



# The Killing of Reinhard Heydrich: The SS Butcher of Prague

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## **The Killing of Reinhard Heydrich: The SS Butcher of Prague** Callum A. MacDonald

If anyone warranted assassination during World War II, the man to know was Reinhard Heydrich (1904–1942)—chief of the security police, rabid anti-Semite, architect of the Final Solution, ruthless overlord of Nazi-occupied Czechoslovakia, and Hitler's most likely successor. In 1941, at the height of the Nazi's seeming invincibility, the Czech government-in-exile launched a desperate operation to kill Heydrich. From the assassins' training in England to their Thermopylae-like last stand in the flooded crypt of a Prague church, and the Nazi's savage reprisals (including the obliteration of two villages), *The Killing of Reinhard Heydrich* brilliantly recounts one of World War II's most daring and tragic missions.

## **The Killing of Reinhard Heydrich: The SS Butcher of Prague Details**

Date : Published August 22nd 1998 by Da Capo Press (first published March 1st 1989)

ISBN : 9780306808609

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Format : Paperback 239 pages

Genre : History, Nonfiction, War, World War II, Military, Military History

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Callum A. MacDonald**

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## From Reader Review The Killing of Reinhard Heydrich: The SS Butcher of Prague for online ebook

### Lewis Weinstein says

A fact-filled, well-organized presentation of the events leading up to, during, and after the assassination in Czechoslovakia of one of the most powerful and repulsive of the Nazi leaders. The depiction of the actual assassination reads like thriller.

... a Czech man who worked inside the Hradcany Castle PS a new through the window each night containing details of Heydrich's movements and whether or not he had been accompanied by an escort

... Heydrich rode in the front of the car with the chauffeur ... the back seat was empty ... there was no escort ... at 10:32 Valcik signalled ... as the car slowed, Gabcik raised the sten and pulled the trigger at point blank range ... it failed to fire

... instead of speeding away, Heydrich ordered the car to stop, not seeing Kubis ... Kubis threw the bomb which exploded against the rear wheel, throwing shrapnel back on him and also into the car and Heydrich

... Heydrich and the driver jumped out ... drew their pistols... chased Gabcik and Kubis, both of whom escaped

... Heydrich staggered and fell against his wrecked car ... a woman commandeered a small truck ... He was loaded in and taken to the Bulkova hospital ... his external wounds were cleaned ... but an x-ray revealed internal injuries including splinters from the bomb or the car in his spleen

... Heydrich's condition deteriorated ... doctors chose not to remove the infected spleen ... treated with drugs (an early versin of sulphanomide)

... in retaliation, thousands of Jews were taken off to extermination ... but this was not enough for Hitler ... the small village of Lidice was selected and destroyed

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### Ruth says

Heydrich is really a secondary character in this book, which focuses on the complex relationships among different groups and individuals vying for different ideologies, various outcomes for post-war Czechoslovakia, and individual or organizational advancement. The exciting "action" parts of the book are surrounded with a lot of dry (though necessary) background information, examination of people's thoughts and motives, and relating their conversations and correspondence.

I was already somewhat familiar with the intra-Nazi rivalries of SS, regular military, Prussian officers, SA, and Gestapo, and so weiter. Honestly, in this section it was hard to keep track of which group was which, and who the non-famous characters were. It simultaneously seemed too long (because boring) and too short (because lacking memorable narratives).

What was more interesting to me, both because of its more detailed examination, but also because more was riding on the outcomes, was the interplay of interests, ideologies and control of information among Czech and other allied factions: Moravec and the Czech intelligence service in exile, British and Soviet military intelligence, Benes and those who rivaled him for recognition as the Czech government in exile, the Czechs serving in the Nazis' puppet government, the Czech exile spies parachuted back to their homeland by the British SOE program, and the Czech underground resistance.

Some day I'd like to find a similar book that focuses on the Sudeten Germans, who were on the one hand looked down on as bumpkins by "real" Germans, but on the other hand championed by them as members of the Volk sadly cut off and oppressed by being part of Czechoslovakia. No doubt the Sudeten Germans were accustomed to think of themselves as superior to Slavs (or at least deserving of superior lives), first by the Austro-Hungarian government and later by Nazi rule. But did the group as a whole really buy into Nazi ideology? Did they really have to be ethnically cleansed from post-war Czechoslovakia for the sake of peace? What happened to them afterwards--did they all end up in East Germany? Oskar Schindler was a Sudeten German, for what that's worth.

