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Reinhard Heydrich Biography

The First In-depth Look at a Nazi 'God of Death'

By *Georg Bönisch*

As the chair of the Wannsee Conference and head of the Reich Main Security Office, Reinhard Heydrich was the personification of the cruelest aspects of Nazi Germany. But the first scholarly biography of him finds that a combination of shame, love and luck -- rather than purely inherent evil -- led him to pursue a path of Nazi terror.

The site for the assassination was carefully chosen at a point where a steeply sloping street in Prague's Libe district made a hairpin turn, forcing approaching cars to slow down considerably. This is precisely what the driver of a heavy convertible Mercedes did as his vehicle climbed toward the curve at approximately 10:30 a.m. on May 27, 1942.

Behind the driver sat his boss, one of Adolf Hitler's most devoted followers. The man was a veritable Aryan poster boy, tall, blonde and blue-eyed, the ideal image of an SS leader. He was also the person whom one British officer referred to as the "mastermind."

That man was none other than Reinhard Heydrich, chief of the Reich Main Security Office (RSHA), the body charged with fighting all "enemies of the Reich" within and outside German borders, and one of the principle organizers of the Holocaust. Just months earlier, he had chaired the Wannsee Conference in Berlin, during which plans for the murder of what would turn out to be approximately 6 million people were discussed.

At the same time, another one of Heydrich's official positions was that of deputy protector of Bohemia and Moravia, two regions in today's Czech Republic, where he ruled with an iron fist. In the weeks after he arrived there in 1941, Heydrich ordered more than 400 people killed because he needed his "quiet space."

This and similar orders were what motivated the assassins lying in wait at the curve ahead. One man raised his submachine gun and pulled the trigger, but the gun jammed. Heydrich, who never traveled with a protective detail, drew his own gun and attempted to return fire. But, at that point, a grenade thrown by the second assassin exploded, sending shrapnel into the car's seats and Heydrich's abdomen. He would die from his wounds eight days later at the age of 38.

A Monster Born or Made?

The attack on Heydrich would be the only successful assassination of a high-ranking Nazi functionary during the party's 12-year rule.

This fact alone guaranteed that Heydrich's life would be often depicted in films and books. Still, until now, almost 70 years after Heydrich's death, there has never been a serious biography of this cold-blooded architect of mass murder that met high scholarly standards. German historian Robert Gerwarth has stepped in to meet this need. His new biography of Heydrich, currently available only in German, boasts astonishing findings and an interpretation that will advance the state of research on Nazi criminals.

Gerwarth, a professor of history at University College Dublin, doesn't see Heydrich as having been a fanatic and anti-Semite from the start. He doesn't believe that Heydrich -- this man who inspired such fear among his subordinates that they followed his every order without question -- was born what Swiss diplomat Carl J. Burckhardt called a "young, evil god of death." He also feels this view

was popular in postwar Germany because it made it easier for others to shift their own guilt onto the conveniently dead Heydrich.

Heydrich was at first more apolitical and insecure, Gerwarth writes, and he didn't radicalize until joining the SS. This sets him apart from other members of the "uncompromising generation," the phrase Berlin-based historian Michael Wildt uses to describe the faithful followers of Hitler whose views were shaped by Germany's defeat in World War I, the postwar revolution and the chaos of the Weimar Republic. These men, Wildt says, were convinced they were subject to "neither regulating norms nor any sort of moral code."

Unlike the other members of this generation, Gerwarth believes Heydrich became a part of Hitler's Nazi Party and annihilation machine in an almost bizarre fashion: through the influence of his fiancée, a fervent National Socialist.

Reinhard Tristan Eugen Heydrich was originally supposed to follow his father's footsteps into a career in music. At least that was the wish of his father, Bruno Heydrich, the director of a conservatory and a composer of obscure operas. Although musically talented, Reinhard preferred to pursue his athletic talents. After finishing secondary school, he joined the Navy with the dream of rising in the ranks to become an admiral.

Neither an Officer Nor a Gentleman

That career ended abruptly in 1931 at the rank of first lieutenant. A year earlier, Heydrich had gotten engaged to a 19-year-old woman named Lina von Osten. He informed another girlfriend that he was breaking things off with her by merely sending her a copy of his engagement announcement.

