

**THE ASSASSINATION OF REINHARD HEYDRICH: Reflections on
Past and Contemporary Political Violence.**

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Sixty-six years ago, on May 27, 1942, Reinhard Heydrich, the Nazi viceroy of the Protectorate Bohemia and Moravia, was assassinated in broad daylight in a Prague suburb Holešovice, by Josef Gabčík and Jan Kubiš, two Czechoslovak paratroopers dressed as civilians, who had been trained and equipped by the S.O.E.¹ Although the assassination had been carefully prepared in great detail several months in advance, many things went wrong during the attack. Heydrich was not killed on the spot, because Gabčík's sten-gun jammed. His companion then tossed a specially made bomb at the open Mercedes cabriolet, which passed at a very slow speed in front of him. But the bomb landed against the right rear wheel instead of exploding inside the car. The explosion killed neither Heydrich nor his driver. Heydrich and his driver were able to jump out of the car with drawn pistols, but neither pistol could fire a shot due to jamming or mishandling. The two attackers, who also had pistols, did not finish Heydrich off, but fired instead in the air to scare off Heydrich's driver and a group of passengers who came streaming out from a nearby tram, some of them even trying to help in pursuing the attackers. Meanwhile Heydrich, keen on pursuing one of his attackers, suddenly collapsed, stricken by pain. In the general confusion the two killers

¹ *Special Operations Executive* – sometimes referred to as “the Baker Street Irregulars,” after its headquarters at 64 Baker Street, was initiated Churchill in July 1940 as a secret organization to train specialists for subversive activities in German-occupied territories.

managed to escape. It took at least half an hour to improvise transport of the injured Heydrich to the nearby hospital "Na Bulovce" where his life hung in the air because of infection spreading in the stomach cavity. Sulphonamides were applied because penicillin was not available as a drug in Nazi-controlled Europe (not even in England, where it was invented, until late 1943).

State Secretary Karl Hermann Frank,² the highest-ranking Sudeten German in the Nazi administration of the Protectorate, telephoned immediately Hitler about the attack on his boss. The Fuehrer was infuriated. In reprisal, he ordered the arrest and execution of 10,000 Czech hostages. While doctors were fighting for Heydrich's life, German police collected all available data and came to the conclusion that according to the indices left on the scene the attack must have been organized and prepared in England. As for the assailants, however, they could have been Brits as well as Czechs or even recruited from anti-Nazi Germans. Frank phoned back to Hitler the results of the enquiry confirming the British involvement and requested him to revoke the execution order of 10,000 Czechs, arguing that such unprecedented reprisals would be catastrophic for the morale of the Czechs in the Protectorate and would help the exile government of Dr Edvard Beneš in London.³ But Hitler was still foaming and not in the mood to compromise. Thus ended one of the most important days in the history of the Czechoslovak resistance, which had begun with

² K.H.Frank (1898-1946). A monograph is in preparation, based on the recent dissertation (2007) by René Küpper at the Cologne University: *Politische Konzeption und Besatzungspolitik Karl Hermann Franks in Protektorat Böhmen und Mähren*.

³ The preliminary inquiry was conducted by the criminal commissar of the Prague Gestapo, Heinz Pannwitz. It survived the war. It remains the most important source for investigating the Heydrich assassination. It was published by Stanislav F. Berton in: *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, vol.33/1985, p.673-706.

the attempt to kill one Nazi and nearly ended with the execution of 10,000 randomly selected Czech citizens.

Tyrannicide in Context

This kind of asymmetry between individual and state-led terrorism that used mass reprisals is not unique. With international relations since September 11, 2001, entirely captivated by "international terrorism," it might be tempting to place the attack on Heydrich not only into the context of the resistance movements of the Second World War but also into the contemporary U.S.-led campaign against international terrorism. One cannot ignore certain fundamental lessons of history, in which individual terrorism appeared under special circumstances to be the only available method of political struggle. *Tyrannicide*, the assassination of a tyrant, was staged in ancient Rome and in the great tragedies of William Shakespeare. One of the most controversial tyrannicides of recent history was that of Reinhard Heydrich, which took place a mere sixty-six years ago, whose pros and cons have been hotly disputed in Czechoslovak post-war history.