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### **Pete daPixie says**

On my last full day of a visit to Prague I visited the Karel Boromejsky church and the crypt where the Heydrich assassins and other Czech parachutists were discovered and surrounded by S.S. and Gestapo troops in 1942, some of the agents were killed and the remainder chose suicide rather than be captured. The crypt of the church remains more or less how it was, with the walls riddled with bullet holes and monuments dedicated to the men. MacDonald's book was on sale at the church.

'The Assassination of Reinhard Heydrich' is a very poignant and fascinating read, that I couldn't put down from start to finish, without doubt inspired by my visit to the place where these events culminated. My final day in Prague was the 7th of March, which I discovered in some strange coincidence was Heydrich's birth date.

The author's research is extensive and thorough in providing not just a fully comprehensive biographical background of Heydrich's life, his warped character and rise to the Nazi hierarchy, but also the political situation of Czechoslovakia, both before and after Munich, and the full military careers of the S.O.E. trained parachutists, the Czech military in exile in England and their machinations surrounding Operation Anthropoid, and the very dangerous and brave insertion of these agents back into their homeland. The story is one of gripping suspense throughout that climbs to a crescendo to the 4th of June 1942 with the killing of the 'butcher of Prague'.

I have long been interested in political assassinations and find Heydrich's demise to be a rather accurate template for Kennedy's killing in Dallas just over twenty years later. Both victims were passengers in open topped vehicles, both cars had to slow down to round a corner, both actions involved assassins in a cross fire and "Gabcik, with the coat draped casually over his arm, crossed the street and stood beneath a small grassy knoll near a tram stop, waiting for Valcik's signal." The narrative then describes how Heydrich, instead of ordering the driver to accelerate out of the ambush, yelled at his driver to stop, what many witnesses on Elm Street describe the presidential limo as doing prior to the fatal head shot.

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### **Bill Kerwin says**

Heydrich's assassination has interested me for years, ever since I first saw Fritz Lang and Bertolt Brecht's great propaganda film, "Hangmen Also Die," that tells the story of how the Czech underground not only

carried out this extremely high-profile assassination, but also--through heroism and solidarity--managed to conceal the identity of the assassin in spite of threats, torture and retaliatory executions.

The real story is quite different. The actual assassins were expatriate Czech soldiers supported by the Czech government-in-exile, trained in weaponry and assassination techniques by the British. The native underground--far from supporting their effort--argued against this operation, fearing--rightly, as it turned out--that such an act would elicit serious reprisals. The government-in-exile, although acknowledging this danger, was desperately eager to establish its usefulness in the war effort, believing that good relationships with both Britain and the USSR was essential to ensuring a place at the peace talks and once again establishing an independent Czech Republic.

Despite an excellent opportunity (Heydrich always rode in an open car to demonstrate his contempt for the Czech resistance), the assassins botched the job: a sten gun jammed, a grenade lobbed toward the open car missed its mark (damaging the door and seat of the Mercedes), and Heydrich took out his revolver and began to pursue his would-be assassins. It turned out, however, that the shrapnel (pieces of wire and horsehair from the seat) had pierced Heydrich's spleen, and he died of infection some days later.

The assassins went underground, and the fearful reprisals began, including the immediate transportation of 3000 Jews to concentration camps and the leveling of two Czech villages. The Nazi offered a reward, enticed an informer, and the assassins were tracked to their hiding place in the crypt of an Orthodox church. There heroic resistance lasted for hours, but eventually they ran out of ammunition and used their last bullets to kill themselves.

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### **Erik Graff says**

Reinhard Tristan Eugen Heydrich (7 March 1904–4 June 1942) was a prime example of the kind of fanatical devotion that Adolf Hitler sought in his underlings and an early architect of the final solution. This account is unsympathetic. A sympathetic account would be, after reading this, difficult to imagine.

A movie was made of the Heydrich assassination, Operation Daybreak, which I saw on television around 1975.

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### **S. says**

The best thing about this book, and all WWII books, is that WWII ends! It ends, and they string those evil mothers up from the lampposts and light their sorry asses on fire! I love that part.

This was an interesting book focusing on the 1942 assassination of Heydrich, a true monster. It is quite detailed and somewhat slow through the first half, but finally the parachutists land and the story aspect of this history gains speed and drama.

A good book for anyone with more than a passing interest in WWII.

