

Reinhard Heydrich: The Man Without Conscience

To most contemporary Americans, the name “Reinhard Eugine Tristan Heydrich” means little or nothing. To fewer still does the man behind the name become associated with the horrible and sadistic atrocities he planned and oversaw. This reality is at once sad and even extremely dangerous because, as the reader will soon see, Herr. Heydrich was in fact central, if not absolutely essential to the Nazi secret police establishment and the gruesome “Final Solution” to the “Jewish Question” that was later carried out by them. It is no far-fetched idea to assume that all people of conscience would agree that the horrible, supposedly “inhuman” murder and destruction by the Nazi state during the Holocaust was a deadly, unjustifiable tragedy.

However, only a brave few might venture to dig deeper, down to the frightening and hideously disturbing truth of the matter- Heydrich *was* undeniably human. He was a man who, according to each and every last reliable historical source, did not, even once, show any sign of guilt or good conscience about his demonic goals and actions.¹ The burning questions that come out of all this are: “What caused such a person to behave like that?”, and “How can such a 'soul less' person be recognized?”.

To try to answer these important questions, if in fact they can be fully explained, logically begins with “the beginning”, as it were, i.e., Reinhard's childhood. Although no detailed biographies written by himself or any of his contemporaries exist, scholarly research over the last fifty to sixty years indicates that Heydrich's early life was relatively calm and nurturing compared to that of his peers (Hitler, Himmler, etc.). His family suffered no signs of domestic violence, impoverishment, or even any substantial risk of danger during the Great War of 1914-1918.

Reinhard's father, Bruno Heydrich, was apparently born into the German working class. Though

1 Wighton, Charles. (1962). Heydrich: Hitler's Most Evil Henchman. London: Odhams Press, Ltd.. p. 13

that generation of the Heydrich family was not rich, they were evidently well off enough to send young Bruno to a locally respected music school, where he did relatively well. Although evidently very dedicated to learning, he was never to be considered any better than a “B quality”, or “second-string” musical talent. This feeling of not feeling good enough seems to have developed into an internalized inferiority complex of some sort because, in an attempt to prove his musical greatness once and for all, Bruno Heydrich spent months of his time and nearly all his money into writing what he believed would be perhaps the greatest, most over-the-top musical drama ever.² All told, it was entitled *Amen*, and in a tragic twist of poetic justice, it was in many ways the biggest theatrical disaster in contemporary history. It didn't even have a prayer.

Angered and depressed, Bruno decided never again to return to the public concert hall. Instead, he took up teaching in the late 1890s. Though the founding of his Heydrich School of Music, Bruno was able to rebuild his professional status and to provide for his wife and two sons (Reinhard and Heinz) as never before. With the onset of the First World War and the hyperinflation that soon followed it, Bruno's student body dwindled, as fewer and fewer middle and upper class Germans possessed the funds to enroll their children in “non essential” programs like music tutoring.³ As a result, the Heydrich family found it more difficult to make ends meet. However, they remained quite fortunate compared to many of their neighbors, and no history of stress-induced domestic violence within Reinhard's household can be found.

Clearly, the quality of his early childhood and home life were atypically not a significant factor in the mental and emotional development process of this up-and-coming psychopath. One factor that may have contributed to Heydrich's violent behavior, at least insofar as the Jews were concerned, may have stemmed from a particular event that transpired in the early days of the 20th century.

In the early 1900s, Reinhard's father and mother often received payment for students' tuition at their academy via money order. At some point, a parent made out the payment to Mrs. Heydrich using

² Graber, G.S.. (1980). The Life & Times of Reinhard Heydrich. New York: David McKay Co.. p. 6

³ Ibid, p. 6-7

the name “Frau Heydrich-Suess”. Though the genealogy of neither Bruno nor his wife Elisabeth were of Jewish descent, rumors and allegations to the contrary spread like wildfire through their home town of Halle, and via a renowned professional music journal, throughout Germany. As a result, Reinhard and his younger brother Heinz received relentless taunting and ostracism from their peers.⁴

In response to this negative, unfounded marginalizing, Reinhard became increasingly anti-social and socially inept.⁵ By the time he was in high school, he had become a ruthless master of using peer intimidation while sucking up to his superiors (teachers and other adults) in order to get his way. As far as he cared, there was nothing morally or ethically wrong with using and manipulating others, as long as it achieved a desirable outcome. This was to be a defining mentality that drove his future career in the service of the Third Reich later in life.