Not only is it difficult to isolate terrorism from mainstream history of which it has been an integral part -- terror has remained a substantial component of most emancipation movements passing through the spiral of war and revolution. This may be one of the main reasons why a conclusive definition of terrorism may never be possible. No doubt terrorism, when pursued by outcast individuals, appears as a violent activity endangering human lives, which is conducted outside the existing legal status quo.

But how to rate state-directed terrorism at national level? We do not have to step far back in history to be reminded that the term *La Terreur* had been used for the

bloodiest phase of the French Revolution, during which 99 percent of the excesses, including brutal mass executions, had been declared "legal," in that they were covered by the existing revolutionary legislation under the slogan "*Patrie en danger*". Defenders of Stalinism have applied the same logic to the period of "Great Terror" of the 1930s, during which millions perished.

Recent German history offers a classical case of *Tyrannicide* in the various attempts to murder Hitler by members of the German resistance. Most of them were *Wehrmacht* officers who were at first unable to resolve the dilemma between the blind subordination toward their head of state and commander-in-chief in one person, to whom they personally swore a pledge of allegiance, and the growing recognition that Hitler was a monster that must be put away. One has to be reminded, nevertheless, that the courageous German officers who had reached this ultimate decision at applying *Tyrannicide* (hence *Tyrranenmord* used for the first time in the German political vocabulary), to remove the tyrant, risked their lives not because *Der Führer* had threatened to exterminate the Jews and to enslave Europe's non-German population, but because from a certain moment his military conduct of war proved disastrous and Germany, instead of winning the *Weltherrschaft*, was about to lose the war. Like Mark Antony, the faithful warriors disagreed with the Nazi Caesar and called him ambitious. This, at least on paper, looked almost like a replay of the classical Shakespearean scenario of killing Julius Caesar. It is certainly a curious thing, but not unusual from world's historical perspective, when the introduction of democracy in a major and most educated European country begins with an act of murder.⁴

⁴ Postwar German political culture continued to vilify the heroes of the 20 the July (1944) as traitors of the armed forces and of the nation. It was not until 20 July 1954, when President Theodor Heuss, in a public

At about the same time, the Czech resistance had found itself in a parallel but not completely identical dilemma. The Czech opposition knew they could not decisively influence the conduct of a global war like the German general staff officers, but they could at least demonstrate to the world that they hated their local tyrant and were prepared to kill him regardless of consequences. Regardless? Not quite, as we shall see.

As for the phenomenon of the *Tyrannicide*, it was until then entirely outside the context of modern Czech political tradition, in which even individual terror was entirely absent since the assassination of the imperial generalissimo Albrecht Wallenstein in Eger in 1634. In the nineteenth century the Czechs preferred to settle their political disputes with the Habsburgs through various forms of non-violent opposition. It was, however, the appearance of institutionalized mass killing in both world wars, termed by some as state-organized terrorism, that radically altered the situation. Still, the Czech exiles gathered since 1939 under the leadership of ex-President Edvard Beneš and other political and military leaders in Paris and London, preferred to carry out their fight against the German occupation of their country in the traditional way by promoting passive resistance, by gathering information useful to the Allies, and not through terrorist attacks.

Enters Reinhard Heydrich

ceremony, courageously paid homage to the victims and their surviving families, that the public opinion in Germany had begun to change. The American historian Fritz Stern, himself a refugee from Nazi Germany, who was present at the occasion, had left a moving testimony: "Unlike any other German historical event, this act of desperation... involved what might be called the 'good Germans' from every element in society – clergy, soldiers, civil servants, students - all risking everything for what after all were commands of conscience alone – a little belated to be sure." Fritz Stern, *Five Germanys I have Known* (New York: Farrar, 2006), p.212-214.