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### **Tom says**

An excellent piece of research on the 'Butcher of Prague', detailing his early years and one possible root of his anti-Semitism, his supposed Jewish roots, to his beginnings in the navy all the way through his blood-drenched career in the SS up to his assassination and the aftermath.

A large part of the book also focusses on the role that Beneš and the exiled Czechoslovakian government in London played in the operation and the various behind-the-scenes involvement of the British, the US and the Russians in the plot as well as the brave individuals who carried it out.

Very readable, recommended to anyone who studies the Third Reich or just the interested layman.

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## **Matti Karjalainen says**

Laurent Binetin "HHhH" ja Terhi Rannelan Frau -romaanit saivat minut kiinnostumaan Reinhard Heydrichin salamurhasta, ja niinpä tulin hankkineeksi Prahán-reissultani tämän tietopokkarin. Faktapohja oli ymmärtääkseni molemmissa edellämämainituissa hyvin kohdillaan, mutta ainahan sitä voi oppia jotain lisää!

Callum MacDonalidin "The Assassination of Reinhard Heydrich" osoittautuikin päteväksi ja selkeäksi yleisesitykseksi, jossa kuvattiin napakasti niin Prahán pyövelinä tunnetun natsijohtajan elämänvaiheita kuin hänen salamurhaansa johtanutta Operaatio Anthropoidia.

Mielenkiintoista oli saada myös lisävalotusta kansallissosialistisen puolueen kulisseissa käytyyn valtataisteluun ja siihen suurvaltapoliittiseen peliin, jota miehitystä paenneet tsekkoslovakialaiset poliitikot joutuivat käymään pitäkseen hengissä toiveita maansa selviämisestä sodanjälkeisessä maailmassa.

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## **Eric\_W says**

Buried to the strains of Siegfried's Death March, more than a few people were quite relieved at the death of this hated man. Heydrich was a man feared by just about everyone, including his fellow Nazis. Much like J. Edgar Hoover, he was known to keep a dossier on everyone, and as head of SS intelligence and the secret police was well-placed to use it to his advantage. Killed by a couple of Czechs, the author documents the murder had less to do with British intelligence than Czech resistance and rooted in the political needs of the Czech president in exile.

Born into a family that suffered during the depression following World War I, Heydrich began his rise through the Navy where he excelled in languages and seemed to fit right in although he was bullied for his high voice and introverted ways. He was kicked out of the Navy thanks to an incident with a well-connected woman (he was a notorious womaniser), so he joined the ranks of Himmler's SicherheitsDienst (SD) the intelligence section of the SS. It was a perfect match and his rise was meteoric.

Heydrich had been sent to Prague to boost armaments production by the Czechs. The previous Reichs Protector, Neurath, was relieved of his duties in late 1941. Heydrich was assassinated barely 8 months later. The resistance had originally intended to use assault weapons, but they jammed so they threw a grenade which wounded Heydrich severely and he died of sepsis..

Considered exceptionally intelligent, hard-working, ambitious and totally amoral, Heydrich had achieved his rise to the top of the SS by mercilessly crushing his enemies and by creating the "Final Solution" for Hitler's plan to destroy all Jews. By putting him in charge of Bohemia and Moravia the Czechs would soon learn

what it meant to live under a master of suppression. Heydrich's plan was to use the "carrot and stick" approach, increasing food supplies to reduce the power of the resistance on the one hand, and on the other dealing ruthlessly with any opposition.

Both sides, as is so common, were driven by political needs. Heydrich wanted to combat the rising power of Martin Bormann, and to do so he needed to successfully convert the Protectorate into an SS state thus accruing more power to the SS. Benes needed to prove that the Czech people opposed the Nazis, who, he suspected were still seen by many in Britain as a bulwark against Russian imperialism and power. That many ordinary people got caught in the political crossfire bothered few except perhaps the families of those killed.

Those on the ground in Czechoslovakia in the resistance, when they heard about the proposed assassination were horrified and argued with London that it would have disastrous consequences for the resistance and thousands of innocent people who would be swept up and killed as reprisal with little to show for it. Anton Heidrich (more irony), a high ranking resistance officer, sent a message to London requesting the operation be called off, although the message they received did include a note at the end saying if the assassination was deemed absolutely necessary to the national interest they were willing to make the sacrifice (other people's lives are always easy to sacrifice.)

It's hardly a spoiler to reveal that Heydrich died following an almost bungled assassination. The reprisals that followed killed many innocent people. The book does a terrific job at portraying the multiple agendas of all those involved and the details of the assorted plots.

