

Death of the Hangman

On this day 76 years ago, May 27m 1942, the courageous men and women of the Czech resistance attempted to assassinate one of the great villains of history, SS Obergruppenfuhrer Reinhard Heydrich, Reichsprotektor of Bohemia and Moravia. When his chauffeur-driven car slowed down at a hairpin turn in a suburb on the outskirts of Prague, Josef Gabchik stepped forward, armed with a British-made submachine gun, intending to riddle Heydrich with bullets. But the gun jammed. As Heydrich, enraged, rose in his seat and began drawing his pistol, Gabchik's partner, Jan Kubis, tossed a bomb at the car. Heydrich was wounded in the explosion, fatally as it turned out, and Kubis and Gabchik fled the scene.

Heydrich was the highest-ranking Nazi assassinated during the war. As the second-highest ranking member of the SS and deputy chief of the Gestapo, he was secretly intriguing to overthrow his nominal superior, Heinrich Himmler, and saw himself taking Hitler's place someday. He was so ruthless that the men who worked for him called him "The Blond Beast" behind his back, and a fellow Nazi, seeing Heydrich go past, said he felt he had just seen "the evil young god of death."

Heydrich was the architect of "The Final Solution," the Nazi attempt to exterminate Jews, Gypsies, and all other forms of what they termed "life unworthy of life." He had chaired the infamous Wannsee Conference of January 1942, and was the author, along with Adolf Eichmann, of the "Wannsee Protocols," the minutes of the meeting in which the plan for the Final Solution was actually put on paper.

The Czechs had been overrun by the Germans in March 1939 and had surrendered without firing a shot. But in the years that followed they had put up a growing resistance to Nazi rule that became serious enough that in September 1941 Hitler dispatched Heydrich to Prague with order to crush the Czechs once and for all. Heydrich sent so many people to the gallows that soon the Czechs had nicknamed him "The Hangman" or else "Hangman Heydrich." In London, the Czech government-in-exile decided to make a symbolic gesture to show the world their people were not beaten. Two brave young Czech soldiers, Josef Gabchik and Jan Kubis, were sent to Prague with orders to assassinate Heydrich, despite knowing that the Czech people would pay a fearful price for this act of defiance.

At first it appeared Heydrich would recover from his wounds. Then blood poisoning set in, and there was nothing the doctors could do. Heydrich died in agony on June 4, as had so many of his victims, and a veritable hecatomb of terror was unleashed on the Czechs in retaliation, culminating in the razing of the tiny village of Lidice, on June 10.

Lord Byron wrote, “the past is the best prophet of the future.” We must remember what came before us, for we are walking the roads our ancestors trod. By knowing what has happened in the past, we have a better chance of avoiding its mistakes.