This idyllic atmosphere could not last forever under the ever-increasing brutality of the war, especially since Germany had attacked the Soviet Union in June of 1941. The Czech underground multiplied their sabotage activities. A decisive catalyst of change had been the arrival in Prague, at the end of September 1941, of Reinhard Heydrich, the new German viceroy of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, as the western fragment of former Czechoslovakia under German occupation was called. Considered to be Hitler's potential successor, Heydrich, deputy of Heinrich Himmler and one of the highest SS and police officers of the Third Reich, was also the chief architect of the "Final Solution" of the Jewish Question, in other words of the removal of the European Jewry from all German-controlled territories.

Intending to turn the Protectorate into a model SS province under his vicerealty, Heydrich decided to cleanse Bohemia and Moravia from its Jewish population. Even before the Wannsee Conference of January 1942, at which it was decided under Heydrich's initiative to remove eleven million Jews from Nazi-controlled Europe, the Protectorate's Jews were to be sent to the concentration camp of Theresienstadt, and thence to Auschwitz, from where there was no return. The Bohemian *Lebensraum*, declared Heydrich shortly after his arrival to senior German administrators in Prague, must be ruthlessly Germanized after the victorious war, so that the majority of Czech inhabitants unfit for Germanization could be expelled to Siberia after the final victory of German arms. For the time being, however, as long as the Reich needed the weapons produced by Czech workers, Heydrich would give them preferential treatment, insisting that the Czech workers received the same food rations and holiday benefits as their German counterparts.

Against the Czech intelligentsia, however, the cynical Heydrich used terror. Without hesitation he started from the top. The Protectorate's Prime Minister, General Alois Eliáš, was arrested, proven guilty of maintaining contacts with the enemy and sentenced to death.⁵ Hundreds from among the Czech intelligentsia were executed or sent to concentration camps. With deadly efficiency, Heydrich continued to apply the tactics of stick and carrot to split the nation. He nearly succeeded in silencing the underground network of the Czech resistance and its radio contacts with England.

Beneš responds

Beneš and his exile government in London must have felt uneasy, to say the least. In the summary assessment of anti-German activities in occupied Europe prior to June 1941, which the British showed him, the Protectorate would still figure at the bottom. How could Beneš put the British government under pressure to revoke the Munich agreement and recognize the pre-1938 borders, when the inhabitants of the Protectorate were so successfully collaborating with the Germans? Moreover, Beneš had to face the Communist challenge from Moscow, where an alternative Czech leadership could emerge. By then the Russians, who faced a Nazi war of extermination, were fighting a brutal war of survival in which all means applied to bloodletting the Germans, regardless of one's own losses, were considered legitimate. Once the principle 'eye for eye' took possession of the warriors, hesitation over applying more direct terrorist methods becomes weak. Thus, when Beneš learned that the Soviets, without telling him, were trying to send their own paratroopers into the Protectorate, he knew the challenge was deadly serious. He had to act quickly and

⁵ Though sentenced to death on 1 October 1941, General Eliáš was executed on 19 June 1942. After Heydrich's death Hitler ordered Eliáš's sentence to be carried out. See Tomáš Pasák, *Pod ochranou Říše* (Prague 1998), p.302-394.

decisively if he wanted to retain the leadership of the exiled movement under his control. What if the other side succeeded in killing a prominent collaborator or a Nazi top brass? To make himself more credible in the eyes of the Czech resistance, he had to challenge, however reluctantly, Nazi-sponsored terror through a bold act of individual terrorism on the part of the resistance – the only means available and justifiable under the circumstances.⁶

It is generally assumed that the main actor in the drama on the Czech side, the exiled ex-President Beneš, must have ordered the assassination of Heydrich in council with his head of intelligence operations, Colonel F.Moravec, who in turn contacted the Special Operations Executive (S.O.E.), which trained the killers and arranged for aircraft to drop them over the territory of the Protectorate, where members of the underground were expected to receive and shelter them. No written evidence survived the conspiracy. Both men wrote memoirs, but Moravec, who outlived Beneš by eighteen years, kept his knowledge secret out of loyalty to the president.⁷