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## **Martina says**

Smartly written recap. Thumbs up. Absolutely enjoyed it.

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## **John says**

Overall this is an interesting book but the assassination only takes up 30 - 40 pages at the end of the book. Much of the book covers Heydrich's rise to power and his plans for gathering even more powers for himself and his SS. Another large portion of the book involves the Czech government in exile and its efforts to keep the Allies on its side and prevent the communists back home from being in a position to take power once the war is over. Lots of political intrigue! I enjoyed it because it was a bit of WW2 history I knew very little about.

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## **Martin Roberts says**

Horribly fascinating in its depiction of how Nazism and war turned an ordinary but repugnant man into a mass murderer who subjected a whole country to a personal rule of terror, had his eyes on the rest of occupied Europe and set the wheels of genocide in motion. Furthermore, it is always chilling to see that what the Nazis had in mind for Europe -- and indeed, anywhere else they might conquer -- was even worse than the mind-boggling evil they actually committed.

Also fascinating in its description of the complex webs of intrigue in which "Reichsprotektor" Heydrich and Czechoslovak President in Exile Benes both moved, without which it is impossible to tell the full story

behind the assassination. The planning and haphazard execution were no less complex, as well as moving, as is the discussion of the very mixed benefits which the Czechoslovak people drew from the slaying. Incidentally, I was dismayed to read the Heydrich's widow drew a pension after the war and ran a hotel, at which many former SS officers were always welcome.

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### **Stacey Jones says**

We bought this book in Prague the evening after we had visited the church where the Czech paratrooper assassins died, and so we decided to read it aloud together once we had returned home. I had read about the plot to kill Heydrich in Madeleine Albright's book Prague Winter, and I was eager to learn all I could about this historic event.

The book begins with deep background of Heydrich himself, tracing his biography to his childhood in Germany, and his military career to his time in Prague. It was comprehensive, I thought, but not tedious. The language is objective, but the reader can find nothing in these pages to sympathize with this butcher; and his wife seems like no prize, either! These were cruel people, successful climbers in a murderous military regime.

MacDonald also gives a very detailed description of the Czech operation, run by the government in exile in London, as well as the context of other such missions during the war, which was very instructive.

I found the pages in which the assassination occurs to be riveting, and even though I knew the "ending," I was glued to the book through the end. The Nazis' cruel reprisals are also recounted, and though horrifying, it is a relevant part of the history of the missions, and should be part of the question of what the assassination accomplished and what it cost.

I recommend this book to anyone interested in World War II or in Czech history.

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### **Dan Van says**

An account of the assassination of one of the most notorious Nazis during World War 2 by the Czech resistance. The book paints a chilling portrait of The Butcher of Prague, and the details of how the Nazi party rose to power in the 30's are still relevant today, as events around the world keep repeating - the dismantling of the free press, propagation of lies aimed at discrediting any opposition and finally mass murder.

There is a LOT of detail crammed into this book, from the machinations of the Czech government in exile in England during the war, through to operation of the resistance in occupied Europe. Macdonald paints a vivid picture of the brave men who fought against Nazi oppression, sometimes for misguided aims and often with tragic results, but whose actions need to be remembered and commemorated now more than ever

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### **Nathaniel says**

Fascinating coverage of the career and assassination of a particularly ambitious and vicious Nazi official

whom barely anyone has heard of today. This book makes one realize not only how many hundreds of lives in central Europe may have been saved by Heydrich's death but how far Heydrich's continued existence could have gone toward helping Hitler win the war. The success of Heydrich's assassination also caused Hitler himself to become more paranoid, wasting significant resources on security of top Nazi officials and arguably may have contributed to the deterioration of his mental state and the increasingly erratic command decisions that resulted.

With that said, this book does have its problems. The first part is about Heydrich's rise to power within the regime, from a German perspective, and the second part is about the operation to assassinate him, from a British perspective. These two parts are rather disjointed from each other. The book's greatest flaw, however, is its very stiff and impersonal tone. I understand that this is how historians of MacDonald's generation wrote, especially in the British tradition, but it still gives the sense that you're reading about history in the third person rather than watching a real story come alive in the way that the best historians are able to accomplish.

If the tone doesn't put you off, however, this is probably one of the better books written about Heydrich, a figure who otherwise doesn't get much historical coverage despite the importance of his role in the Nazi regime. The author himself died in 1996 and most of his sources died long before that, so the historical value of books such as these is only likely to increase with time.

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