

Cold Empathy: Challenges in Writing a life of Reinhard Heydrich

Life-Writing in Europe conference, Oxford 20-21 April

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The subject of my recently published biography, Reinhard Heydrich, is widely recognized as one of the great iconic villains of the twentieth century, an appalling figure even within the context of the Nazi elite. Countless TV documentaries, spurred on by the fascination of evil, have offered popular takes on his intriguing life, and there is no shortage of sensationalist accounts of his 1942 assassination in Prague and the unprecedented wave of retaliatory Nazi violence that culminated in the vengeful destruction of the Bohemian village of Lidice. Arguably the most spectacular secret service operation of the entire Second World War, the history of the assassination and its violent aftermath have inspired the popular imagination ever since 1942, providing the backdrop to Heinrich Mann's novel *Lidice* (1942), Berthold Brecht's film-script for Fritz Lang's 1943 Hollywood blockbuster *Hangmen also Die*, a whole series of HISTORY channel and BBC documentaries, and two recent Prix-Goncourt-winning SS novels: by Jonathan Littell's *The Kindly Ones* and Laurent Binet's *HHhH*, (an acronym for the Goering quote: "Himmler's Hirn heisst Heydrich").

The continuing popular fascination with Heydrich is quite easily explained. Although probably not as widely known to the non-German (and non-Czech) general public as Hitler, Himmler and Goebbels, Heydrich played a key role in Nazi Germany's policies of persecution and terror. Although merely thirty-eight years old at the time of his violent death in Prague in June 1942, Heydrich had accumulated three key positions in Hitler's rapidly expanding empire. As head of the Nazis' vast political and criminal police apparatus, which merged with the powerful SS

intelligence service – the SD – into the Reich Security Main Office (RSHA) in 1939, Heydrich commanded a sizeable shadow army of Gestapo and SD officers directly responsible for Nazi terror at home and in the occupied territories. As such he was also the chief organizer of the infamous SS mobile killing squads, the *Einsatzgruppen*, during the military campaigns against Austria, the Czech Republic, Poland, and the Soviet Union. Secondly, in September 1941, Heydrich was appointed by Hitler as acting Reich Protector of Bohemia and Moravia, a position that made him the undisputed ruler of the former Czech lands. The eight months of his rule in Prague and the aftermath of his assassination are still remembered as the darkest time in modern Czech history. Thirdly, in 1941 Heydrich was given the order, by Hitler via Goering, to find and implement a ‘Total Solution of the Jewish Question’ in Europe, a solution which, by the summer of 1942, culminated in what is commonly known as the Holocaust: the indiscriminate and systematic murder of the Jews of Europe, irrespective of the victims’ age or gender an. With these three positions, Reinhard Heydrich undoubtedly played a central role in the complex power system of the Third Reich.

Despite his centrality in the Nazi terror regime, Heydrich has not (until very recently) been the subject of a scholarly biography. One key reason for the seemingly inexplicable neglect of Heydrich’s life story by scholars lies in the nature of post-Second Word War historiography of Nazi Germany rather than in the subject itself. While bookstore shelves around the world have never ceased to prominently display best-selling popular ‘life-and-letters’ biographies, notably of Nazi perpetrators, the genre became less popular among academic historians during the Cold War decades. From the 1960s onwards, historians of Nazi Germany viewed biography as a misleading way of writing about the past. Concentration on an individual life, it was

argued, distorted complex historical processes. The focus was instead shifted from individual historical actors in high politics to impersonal social structures such as class, gender, or economic development. The prevalent historiographical trend of the 1970s and 1980s remained strongly anti-biographical. Socio-economic structures, institutions, and organizations, or the daily lives and attitudes of ‘ordinary people’ and small communities, seemed more intriguing to professional historians than the lives and times of ‘great men’.

In the past two decades, however, the genre of biography, now transformed and enriched by social and cultural history approaches, has experienced a major revival in the historiography of Nazi Germany where ‘structuralist’ approaches to Hitler’s rule – looking beyond and away from biographical interest in the Nazi dictator – were long dominant.¹ Groundbreaking new biographies such as Ian Kershaw’s *Hitler*, or Christopher Browning’s seminal book, *Ordinary Men*, a group biography of a police battalion involved in mass executions behind the Eastern front, have powerfully demonstrated that it is possible to combine the study of individual lives in Hitler’s Germany with larger analytical frameworks.²

My recently published Heydrich biography builds on these very important examples of ‘new perpetrator biographies’. Heydrich’s life not only offers analytical access to a whole range of thematic issues at the heart of Nazi rule (e.g., ‘terror on the home front’, ‘wartime radicalization’, ‘the path to genocide’, ‘German occupation regimes in Eastern Europe’) but also illustrates the historical circumstances under

¹ Volker R. Berghahn and Simone Laessig (eds.), *Biography between Structure and Agency: Central European Lives in International Historiography* (Oxford and New York 2008).

