're about to witness the scene of a nightmare. The location is Wolfsschanze, Führer Adolf Hitler's first Eastern Front military headquarters. The time is 42 minutes past noon, July 20<sup>th</sup>, 1944. A bomb had just detonated underneath a large conference room table. In the aftermath, a stenographer's charred body lies lifeless, and the target of the bomb's explosion—der Führer—stands alive and well in mangled trousers with merely his eardrum ruptured. Claus von Stauffenberg, the man responsible for the bombing, leaves at the first sight of smoke under the assumption he succeeded in the assassination of sein Führer Hitler. Alas, Stauffenberg's failure results in his execution by firing squad sometime after midnight in the Bendlerblock Courtyard on the following day. Meanwhile, a one Generalfeldmarschall Erwin Rommel remains hospitalized from an unrelated event: a July 17<sup>th</sup> Allied aircraft siege on his staff car. Some hours later, he awakens from his injuries in the shock of the aftermath, but what was it that gave Herr Rommel pause and anguish about Stauffenberg's attempted coup?

Certainly, it is a point of contention as to what the facts of the situation are regarding Rommel's involvement. There is an unsurprising lack of documentation on the conspirators' coup as much of the evidence was destroyed, and subsequent reports vary on the basis of relevant parties' testimonies. Naturally, Rommel's loyalty to the National Socialist state is called into question, as well as his deteriorating relationship with Hitler. It would appear ubiquitous among historians alike that the Desert Fox—an epitaph he earned during campaigns in Northern Africa—had at least cursory knowledge of the above detailed assassination and opposed what he knew of it. Academically, that brings up a dichotomy of interest: Rommel, he the valiant Desert

Fox of chivalrous combat leading his clean Wehrmacht through the battlefields in Europe and Africa, and the Hitler obliged soldier obediently following orders who cannot be divorced from the Nazi reality of the atrocities committed by Himmler's Schutzstaffel. Sure enough, it is presented as much in Joseph Allen Campo's PhD dissertation titled, "Desert Fox or Hitler Favorite?..." which takes the position of the latter as it expands on the framework of an established mythology: that Rommel's legacy is one of speculation rooted in propaganda. That is to say, this mythos has created a rift in understanding. Campo's views are not far removed from other academics, as historian Daniel Allen Butler's biography *Field Marshal: The Life and Death of Erwin Rommel* exemplifies this idea as its primary thesis regarding Rommel's role in the July 20<sup>th</sup> coup—that he was largely ignorant and his own grievances with Hitler did not align with Stauffenberg's vision. The antithetical of course varies, as veteran historian Peter Hoffmann argues in his historical compendium *History of the German Resistance, 1933-1945* that Rommel was perfectly aware of Stauffenberg's aspirations and sought his own avenue of dealing with the problem: arresting der Führer. This position is echoed by war correspondent and journalist William Lawrence Shirer's compendium *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: A History of Nazi Germany* in which he details the correspondences between Rommel and his chief of staff Hans Speidel. Although much of the history of Field Marshal Rommel is speculative and there will never be an outright consensus on his role in the July 20<sup>th</sup> conspiracy party, it stands to reason through the available evidence that Herr Rommel was perfectly in the know about the July 20<sup>th</sup> conspirators' lofty aspirations, and had sought what he believed the best avenue of peace would be: having Hitler non-violently disposed.

While Rommel may have pledged fealty after Hitler's rise to power, it is of pertinence to expound on the paradigm the Field Marshal functioned on in order to possess an accurate understanding. Rommel held something of a naive attachment to Hitler, and trusted his judgments for a time, because the will of Germany was represented through der Führer, and the German people were paramount in Rommel's mind; it was to Germany that he swore his oath after all. Butler in his biography of the soldier reports the contents—an amalgamate—of Rommel's diary entries and letters in late 1942: that the Field Marshal had begun to describe Hitler as “‘crazy,' 'abnormal,' 'pathological,' and demoniac.’” (516). As the war turned sour, Rommel's fond attachment and trust turned into skepticism, fear, and distrust. The oath he swore to sein Führer would be the fundamental force in binding the newly christened Generalfeldmarschall to the NSDAP state. What worse was there to be than an eidesbrecher (oath crusher)? The fact of the matter is, as the war turned against the German people and Hitler began to lose sight of the bigger picture, as Rommel began to become aware of the increasing atrocities committed by the Schutzstaffel and soldiers alike, his loyalty dangled on a thin thread of honor that would be thrown into reproach in as little as 16 months. Butler however, would contend that this downward spiral of emotion would not align with the conspirators' interests. The thesis of the conspiratorial section of his book is that Rommel's involvement with the conspiracy was cursory at best, and that his own goals did not converge with Speidel or Stauffenberg's vision (518-9). He, for whatever reason, divorces Rommel's anger with Hitler's wartime leadership. Butler makes it abundantly clear that Rommel was furious—truly angry—at the state of affairs and what the soldiers as well as the German people were being put through. Rommel's letters and diaries all express blatant contempt at Adolf Hitler's decisions, his treatment of others, and his unwillingness to listen to his generals. That is what made Hitler