Based on the seemingly nonexistent presence of the typical psychological “red flag” indicators in Reinhard's formative years, it could be effectively argued that his perverse behavior and evident lack of conscience could have been the result of some sort of mental condition. Perhaps he had a developmental disorder, or a chemical imbalance in his brain. Who knows? The real issue at hand is yet another confounding question: Why wasn't this seemingly obvious and overt antisocial behavior addressed, or even mentioned during Heydrich's formative years? Although there were few, if any, mental related drugs in the early 20th century, there was a modest but growing psychology and biomedical field; and Germany was at the center of this cutting-edge development.⁶ His future actions were entirely his own fault, but at least some blame lies at the feet of those, such as Reinhard's parents and teachers, who must have had at least some idea of what was going on, yet did nothing to stop or correct the behavior.

In the early 1920s, Heydrich joined the German Navy. He was drawn to its strong, even fanatical emphasis on national pride and ethnocentric machismo. He likely saw the military's strict

4 Graber, G.S.. (1980). The Life & Times of Reinhard Heydrich. New York: David McKay Co.. p. 8-9

5 Ibid., p. 2

6 Cornwell, John. (2003). Hitler's Scientists: Science, War, and the Devil's Pact. New York: Penguin Group. p. 38

martial culture and rigid enforcement of morality to be “just what the doctor ordered” when it came to proving himself to be a strong figure, worthy of honor and respect by peers. Unfortunately for him (and perhaps most of Western society), his old nemeses of social ineptitude and egoism again resulted in almost total rejection by his Naval associates.⁷ As was typical of him throughout his life, Heydrich was convinced that the only way to gain respect from others was to become more “macho”. Thus began his obsession with sports and exercise that lasted to the end of his days. Although the desired level of respect was never obtained, no one ever again accused him of being weak or scrawny.

In the late 1920s, after leaving the Navy, Heydrich became a Nazi party member and minor figure in Hitler's party body-guard service. By 1930-31, Himmler had appointed him as the organizer, or *SS-Obergruppenführer* (similar to the rank of General in the US Army), of the SS (*schutztaffel*) security and intelligence services. Though neither man had any experience in intelligence gathering or law enforcement, Heydrich's organizational outline for the new SS departments was approved by Hitler immediately. All told, the young former sailor put all of twenty to thirty minutes into the plan.⁸ As shocking and illogical as it may seem, blatant cronyism and the practice of putting ideology above logic in one's plans was business as usual within the National Socialist ranks.

Heydrich began using his new-found power and authority as commander of the SS, and the *Sicherheitsdienst* (SD), or secret police/secret service in particular to create a huge and far reaching security organization that strongly reflected his own personal beliefs in unquestioning loyalty and dogmatic/behavioral “purity”. In order to exact this strict loyalty to himself and the SS organization as a whole, the Obergruppenführer shamelessly twisted and perverted the theology and morals of the Christian majority in Germany.⁹

To this end, the SS guiding principles were founded on a secretive, cult-like “pseudo theology” based on opulent religious ceremonies, secretive borderline occult superstitions, and a distorted

7 Graber, G.S.. (1980). The Life & Times of Reinhard Heydrich. New York: David McKay Co.. p. 25

8 Ibid., p. 45-46

9 Brissaud, Andre. (1974). The Nazi Secret Service. London: The Bodley Head. p. 18

reincarnation of the medieval codes of knight chivalry. Being the master of manipulation that he was, Heydrich was able to use his artificial “religion” as a control tool to spread his ideology to SS recruits, but it also had the “added bonus” of enabling his men to carry out more and more grotesque and abominable programs of abuse and murder without feeling as guilty as they otherwise would or should have.

Another aspect of the SS divisions were their purportedly exemplary “aryanness” and exclusivity. This ideal, though inherently unrealistic and unattainable, did result in a real sense of respect for the SS and its members amongst the general German population by the time of Hitler's official rise to power in January 1933. The most elite of all SS groups was *der Schwartzte Korps*, known in English as the Black Corps, also the name of the widely popular propaganda newspaper overseen by Heydrich himself. As a new Nazi party member, Reinhard spent several years as a minor officer in the then mostly ignored “body-guard” organization. Until his sudden appointment as the *Reichsfürer-SS* Himmler's right-hand man, the Black Corps had no official political power, and served primarily as “bouncers” at official meetings, rallies, and various obnoxious, and often violent “community outreach” type events.¹⁰

Prior to the Nazi political take-over in the mid-1930s, Hitler's fascist cohorts and their sympathizers were unable to gain critical popular support through brute force alone. Instead, they needed to rely on outwardly “benevolent” tactics such as promoting “community values”, sponsoring public sports and cultural events, etc. in order to draw the common non ideological German into condoning, if not actively supporting the developing Nazi regime-to-be.

