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Codebreakers solve Hitler bomb riddle

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THE fate of one of the plotters who tried to kill Adolf Hitler has been discovered by two amateur code-breakers who have deciphered a series of German army Enigma messages 60 years after they were sent.

The code-breakers have found proof that General Friedrich von Rabenau was assassinated, probably by SS Hauptsturmführer Kurt Stawitzki, a Gestapo chief.

Von Rabenau had been one of the senior army officers who conspired to kill Hitler by planting a bomb at his eastern headquarters in east Prussia on July 20, 1944. Hitler survived and wreaked revenge on the plotters, ordering eight to be hung from meat hooks.

However, there has always been doubt about what happened to von Rabenau other than that he was believed to have been executed at Flossenbürg concentration camp near Weiden, close to the German-Czech border.

This has now been confirmed by Geoff Sullivan, a software engineer from Redditch, Worcestershire, and his friend Frode Weierud, a Norwegian electrical engineer.

They had been working on hundreds of previously unbroken messages sent by the Nazis using the Enigma code when they came across one by Stawitzki, chief of the Gestapo in Lemberg.

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They broke the codes using the “hill climb” technique — taking a random starting point and looking for words or word fragments in the results, then giving this a score for accuracy. After up to 3,000 trial decrypts (which takes about 60 hours) a message can usually be read.

Such was the secrecy surrounding the murder of von Rabenau that even when decrypted, the message disguised his death, making it appear that he had been killed by an American bomb attack.

The message, dated April 15, 1945, specified that it should be passed by hand to Heinrich Müller, the Gestapo chief. It says: “To inform through messenger and immediate announcement to RSHA Gruppenführer Müller in person. Rabenau mortally injured by American low flying airplane attack while on the way to here.”

There is documentary evidence to show that Müller ordered executions of prominent people be reported in this way. Stawitzki, as the messenger, is most likely to have carried out the execution, probably by shooting.

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