crazy to Rommel. Naturally, others such as Speidel and Stauffenberg had felt the same way. It is not unreasonable for birds of a feather to flock together, and when each party is angry over the same things, it becomes an unreasonable assertion to make, that each side veered independently of one another despite cross-contamination and illicit involvement with one another. This is made abundantly apparent as Butler himself also details a meeting between Rommel and General Heinrich Eberbach, in which Rommel confessed he wished to do away with Hitler (520). It stands to reason that, if two parties were to meet with the same aspirations, the question would not then be what or why, but rather when and how. And the latter is where the disagreement manifests. Rommel, Speidel, and Stauffenberg all wanted Hitler gone. But by what means?

The primary source that delineates much of the history of the conspirators' operation, as well as Rommel's involvement, is General Hans Speidel. Campo alleges that Speidel's testimonies and works are "unverifiable" and "romanticized". He goes onto opine that General Albert C. Wedemeyer, who had been known for publicly defending German army officers during a climate hostile to it, found Speidel to be incredulous and lacking in objectivity (199). It is not by any means an uncommon perspective for critics to view Speidel's *Invasion 1944* as romanticized, but the usage of General Wedemeyer as something of a sympathetic to the German military does not evidence the premise that *Invasion 1944* is filled with romantic pretext. It is an emotional appeal to point toward the man willing to listen to German soldiers in the aftermath, as if that sets him up as a proper barometer of truth. The General's reasons are his own, and that operates independent as to whether there is objectivity present. Similarly, the allegation of the testimony being unverifiable is only partially true, as it entirely ignores corroborating testimonies and sources.

Contrary to detractors such as Campo, it is not merely the testimony of Hans Speidel that links Rommel to the conspirators. It's June of 1944, and Herr Rommel was opposed to the assassination. But to be opposed to something one must know what that thing is. Hoffman in his seminal compendium detailing the German resistance elucidates this thing by virtue of Allen Dulles' wartime intelligence reports. On the 25<sup>th</sup> of June Rommel had opposed Stauffenberg's plan to assassinate Hitler (351). While it is not explicitly clear if Rommel was made aware of the assassination plot on the 25<sup>th</sup> of June, 1944, or if he had a posteriori knowledge, what is known is the fact that by June the 25<sup>th</sup> he indeed did have knowledge of the plot. And so there is a source independent of Speidel that reports on Rommel's knowledge of the conspirator's assassination plot. It is not questionable that Speidel had brought Herr Rommel into their group, but by evidencing a posteriori knowledge it becomes clear that Speidel's testimony is at least accurate on this particular convention. Additionally, there is the often forgot about Hans Berndt Gisevius, a military intelligence officer who was secretly opposed to Hitler throughout the war. During the postwar Nuremberg Trials, Gisevius testified before the court about Rommel's involvement. Historian Ralf Georg Reuth details this in his biography *Rommel: The End of a Legend*. He quotes Gisevius as saying that Rommel joined late into the coup's plans, and in the wake of his faltering military command suggested that not only Hitler be executed, but Goring and Himmler as well (179). Truly, Gisevius's testimony is an oddity due to its unique claims of desired violence. Much of the plans and paperwork, and those involved, were destroyed. And so, it becomes a question of whether the testimony presented was the direct result of correspondences in some regard between Gisevius and Rommel, or a game of telephone that may have distorted the original meaning. It becomes apparent relatively quickly the more one digs into this niche excavation site, that while Speidel's testimonies are invaluable, they are not all that is presented

in the discourse. A certain truth stands out, however, that Rommel was brought into the conspiracy late—by Speidel sometime after joining him as chief of staff in April of 1944. Then there is the fact that Rommel was made aware of the assassination plot some months later. If Rommel's loyalty had deteriorated in der Führer so much so by the winter of 1942, and he was made aware of the assassination plot by summer of 1944, then it becomes pertinent to assess his replete actions following his initial involvement. Did Rommel desire to kill Hitler, Goring and Himmler? It would seem the jury is still out on that one.