As SS general in '31, Heydrich quickly proceeded to indulge his manipulation obsession by transforming his old Black Corps into what he considered the better served Black Order. The purpose of the BO, unlike that of the old BC was to serve as an exclusively intelligence-gathering secret operations service similar to the existing Gestapo and SD, but loyal only to him. As was typical of him,

¹⁰ Brissaud, Andre. (1974). The Nazi Secret Service. London: The Bodley Head. p. 24

Heydrich sought to undermine the power and authority of other key Nazi leaders, even if it meant counter-productive organizational conflict or redundancy. Black Order affiliated agents were ordered to investigate thousands of people throughout Germany, even high-ranking Nazi leaders such as Heinrich Himmler and perhaps even Hitler himself. Many of these so-called “national security” related spy operations were not for the benefit of the German public, but rather for Heydrich's own personal use. He was described by many contemporaries as being extremely unwilling to trust others, even to the point of paranoia. He showed no scruples towards seeking out potentially damaging information against his opponents in order to blackmail them into submission.¹¹

From the study of his early years in power, we can easily find truth in Lord Acton's 1887 stipulation that “power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely”. As an underling in the Nazi bureaucratic power structure, Heydrich did not have the tools nor the position to even attempt to make real his nefarious and murderous goals and practices. Once in power, however, the man later known as the “Butcher of Prague” was free to execute and expand his race-based plans, which culminated in the Wansee Conference in January, 1942 and the elevation of the Final Solution to being a top SS priority.¹²

Had this all not occurred, perhaps the full extent of the Holocaust and the euthanasia programs would not have been realized. On the other hand, perhaps a lack of such disorganization would have enabled the Nazi regime to better execute its other more traditional military and empire-building strategies, which might have resulted in an equally disgusting number of casualties. However, in light of Heydrich's crucial role in the development of the T4 gas “euthanasia” process and Jewish extermination programs,¹³ a strong argument could be made that the number of victims of German suffering and murder would have been far fewer had someone else been in control. History demonstrates that the morbid truth of the matter is that, as hideous as it may seem, Herr Reinhard

11 Brissaud, Andre. (1974). The Nazi Secret Service. London: The Bodley Head. p. 25

12 Dwork, Deborah, et al. (2002). Holocaust: A History. New York: W.W. Norton & Co.. p. 280-282

13 Friedlander, Henry. (1995). The Origins of Nazi Genocide. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press. p. 196

Heydrich's lack of scruples, ambition, and seemingly complete lack of “human conscience” was precisely what Adolf Hitler needed in order to carry out his diabolical plots to rid the world of Jews, the disabled, and all others he deemed to be “unworthy of life”.

At this point, the reader may be asking why no one acted against Heydrich, either with the intention of eliminating his institutionalized power or his life completely. Knowing what we know of his perverse and frankly demonic “morals” and actions, why did no one try to stop him? Ultimately, he was assassinated in 1942¹⁴, but there were a few important factors that prevented significant attempts at his life prior to that date.

One such reason (as detailed above) was that Heydrich's SS and SD secret police personnel were anywhere and everywhere, or at least did a very good job at creating that impression. As a result, even the most high ranking Nazi officials such as Reichsfürer-SS Heinrich Himmler and Adolf Eichmann (a Heydrich subordinate) were too terrified of his ability to root out and eliminate “anti-German” activities to make any significant challenges to his power. Similarly, the long-held tradition of “high morals” and “integrity” within the SS establishment served to give the impression that nothing seriously wrong was going on. The final great factor was that the Nazi regime had since the early days in the late 1920s used terrorist tactics to scare would-be dissidents into submission through the practice of “collective punishment”.¹⁵ In fact, this is exactly what method was used in revenge for Heydrich's death in June, 1942.

In order to understand the aftermath of the assassination plot, it is important to learn a little bit of the details leading up to and including the attempt on his life. After much intense training, the British military inserted a small group of elite Czech-born special operations commandos into the area around Prague, where Reinhard Heydrich was acting as *Reichsprotektor* of the Austrian and Czech occupied territories, following the medical retirement of the previous Reich administrator in September, 1941.¹⁶

14 Wiener, Jan. (1969). The Assassination of Heydrich. New York: Grossman Publishers. p. 48

15 Ibid. p. 44

16 Ibid. p. 44

As of late '41, British military intelligence had received reports from Czech underground agents of Heydrich's usual practices of atrocity against non-Aryans and his own personal and political enemies. After some months, British high command had designated the Obergruppenführer-SS as wartime assassination priority number one.