This girlfriend's father was so outraged by Heydrich's behavior that he asked the Navy's court of honor to step in. The head of the Navy, Admiral Erich Raeder, determined that Heydrich's conduct had been "unbecoming" an officer, and Heydrich was cashiered on April 30, 1931. Although he had forfeited his right to a pension, he would receive a temporary allowance of 200 reichsmarks per month for two years. Consumed with self-pity, Gerwarth writes, Heydrich locked himself in his room and cried for days.

He did receive positive references from his supervisors praising his "dependable" nature and "serious notion of duty." Indeed, despite dire economic circumstances, Gerwarth writes, he could have found a lucrative job, such as one as a sailing instructor at a yachting school. But Heydrich rejected such possibilities, saying he didn't want to become a "sailing servant to the children of the rich." The reality, his biographer says, is that he "couldn't come to terms with the loss of his social status as an officer."

Guiding Forces

Instead, Heydrich turned to his fiancée as a steadying force. Lina von Osten made no secret of her political convictions, which were highly sympathetic to the Nazi Party and its anti-Semitic views. "We felt provoked by the Jews," she wrote in the 1970s, "and we felt that we simply had to hate them."

In fact, in the first weeks of their acquaintance, Lina was upset when she learned Heydrich had never read Hitler's "Mein Kampf." She was even less fond of the way he made fun of the Nazi Party, its leaders (who he derided as "privates from Bohemia") and the "crippled public speaker Goebbels."

Although Gerwarth concludes that the influence Lina von Osten and her parents had on Heydrich can "hardly be overstated" and that it served as a "political awakening" for him, he still finds that the key influences ultimately came from Heydrich's own mother, who pushed him to throw his lot in with Hitler's party, and his godmother, who was able to provide the necessary connections.

Both Heydrich's mother and fiancée thought a position in the party would be fitting for him, but Heydrich was hesitant at first. If he was going to do it, he wanted one of the "leadership positions" that were available only in Heinrich Himmler's small but elite SS. Although it was the most radical paramilitary group within the Nazi movement, the SS was at that time still under the supervision of the far more powerful SA, or Sturmabteilung, whose members were known as the "brownshirts."

A Fortuitous Start

The fact that Heydrich gave in to the pressure, Gerwarth concludes, can be attributed less to "deep ideological conviction" than to his desire to find a way back into "a structured life in uniform" that could help win back the trust of his beloved.

Still, before taking a position in the SS, Heydrich would first have to join the Nazi Party. He soon did so, becoming member number 544,916. On June 14, 1931, Himmler met with him under the impression that Heydrich had been a high-ranking intelligence official at the Navy's main Baltic Sea base.

At the time, Himmler was looking for someone who could set up a spy network for the SS and, by extension, the Nazi Party. Himmler gave him 20 minutes to outline an organizational plan for a future counter-intelligence service. Although the only related experience Heydrich had came from his work as a radio operator, he embraced the challenge, throwing together everything he'd read in detective and spy stories as a boy and "putting his ideas down on paper in the military jargon he was familiar with," as Gerwarth puts it.

The Sudden End of a Shooting Star of Terror

Himmler was thrilled with the result and made Heydrich the head of his "Ic-Dienst," which would go on to become the SD, the intelligence agency of the SS and the Nazi Party. Heydrich's fiancée, whom he married soon afterward, would write of that day that it was "the finest hour of my life, of our life."

Heydrich's starting monthly salary of only 180 reichmarks was considerably lower than that of a skilled laborer. But he placed more value on having a chance to participate in a national revolutionary movement that rejected the political system of the day, which he had come to hold fundamentally responsible for destroying his previous middle-class existence. He was also sure this would be the way to suitably impress Lina von Osten's family.

Heydrich became a shooting star within the movement, the man who would do the dirty work. He rose to be head of the SD, the Bavarian political police and the Prussian Gestapo, or secret police. At 35, he was the head the Reich Main Security Office, the state authority whose reign of terror and oppression ensured the Nazis' absolute control -- and which also planned the Holocaust.

Immediately following Heydrich's assassination, the Nazis avenged one of their most willing executioners by leveling two Czech towns, Lidice and Ležáky. Thousands of their residents were either killed or dragged off to concentration camps.

Translated from the German by Ella Ornstein

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