² Ian Kershaw, *Hitler 1889–1936: Hubris*, (London, 1998); idem, *Hitler 1936–1945: Nemesis*, (London, 2000); Peter Longerich, *Heinrich Himmler: Biographie* (Munich, 2008); Ulrich Herbert, *Best: Biographische Studien über Radikalismus, Weltanschauung und Vernunft, 1903–1989* (Bonn, 1996); Michael Wildt, *Generation des Unbedingten: Das Führungskorps des Reichssicherheitshauptamtes* (Hamburg, 2002); see, too: Klaus-Michael Mallmann and Gerhard Paul (eds.), *Karrieren der Gewalt: Nationalsozialistische Täterbiographien* (Darmstadt, 2004).

which young men from perfectly ‘normal’ middle-class backgrounds can become political extremists determined to use ultra-violence to implement their dystopian fantasies of radically transforming the world. My book, then, is as much a biography as it is a history of radicalisation and persecution in Germany’s first half of the twentieth century from the privileged perspective of a key member of the Nazi elite.

But how can this be achieved? How does one write the biography of one of the key players in the most murderous genocide of history? I have been struggling with that question ever since I first decided to embark on the project. It was always clear to me that the writing of a Nazi biography would pose a specific set of challenges, ranging from the need to master the vast and ever-growing body of literature on Hitler’s dictatorship, to the peculiar problem of having to live with, and penetrate the mind of, a person whose ‘moral universe’ and deeds are utterly repulsive. At the same time, I was very much aware of the fact that any kind of life-writing requires a certain degree of empathy with the book’s subject, even if that subject is Reinhard Heydrich.

I therefore chose an approach best described as ‘cold empathy’: an attempt to reconstruct Heydrich’s life with critical distance, but without reading history backwards or succumbing to the danger of confusing the role of the historian with that of a state prosecutor at a war criminal’s trial. Heydrich’s transformation into a monster was a gradual process that depended on circumstances – even coincidences – beyond his control as well as on personal choices he made within these circumstances. To reconstruct these circumstances and individual choices is, of course, a lot more challenging than to follow the assumption that someone is ‘evil’ and therefore not only beyond explanation but also fundamentally different in every way from the author and the readership.

If Heydrich's chief advisor on 'Jewish matters', Adolf Eichmann, whose appearance in the court room in Jerusalem in the 1960s revealed him as a pale, subservient and astonishingly dull administrator of death, was long thought to represent, in Hannah Arendt's famous words, 'the banality of evil', Heydrich was always seen as the embodiment of the 'demonic' side of Nazism – more so, perhaps, even than Himmler who was widely believed to be a mere figurehead of the SS behind whom Heydrich's evil genius lurked.

The idea that the Nazi leadership represented 'evil demons' who corrupted their fellow Germans into unspeakable crimes against humanity originated in the immediate post-war period. The Swiss League of Nations' Commissioner in Danzig and envoy of the International Red Cross, Carl Jacob Burckhardt, who had met Heydrich in the summer of 1935 during an inspection tour of Nazi concentration camps, famously described him in his memoirs as the Third Reich's 'young evil god of death'.³ Postwar recollections of former SS subordinates were similarly unflattering. His deputy of many years, Dr Werner Best, characterised Heydrich as the 'most demonic personality in the Nazi leadership', driven by an 'inhumanity which took no account of those he mowed down'.⁴ Himmler's personal adjutant, Karl Wolff, described Heydrich as 'devilish', while Walther Schellenberg, the youngest of the departmental heads in Heydrich's Reich Security Main Office, remembered his former boss as a ragingly ambitious man with 'an incredibly acute perception of the moral, human, professional and political weakness of others ... His unusual intellect

³ Carl Jacob Burckhardt, *Meine Danziger Mission* (Munich, 1960), 57.

⁴ Statement on Heydrich by Dr Werner Best, 1 October 1959, in Copenhagen, in: IfZ (Munich), ZS 207/2.

was matched by the ever-watchful instincts of a predatory animal', who 'in a pack of ferocious wolves, must always prove himself the strongest ...'.⁵

The purpose of such descriptions was obvious: with Hitler, Heydrich and Himmler dead, their former associates drew on images from Goethe's *Faust* that would have been familiar to many Germans and found broad resonance: the German genius had been corrupted by the devil. The majority of Germans after 1945 was also eager to believe that the Nazi perpetrators constituted a pathologically disturbed, evil minority, partly because this interpretation helped German post-war society to view SS perpetrators as extremists operating *outside* the boundaries of an otherwise 'innocent' German society that had itself become a victim of Hitler's deviousness – an interpretation that the American journalist Gerald Reitlinger rightly dismissed in the mid-1950s as the 'alibi of a nation'.⁶ But the image of Nazi perpetrators as a group of demons in crisply pressed black uniforms was also widely held outside Konrad Adenauer's conservative Federal Republic, notably in Western Europe and the United States. And here, too, it served as a kind of self-protection mechanism: if the Nazi perpetrators were not the stylised satans of Hollywood movies, but part of the elites of an otherwise 'normal', culturally sophisticated and industrially advanced Western society, the Third Reich and its policies of exclusion towards minorities was suddenly too close for comfort.

