

# The Killing of SS-Obergruppenfuhrer Reinhard Heydrich

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- **The Killing of SS-Obergruppenfuhrer Reinhard Heydrich**  
Callum MacDonald (Macmillan, 1989, viii + 239 pp.)
- **In the Name of the Volk. Political Justice in Hitler's Germany**  
H.W. Koch (I.B. Tauris, 1989, xv + 325 pp.)

'Operation Anthropoid' was an apt codename for the termination of Reinhard Heydrich, of a life devoid of a coherent moral centre and devoted to destruction on a scale beyond human comprehension. 'A living card index, a brain which held all the threads and wove them altogether', was Himmler's astute comment on Heydrich; architect of the SD, Chief of the Reich Security Main Office, Reich Protector in Bohemia and Moravia, and the co-ordinating intelligence behind the 'Final Solution of the Jewish Question'. He created nothing except fear. In control, he stalked his prey with the single-mindedness of a predatory animal; out of control, away from his Nazi model family, he terrorised prostitutes in a drunken frenzy.

Finally, however, Heydrich's flamboyant recklessness and boundless contempt for humanity was his undoing. His conviction that he had cowed the Czechs through a combination of terror and sectoral economic pay-offs, and his refusal to show fear to the conquered, led him to take risks with his own security. One May morning, he set off for work in Prague in an open Mercedes tourer. Rounding a bend, he spotted a man trying, vainly, to shoot him with a malfunctioning sten-gun. Klein the driver was told to stop, Heydrich prepared to engage the assassin, and a bomb thrown by a second, unseen, assailant sent fragments of upholstery and wire into his spleen. He died in hospital a week later. Few people, not least the Nazi leaders who spoke fulsomely at his funeral, were sorry to see him go. They 'avenged' him, however, through the murders at Lidice and the eponymous 'Aktion Reinhard' which consumed the lives of 1.7 million Jews.

Callum MacDonald's account of the assassination combines the pace and technical precision of reportage, with the background analysis one would expect of an academic historian of the Korean War and Munich. He is an excellent guide to the complexities of Czech exile politics and to the considerations which resulted in the assassination. Put briefly, President Benes had hoped to make the main Czech contribution to the Allied war effort in the field of intelligence. When Heydrich finally caught up with the Abwehr agent 'A-54' he paradoxically signed his own death warrant. With the Russians furious about both the output of Czech arms factories and collaboration between the puppet regime in Prague and their Nazi masters, the pressure mounted on Benes to engineer a spectacular act of Czech 'resistance'. Despite the opposition of the severely decimated Czech underground, a team of SOE-trained parachutists went into action after five-months of living underground in safe houses. Two tough, highly motivated and disciplined NCOs carried out their orders to the letter. Subsequently betrayed by another agent, who walked into Gestapo headquarters, the assassins finally committed suicide after a protracted gun battle with 700 Waffen-SS troops in the flooded crypt of an Orthodox church.

The Nazi's murderous response at Lidice and Lezaky redressed the position Benes had lost with the exposure of 'A-54': the British finally repudiated Munich, and along with the Russians, washed their hands of the Sudeten Germans in any post-war settlement. The Nazi leadership moved a step closer to Nuremberg and the gallows.

After 1945, Benes denied all connection with 'Anthropoid', a position soon emulated by the Communists who expunged their earlier enthusiasm from the historical record. The assassins, Kubis and Gabcik, are commemorated by a simple plaque in Leamington Spa, MacDonald's home town. It is a gripping story of hubris, heroism, and betrayal, which the author has reconstructed from recently available documents, in a sparse and unpretentious fashion.

Like Heydrich, Roland Freisler, a central figure in H.W. Koch's survey of 'justice' in Nazi Germany, evaded an

appointment with the Allied hangmen, in his case through being crushed by falling masonry during a bombing raid. A lawyer who specialised in political cases, Freisler hitched his robe to Hitler's wagon in 1925, becoming Secretary of State in the Reich Ministry of Justice on April 1st, 1934, and from 1942, President of the court he had been instrumental in creating, the Volksgerichtshof, or 'People's Court'.

Freisler was one of many educated professionals who voluntarily and enthusiastically prostituted their training in the service of the Nazi regime. This was an uphill task for lawyers and judges, for despite their willingness to, for example, sentence 'gypsies' to death for stealing a bicycle, or to convict people for 'Rassenschande', Hitler fundamentally despised their whole profession. What he expected of the courts was made clear on September 25th, 1930, when he said; 'May I assure you that when our movement in the course of a legal struggle comes to power, then a German State Court will come, November 1918 will find its revenge and then heads will roll'.

Try as the German judiciary did to oblige him, the odd acquittal or moderate sentence resulted in ferocious denunciations of which this is the most notorious: 'I expect the German judiciary to understand that the nation does not exist for the judiciary but the judiciary for the nation, that is to say that the whole world, including Germany, is not to be blown to smithereens just in order that a formal law can exist, but that Germany must live on, however much the formalities of the judiciary may be in contradiction with this'.

The 'People's Court' was created to iron out the sort of embarrassments which had occurred during the Reichstag fire trial in 1934. It specialised in cases of 'treason' which meant any action or intention directed against Party or State, including such 'crimes' as listening to foreign radio stations. Among its victims were a Berlin artisan sentenced to death for describing Hitler as the greatest butcher in history, and a Wiesbaden interior decorator who had imputed that Hitler's real name was 'Schuttelgruber'.

Although the author of this study is almost hyper-sonically sensitive to what, slight, evidence there might be that Roland Freisler and his colleagues sometimes acted 'judiciously', assiduously revising the number of death sentences passed by the VGH to 12,891 (!), which 'will never be conclusively verified', his lack of imaginative sympathy for Freisler's victims is evident on virtually every page. Leaving aside his repeated use of the word 'euthanasia' (without inverted commas) to describe the mass murder of the handicapped, we have an attempt to insinuate that Herschel Gynspan (sic!) killed Ernst vom Rath because of some homosexual grievance rather than because 17,000 'Ostjuden', including his relatives, had been dumped on the Polish frontier.

There is also an extended attempt to 'demythologise' the most famous group of Freisler's victims: the military conspirators behind the July 20th assassination attempt. The author's lack of human sympathy for the accused is apparent from the start, 'It must be said from the outset that with few exceptions the defendants did not make a very favourable impression on the court, either with their general demeanour or with their vain attempts to extricate themselves from the accusation of this heinous crime'. In fact, regardless of what one may think of their reactionary and utopian plans for a Germany without Hitler, they behaved with as much dignity as the removal of their false teeth and braces, the vulgar and histrionic harangues from Freisler 'worms' and 'slime' being the favoured epithets – and the inevitability of death permitted. No doubt it is a great consolation to their relatives to be informed by the indefatigable Dr Koch that they were hanged with rope rather than piano wire, and that 'Death occurred within seven to twenty seconds'. Everything understood, everything pardoned?

Michael Burleigh is the author of *Germany Turns Eastwards: A Study of Ostforschung in the Third Reich* (Cambridge University Press, 1990).