As for Beneš, he never mentioned in his (unfinished) Memoirs the heroic Czechoslovak paratroopers, thus solidifying the myth that the assassination of Heydrich was a spontaneous action, decided and carried out exclusively by the Czech underground.⁸ When directly asked about his knowledge of the preparations leading to the killing of Heydrich, Beneš would

⁶ In his longest message to the members of the underground resistance at home of 15 May 1942, Beneš attacks the collaboration and opportunism. It contains a cryptic message open to interpretation: "... in such circumstances an opportunity may arise for a certain violent action, rebellion, direct action, sabotage, demonstration. International opinion would appreciate it..." (*Edvard Beneš – Vzkazy domů*. Ed. by J.Šolc (Prague 1996), p.127.

⁷ *Master of Spies. The Memoirs of General Frantisek Moravec* (London 1975), p.208-24; F.Moravec, *Špión, jemuž nevěřili*(Toronto: 68 Publishers, 1977), p.285-301. For criticism of Moravec see Jiří Šolc: *Ve službách prezidenta* (Prague 1994); *Po boku prezidenta* (Prague 2008).

⁸ E.Beneš, *Paměti* (1947), Engl.translation appeared in 1954. A critical reconstruction of Beneš' *Memoirs 1938-1945* (2007), contains in volume II an unpublished chapter, drafted by Prokop Drtina for Beneš, which refers briefly to the German reprisals in consequence of the assassination of Heydrich, which itself appeared to be a spontaneous act of the home resistance – not carried out by the S.O.E. agents parachuted from England (Vol. II, p.395.)

invariably deny any knowledge. However, Eduard Táborský, the president's personal secretary during the war, admitted in private conversation and correspondence shortly before he died in 1996 that in late October 1941 Beneš had received and bid farewell, the two S.O.E.-trained agents, one of them identified as Gabčík.⁹

As for Heydrich, he was to die several days later due to the infection of his wounds. On June 2, after conversation with Heinrich Himmler, who flew to Prague to speak for the last time with his deputy and protégé, Heydrich slipped into a coma; two days later he died. Meanwhile the Nazi machinery of terror unleashed an unprecedented manhunt. By a combination of mass arrest, intimidation, torture and bribes, the parachutists and their helpers were apprehended by the Gestapo. Two weeks after Heydrich's funeral, the main commando group, hiding in a church crypt in the center of Prague, including those who planned and executed the assassination, were surrounded by several hundred security troops. They stood no chance of surviving the assault and shot themselves with their last bullet.

The assassination of Reinhard Heydrich has occupied a very unusual place in Czech historiography. Because it is a clear-cut case of a terrorist attack (i.e., of an unprecedented *tyrannicide*), it has never been objectively analyzed. Above all, because it exacted such a high price in Nazi reprisals, the controversy over the pros and cons of Heydrich's assassination has remained one of the major unsolved disputes of the history of resistance in the Second World War to this day.

The dilemma Beneš faced can be highlighted by the following key episode. Two weeks before Heydrich was to be blown up, several senior members of the Czech underground sent

⁹ Two independent testimonies supplied to the author.

a radio message to London urging President Beneš to cancel the assassination, citing three major reasons: that thousands of hostages in German hands would be executed, that the Nazis would commence unprecedented massacres, and that the last remnants of the underground resistance would be wiped out. It is generally assumed that the dispatch was tampered with by Col.Moravec since, at such an advanced stage of planning, with the paratroopers already on the spot and closing in on their prey, he could not risk compromising his and President Beneš' prestige.

Too high a price?

Nazi reprisals happened exactly as the underground dispatch of 12th May predicted. Hundreds of hostages were summarily executed, including the Prime Minister Eliáš. For all intents and purposes the Czech clandestine network was destroyed by the Gestapo for the rest of the war. Ladislav Vaněk, alias "Jindra," one of the senior underground leaders whose organization sheltered the paratroopers, offered to cooperate with the Gestapo after his arrest. The devastating result was that the Gestapo not only arrested and eliminated the entire network but restored the radio link with London to feed the exiles false information.