As historians ought to be primarily in the business of explanation and contextualization, not condemnation, I have tried to avoid the sensationalism and

⁵ Wolff's post-war testimony, in: IfZ, ZS 317, Bl. 34f; Schellenberg, *Memoiren*, 36. For a similar account, see: Walter Hagen (alias Wilhelm Höttl), *Die geheime Front: Organisation, Personen und Aktionen des deutschen Geheimdienstes* (Linz and Vienna, 1950), 27; on Höttl and his account, see: Thorsten Querg, 'Wilhelm Höttl – Vom Informanten zum Sturmbannführer im Sicherheitsdienst der SS', in: idem. et. al. (eds.), *Historische Rassismusforschung: Ideologie – Täter – Opfer* (Hamburg and Berlin, 1995), 208–230.

⁶ Gerald Reitlinger, *The SS: Alibi of a Nation 1922–1945* (New York, 1956). See, too: Robert L. Koehl, 'The Character of the Nazi SS', *Journal of Modern History* 34 (1962), 275–283.

judgmental tone that long characterized accounts of Heydrich's life and the lives of senior Nazis in general. His story is sensational enough without uncritically recycling self-exculpatory post-war testimonies and memoirs of his former comrades, all designed to show that, however bad they were, Heydrich was worse. Heydrich's actions, language, and behavior best speak for themselves, and wherever possible, I have tried to give space to his own characteristic voice and choice of expressions.

The interpretation of Heydrich's life that I offer in my book revises some older assumptions about Heydrich's personal transition to Nazism and his contribution to some of the worst crimes committed in the name of the Third Reich. Born in 1904 into a privileged Catholic family of professional musicians in the Prussian city of Halle, Heydrich's path to genocide was anything but straightforward. Not only was his life conditioned by several unforeseeable – indeed accidental - events that were often beyond his control, but his actions can only fully be explained by placing them in the wider context of the intellectual, political, cultural, and socio-economic conditions that shaped German history in the first half of the twentieth century.

Heydrich, I would argue, was both a typical and atypical representative of his generation. He shared in many of the deep ruptures and traumatic experiences of the so-called 'war youth generation': namely, the First World War and the turbulent post-war years of revolutionary turmoil, hyperinflation, and social decline, which he experienced as a teenager. Yet while these experiences made him and many other Germans susceptible to radical nationalism, Heydrich in fact refrained from political activism throughout the 1920s and although he joined the staunchly nationalist German navy in 1922, he was ostracised by his fellow naval officers for not being nationalist *enough*. The great turning point of his early life came in early 1931 when he was dismissed from military service as a result of a broken engagement promise

and his subsequent arrogant behaviour towards the military honour court. His dismissal at the height of the Great Depression roughly coincided with his first meeting of his future wife, Lina von Osten, who was already a committed Nazi and who convinced him to apply for a staff position in Heinrich Himmler's small but elite SS.

Right up until this moment, Heydrich's life might have taken a very different direction and he initially possessed few obvious qualifications for his subsequent role as head of the Gestapo and the SD. Crucial for his future development were the experiences and personal encounters he made *within* the SS after 1931, and in particular his close relationship with Heinrich Himmler. In other words: the most significant contributing factor to Heydrich's radicalization was his immersion in a political milieu of young and often highly educated men who thrived on violent notions of cleansing Germany from its 'internal enemies' while simultaneously rejecting bourgeois norms of morality as weak, outdated, and inappropriate for securing Germany's 'national rebirth'.

Yet his immersion in this violent world of deeply committed political extremists does not in itself explain why Heydrich emerged as arguably the most radical figure within the Nazi leadership. At least one of the reasons for his subsequent radicalism, I would argue, lies in his lack of early Nazi credentials. Heydrich's earlier life contained some shortcomings, most notably the persistent rumours about his Jewish ancestry that led to a humiliating party investigation in 1932, and his relatively late conversion to Nazism. To make up for these imperfections and impress his superior, Heinrich Himmler, Heydrich fashioned himself into a model Nazi, adopting and further radicalising key tenets of Himmler's worldview and SS ideals of manliness, sporting prowess and military bearing.

Heydrich even manipulated the story of his earlier life to shore up his Nazi credentials. He supposedly fought in right-wing militant *Freikorps* units after the Great War, but his involvement in post-1918 paramilitary activity was at best minimal. Nor do any records exist to prove that he was a member of the various anti-Semitic groups in Halle to which he later claimed to have belonged.