But what the jury is not out on is the corroborating evidence that Rommel at the least endorsed a non-violent disposal of Hitler himself. Shirer pieces together a narrative using Karl Strölin's Nuremberg testimony, and Speidel's book *Invasion 1944* among others. Strölin had met with Rommel sometime toward the end of February 1942, and the two conversed about the idea of Hitler being non-violently abdicated from his position. This is later echoed by General Speidel as he set up a meeting to overthrow the National Socialist regime on May the 15<sup>th</sup> between Rommel, himself, and General Carl-Heinrich Rudolf Wilhelm von Stülpnagel. Despite Rommel's agreement, he would report to his superior Field Marshal von Rundstedt, who would find himself agreeing with the conspiracy (1032). Rommel is claimed by both Stülpnagel and Speidel to have resisted the idea of assassination, but instead supported a non-violent upheaval of the Deutschland Führer. In turn, this contradicts the narrative presented by Gisevius. It can be assumed this is a result of the heavy social stigma surrounding the nature of being an eidesbrecher, but at the same time, it does not preclude Rommel's affectations nor the idea of precarious foundation that may have changed two months later in July. While it can be said that perhaps Rommel may have supported assassination at some point, the available evidence would suggest that as far as the month of May goes, he did not support the idea. Combined with his

continuing disapproval of Hitler's leadership over the war, the likelihood of Rommel supporting a non-violent coup seems increasingly the most probable outcome.

Of course, not everyone arrived at the same conclusions, as there is an antithetical position that posits Rommel's loyalty to Hitler remained steadfast. Reuth not only claims that Rommel was not involved in the conspiracy, but his involvement was not assumed. And similarly Rommel was furious at the assassination attempt and condemned the likes of Caesar von Hofacker and Stauffenberg (181). The basis of Reuth's narrative focuses on an unspecified letter Rommel wrote to his wife Lucy; however, this letter remains unsourced. It would seem that Reuth either skimmed out on doing adequate research or took the nature of this letter for granted. Regardless, perhaps a better recounting of the events is presented in Major-General (Retired) David Fraser's biography *Knight's Cross: A Life of Field Marshall Erwin Rommel* in which he details what may be the aforementioned letter to Rommel's wife wherein he is thankful that the coup failed. It is reasoned by Fraser that this may have been done as "a matter of survival" (524), which makes sense given the possibility that a lack of reaction—a lack of dramatic reaction against the coup—would be rather suspicious. Furthermore, Reuth's claims about Rommel's indignation toward the conspirators are also disrupted by Fraser: Rommel did not in fact condemn the likes of Stauffenberg and his compatriots, but rather applauded their courage and was painfully personally grieved by their deaths, which is revealed through letters to his son, Manfred. Additionally, most of his ire would be focused on the "amateur plotting" of such a dangerous and complex task (528). And so clarity is shone by virtue of Rommel's letters to his son where he expresses sorrow for his fellow officers, but least of all does not condemn in the way that Reuth asserts. And his shock is derived from a letter to his wife, which may well be entirely contrived. That is likely the source of Rommel's pause and anguish in the hospital upon being informed

about the failed assassination attempt. This is also notwithstanding that, on the off-chance the that portion of the letter were not contrived, continued opposition to the assassination itself would not designate Rommel as having not supported a non-violent removal of the Supreme Commander.

His name is Erwin Rommel. Witness him as he sits in the backseat of a Third Reich sedan. He wears a leather jacket from his time as leader of the Afrika Korps and clutches his field marshal's baton. Taking a breath, he pulls out a small rounded brown capsule. A couple of minutes later General Burgdorf returns to the car with General Maisel. Rommel is hunched over—dead. Until the very end he proclaimed his innocence in Stauffenberg, in Speidel, in Hofacker's conspiracy. Perhaps Rommel was innocent, perhaps his knowledge of the coup was that of a misunderstanding. Or Perhaps Herr Rommel was well aware of the plan as the evidence seems to show. One thing remains clear in this speculative mist—der Führer had fallen out of the Generalfieldmarshal's favor. So much so that it seems his patriotism, his righteous indignation, his own brand of nationalism without the socialist flourishes, would gestate a desire for a better Germany. And a better Fatherland would neither see nor need the necessity of a rotzbremse faced megalomaniac. In the end, Rommel would not support the creation of a martyr that may have sparked a civil war, but instead the non-violent abdication of a weakening and pathologically deranged Adolf Hitler



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