Unfortunately, the months of training, planning, and cooperation with Czech partisans resulted in only mildly injuring Heydrich, rather than killing him. The significance of the attempt was not the drama of the initial violence, but rather the darkly ironic way in which nearby witnesses reacted, or rather failed to react. Rather than help their oppressor, Czech and German bystanders simply ignored the attack and continued about their daily business, as if nothing were amiss. Not even a passing SS cargo trucker offered the screaming “Butcher of Prague” any aid. In fact, the soldier was explicitly asked to help Heydrich, but he categorically refused and drove away as quickly as possible. If there is in fact “karma” or some form of higher power administering justice in the universe, Heydrich surely got what he deserved in the end.¹⁷

Eventually, some German officials passed by, and drove Heydrich's bloody and somewhat maimed body to a nearby hospital taken over previously by SS command. The tissue and organ damage appeared to be relatively mild, and a full recovery was expected though the following days. However, Heydrich suddenly died on June 4, 1942, for unexplained reasons. The German physicians present judged the official cause of death to be undetected bacterial infection or shrapnel, however the noted presence of higher than normal supplies of morphine delivered to his room stand as at least circumstantial evidence that foul play was involved.¹⁸

When hearing of the death of his beloved protégé, Hitler demanded a lavish state funerary ceremony and a violent retaliatory decimation of the nearby Czech city of Lidice, which in truth had had absolutely nothing whatsoever to do with the incident. Whether this was another of Hitler's deranged and illogical “strategies” or another instance of the Nazis' “collective guilt” strategy is

¹⁷ Wiener, Jan. (1969). The Assassination of Heydrich. New York: Grossman Publishers. p. 86-89

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 100

debatable. However, the result is that the revenge policy, dubbed “Operation Heydrich” resulted in the total destruction of the town of Lidice, and the deportation of its women and children to concentration camps. All males deemed to be teen-agers or older were rounded up and executed in mass graves by firing squad.¹⁹

In summary, the life history of one Reinhard E. T. Heydrich, SS general, illustrate the ugly truth that indeed, truly heartless and remorseless psychopathic killers can and do exist. Of all the notable Nazi perpetrators, Heydrich stands out as being arguably the most cruel and insidious. Unlike the likes of Hitler and Göring, who enjoyed the limelight, Reinhard was more than happy to remain hidden, operating as the manipulative and obscure puppet-master of the Third Reich. By all known reputable accounts, he did not at any point appear to possess even a shred of conscience or guilt for his actions. Even his official (if not always true) superior, Heinrich Himmler displayed remorse for the actions of himself and of the Schutzstaffel he created and oversaw.²⁰ In many ways, the case of Heydrich acts as a case study of a wide cross-section of what went so fatally wrong in central Europe during the first half of the 20th Century.

One cannot study the man nicknamed the “Butcher of Prague”, and the “Man With the Iron Heart”, without taking some time to ask some very fundamental questions regarding morality and ethics. If we as individuals and as a society someday encounter such great evil in the future, what should be done? Even with modern medicine's novel new drugs and therapies, can such a monster of a man ever *really* be cured? Would we know the answer before it became too late to stop him? If the answer to these questions is certifiably “no”, is it morally justified and in our best interest to destroy such a person as a matter of self protection, or in doing so, do we thus become the very thing we despise the most?

As frustrating as it is, the study of Reinhard Heydrich and his murderous SS paramilitaries seems to initiate many more questions in the end than it appears to answer. This is not the typical

¹⁹ Wiener, Jan. (1969). The Assassination of Heydrich. New York: Grossman Publishers. p. 190

²⁰ Course Reader, p. 274-275. “Lords of Life and Death”.

outcome one expects to reach when studying any number of other topics, even within the context of World War II Germany. On the contrary, perhaps the topic of this paper really *is* fundamentally different and unique to all the others. In fact, it can be argued that the mere process of asking so many salient questions is exactly what the legacy of all this is. After all, the people of post WWI themselves did not ask the hard questions when they had the chance. Soon, it became too late to take the risk. If more enlightened Germans had, there is no doubt that the twenty-seven to thirty million men, women, and children who perished over the years between 1933 and 1945 would have survived.