By the mid-1930s, Heydrich had successfully reinvented himself as one of the most radical proponents of Nazi ideology and its implementation through rigid and increasingly extensive policies of persecution. The realization of Hitler's utopian society, so he firmly believed, required the ruthless and violent exclusion of those elements deemed 'dangerous' to German society, a task that could best be carried out by the SS as the executioner of Hitler's will. Only by cleansing German society of all that was alien, sick, and hostile could a new 'national community' emerge and the inevitable war against the Reich's arch-enemy, the Soviet Union, be won.

The reconstruction of Heydrich's changing moral universe posed one of the greatest challenges in writing a book on his life, but it was necessary to do in order to explain the seemingly inexplicable: the apparent paradox between the cultivated, musically talented middle-class boy from Halle and the fanatical SS ideologue and organiser of historically unprecedented mass murders. As recent perpetrator studies have argued convincingly, notions of permissible deeds changed radically throughout the 1930s and even more dramatically after the beginning of World War II. By 1941 (the beginning of the military campaign against the Soviet Union) those involved in mass killings firmly believed that what they were doing was not only morally justified, but morally imperative in order to spare subsequent generations of Germans from the horrors of war. As the German sociologist of violence, Harald Welzer, has pointed out, there was indeed such a thing as the "ethics of Nazism", a morale that

was not universalist but highly selective and exclusive. It was based on the notion of radical racial inequality, combined with the idea that the ‘strong races’ had a moral duty to permanently suppress, segregate and exterminate the existentially threatening ‘subhuman races’ of the East. Heinrich Himmler’s famous 1943 Posen speech to a group of senior SS officers, who had collectively murdered several million people, praising them for having addressed their ‘difficult’ but ‘historic’ task ‘with decency’ points to the moral paradigm shift that had occurred under conditions of war: the perpetrators were not meant to feel pleasure in the execution of their tasks or to enrich themselves by stealing from their victims, but to see their role as that of a gardener who weeds out the wilderness of the Eastern lands and transforms them into what Hitler in 1941 referred to as the future ‘German Garden of Eden’ in the East.

The means of ‘cleansing’ envisaged by Heydrich were to change dramatically between 1933 and 1942, partly in response to circumstances beyond his control (such as the outbreak of World War II) and partly as a result of the increasing *Machbarkeitswahn* that gripped many senior SS men, policy planners, and demographic engineers after 1939: the delusional idea that a unique historical opportunity had arisen to fight, once and for all, Germany’s real or imagined enemies inside and outside the Reich. While the mass extermination of Jews seemed inconceivable even to Heydrich before the outbreak of war in 1939, his views on the matter radicalised over the following two and a half years. A combination of wartime brutalization, frustration over failed expulsion schemes, pressures from local German administrators in the occupied East, and an ideologically motivated determination to solve the ‘Jewish problem’ led to a situation in which he perceived systematic mass murder to be both feasible and desirable.

The ‘solution of the Jewish question’ for which Heydrich bore direct responsibility from the later 1930s was, however, only part of a much broader wartime plan to recreate the entire ethnic make-up of Europe through a massive project of expelling, resettling and murdering tens of millions of people in Eastern Europe. Heydrich was fully aware that its complete realisation of this megalomaniac plan had to wait until the Wehrmacht’s victory over the Red Army. It was simply impossible from a logistical point of view to expel, resettle, and murder an estimated minimum of thirty million Slavic people in the conquered East while simultaneously fighting a war against a numerically superior alliance of enemies on the battlefields. The destruction of Europe’s Jews, a much smaller and more easily identifiable community, posed considerably fewer logistical problems. For Heydrich and Himmler, the swift implementation of the ‘final solution’ also offered a major strategic advantage vis-à-vis rival agencies in the occupied territories: by documenting their reliability in carrying out Hitler’s genocidal orders, they recommended themselves to the Führer as the ‘natural’ agency to implement the even bigger post-war project of Germanization.

For the reasons I have outlined in my paper – and with that I will conclude – the medium of biography, and more specifically a biography of Reinhard Heydrich, offers a uniquely privileged, intimate, and organic perspective on some of the darkest aspects of Nazi rule, many of which are often artificially divided or treated separately in the highly specialised literature on the Third Reich: namely, the rise of the SS and the emergence of the Nazi Police State; the decision-making processes that led to the Holocaust; the interconnections between anti-Jewish and Germanization policies; and the different ways in which German occupation regimes operated across Nazi-controlled Europe. On a more personal level, it illustrates the historical circumstances

under which young men from perfectly ‘normal’ middle-class backgrounds can become political extremists determined to use ultra-violence to implement their dystopian fantasies of radically transforming the world.