Hitler, as we know, under K.H.Frank's urging at first requested the execution of 10,000 Czechs, but then allowed the figure to be lowered because the shock of having so many leading Czechs executed would have undermined the morale in the Protectorate's important munitions and armaments works. The escalation of violence took then a grisly turn. On the day of Heydrich's funeral a transport of 1000 Czech Jews was dispatched from Prague to the SS extermination factories; two more followed suit. Out of these 3000 Czech Jews only one survived the war.

But something more spectacular had to be thrown on the funeral pyre to avenge Heydrich's death. On the day of his state funeral in Berlin the village of Lidice near Prague was set on fire and leveled by the SS for allegedly sheltering the parachute agents. Two hundred of its male inhabitants were shot on the spot, its female population sent to concentration camps and the children given to German families for adoption. Lidice was to become one of the most notorious Nazi atrocities in the entire war. As an act of spontaneous solidarity several localities in the U.S. adopted its name. When the citizens of Joliet in Illinois, decided to name their town after Lidice, President Roosevelt welcomed the event by sending them a personal message reminding everyone that Nazi terror could never destroy the love of freedom. "If future generations ask us what we were fighting for in this war," proclaimed the US Secretary of the Navy, Frank Knox, "we shall tell them the story of Lidice." Nazi reprisals and atrocities caused by the assassination of Heydrich gave Beneš and his exile government the much needed sympathy and support among the Allies. The assassination was generally attributed to the home resistance; the parachutists from England were never mentioned - exactly as Beneš wanted it. Jan Masaryk, the foreign minister in the exiled Czechoslovak government and the son of the founder of Czechoslovakia, was jubilant about the effect Lidice had for the Czechoslovak cause in the U.S. He felt that he could make no progress in his propaganda work before, "then came Lidice, and I had a new lease of life".¹⁰

The British Foreign Office, however, carefully avoided any direct endorsement of the *tyrannicide*, which it considered an internal Czech affair. That also suited Beneš' purpose since he was about to collect the rewards obtained at such a high cost. First, from the Soviets, since Foreign Minister

¹⁰ Callum MacDonald, *The Killing of SS Obergruppenführer Reinhard Heydrich*, New York 1989, p.200.

Viacheslav Molotov, who happened to be passing through London in the aftermath of the assassination, promised Beneš that the USSR would support the expulsion of up to one and a half million Sudeten Germans after the war. One month later the British did likewise saying that they would not oppose in principle the transfer of Czechoslovakia's minority population in an endeavor to make the country ethnically homogeneous. Although the British Government still had reservations about the juridical continuity of Czechoslovakia and would not commit itself on confirming the pre-1938 border; two months after Heydrich was buried the British Government repudiated the Munich settlement of September 30, 1939, in which France, England, Germany and Italy had imposed the cession of the frontier districts of the Czechoslovak Republic on the German Reich.

Finally, as for the main controversy concerning the pros and cons of Heydrich's assassination, those who argue that not touching Heydrich could have saved thousands of human lives, must also face the fact that every day of Heydrich's life in the service of the Third Reich meant further perfection of the killing machine and of the practice of genocide. By killing one of Hitler's most able assistants, the brutal regime and its collaborators were shaken and the occupied peoples of Europe given hope. In my view, the killers, that is the British-trained commandos who carried out the *tyrannicide*, were heroes and should be remembered as such - even if, technically speaking, some might call them terrorists.

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Second World War (e.g. *India in Axis Strategy; Hitler-A Chronology*). Since the opening of the Czech archives after 1990 he has concentrated his research on the second Czechoslovak President Edvard Beneš, whose wartime *Memoirs 1938-45* he has reconstructed from fragments in a new critical edition published in 2007. During the Nazi reprisals for the assassination of Heydrich, Hauner's uncle was executed, while his grandfather had been murdered several months earlier in the infamous concentration camp of Mauthausen.